

EDITORIAL

FREE THE WEATHERFIELD ONE!!!

A catchphrase much used by Brian Conley is "It's only a puppet!!", well in this case I am tempted to say "It's only a soap!!".

But then, perhaps I have got it wrong. Not only did the tabloids go overboard with the story, but one MP, Fraser Kemp, is now leading a campaign to Free Deidre Rachid. Obviously, the pro Deidre vote within his constituency will make all the difference come the next election.

Even the Prime Minister, cool Tony Blair, has added his weight to the campaign to Free the Weatherfield One, which has left me wondering whether Millbank have now issued a briefing to all MP's setting out New Labour's position on the Weatherfield One.

The outcry, the media interest, and even an intervention from the PM which greeted this one programme has to be compared with the silence that the Rough Justice programme on the M25 Three encountered. Real life victims of obvious injustice are
(Contd. Col. 2)

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ignored and forgotten, while a soap character elicits such an hysterical response.

As somebody who knows how difficult it is to get a response from MP's, Ministers, and or the real Prime Minister in relation to injustices, and who feels very angry about the hypocrisy of all of this, it asks one question. How do the M25 Three, John Kinsella, Satpal Ram and many others feel as they watch events unfold?

So many people are obviously annoyed that an innocent character, Deidre Rachid, could be sent down when she is so obviously innocent. As if they could not countenance the same happening in real life. Tell that to the Birmingham Six, Guildford Four, The Maguire Family, the Tottenham Three, Bridgewater Four etc.

Our task is very obvious. To make the following reality ...

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Jon O'Neill

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Oi Tony, Tony, Tony
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NOTTS TU NEWS

ISSUE 17
Free or Donation
May/June 1998

Published by the Nottinghamshire Association of Trades Union Councils



"If we pay them starvation wages—
why do they need a lunch break?"

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CAMPAIGNING & DISPUTES

UNEMPLOYED WORKERS CENTRE FOR NOTTINGHAM!

Anybody remember, not so long ago, John Prescott, former Shadow Secretary of State for Employment getting apoplectic on our T.V screens and in our newspapers about the latest Tory fiddling of the unemployment figures? From 1980 to 1997 the criteria for calculating the number of unemployed was altered almost 30 times to create the illusion that unemployment in Britain was never as bad as it was, and still is.

Here then is a quote from the 'Red Book', a 165 page document produced by H.M Treasury in support of the last Budget. "Almost 4.25 million people of working people in the U.K are without work and wanting a job. Moreover the number of inactive people who say they want a job as a proportion of the adult population is higher than in any other European Union country." 4.25 million that is the unadulterated state of unemployment in this country, yet the official statistic is still 1.4 million.

Now, I don't doubt the sincerity of Bro. Prescott's protestations during the wilderness years, in fact he was quite inspirational in his condemnation of the Tories. He even used to refer occasionally to that holiest of Holy Grails 'Full Employment' as a goal for a future Labour

government. So what's been done since that day in May, oh, so heavily laden with irony for the working class, to identify and release for public consumption the real and utterly damning figures for unemployment in Britain? One word answer: nothing. And did we really expect anything as we marched (or were dragged) in our droves to the polling stations, last May Day that anything would be?

Surely it is becoming evident that a low income, high unemployment economy suits 'New' Labour just as much as it did their predecessors and that massaging the unemployment figure statistics is part of a strategy designed to lessen people's fear of unemployment and identification with those that already suffer from the deprivation that it brings. Having abandoned any pretensions to the goal of equal distribution of wealth with the deletion of Clause 4, we now seem to have a Labour government with a firm commitment to the unequal distribution of poverty. For instance, look at the way young working class people are being attacked. Allegedly, the recipients of a 'New Deal' they are being pushed deeper and deeper into poverty to create a new

If you want to be heard - speak in

UNISON



Regional Secretary
Nick Wright

Regional Convenor
Norman Wilson

UNISON East Midlands Region

15 Castle Gate, Nottingham NG1 6BY. Tel: 0115 956 7200

CAMPAIGNING & DISPUTES

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generation malleable enough to form the vanguard in the 'flexible labour market' (low pay, low expectations) that is the perceived future of this country's workforce. It seems to me like a very Old Deal when our children are to be denied the opportunity for university education by tuition fees and the crippling debts they would have to incur. It's another Old Deal, albeit devised by the Tories, when 16-18 year olds are not entitled to claim benefits. Where is the restitution? And there is No Deal at all when 18-25 year olds are soon to be told that they are not worth the paltry sum of £3.50 per hour, the probable derisory figure that the minimum wage will be set at. If we allow this to happen without a murmur, without putting up a fight.

If we adopt the mentality of keeping up a rear guard action in our own work places, to maintain benefits and conditions, we will lose them, and we will deserve to lose them. The employed and the unemployed are in the same boat. The unemployed on steerage, the employed on the decks above, but we're all heading for the same iceberg, for women and children first read those that are sailing the ship.

This is where the Unemployed Workers' Centres have a major role to play in building solidarity between those in work, those out of work and those that who have never worked at all. U.W.C.'s create and foster the links between the wider labour movement and unemployed workers, campaign against the punitive sanctions imposed upon people whose only 'crime' is being out of work and against what seems to be an imminent attempt to dismantle the Welfare State. Benefits are the wages of the unemployed in a country that cannot or will not provide jobs for all.

The City of Nottingham has for some time lacked an Unemployed Workers Centre. With the help of Mansfield U.W.C. we are in the process of developing our own at the Chase Neighbourhood Centre in St Anns. Our aim will be to organise agitate and educate with jobless in Nottingham. Not just on behalf of all workers and trade unionists, because the fight for the preservation of jobs, for the advancement of wages and working conditions, for a just and equitable society has it's front line where collective bargaining is not allowed. Please watch this space, we will be asking for support in this endeavour from all trade unionists in Nottingham in the near future. **In the meantime for more information contact Chris Shannon at the East Nottingham Unemployed Workers Centre, Chase Neighbourhood Centre, St Anns, Nottingham, NG3 4EZ. Tel: 0115 9472705.**

Chris Shannon

CHICKENS JOIN MAGNET PICKET LINE

THE MAGNET kitchen workers, sacked in August 1996 in a pay dispute and still fighting for re-instatement, last week discovered a new weapon in the class struggle - the chicken farm.

Their demands had been rebuffed by Magnet Kitchens and its parent company Berisford for 18 months when, last month a small group of Derbyshire ex-miners took solidarity action in defiance of anti-union laws and picketed the home of Berisford chief executive Alan Bowkett in the village of Croxton, St Neots.

The Magnet workers also launched a new campaign of picketing Magnet retail outlets and lobbying the Berisford annual general meeting.

Mr Bowkett last year awarded himself a pay rise of £124,000 but until then had refused to discuss the Magnet workers claim, made in 1996, for a three percent across the board rise after a three year pay freeze.

The picket and the new campaign brought the management to the negotiating table for the first time but after just a few weeks of talking to representatives of four unions involved, the talks broke down. Meanwhile he threatened the pickets with legal action under the new harassment laws.

But the GMB general union succeeded in buying two acres of land near Mr Bowkett's £1.5 million Cambridge mansion and has legally established a chicken farm there. GMB lawyers advised this would avoid prosecution under the anti-union laws. It was formally opened last Tuesday, complete with three chickens and a man in a chicken suit. Plenty of Magnet workers and their supporters attended, carrying placards saying "Magnet Kitchens chickens come home to roost". They began leafleting villagers about the dispute and the union has promised to step up the campaign.

Also, under legal rights going back to the middle ages, the union says it is entitled to hold a "pageant" in the village and plans the first this Saturday. It will involve a karaoke session featuring 40 years of songs with chicken references.

CAMPAIGNING & DISPUTES

FROM THE MORNING STAR NUJ CHAPEL

The sacking of Morning Star editor John Haylett threw the paper into a major crisis as the National Union of Journalists chapel took strike action that stopped the paper for almost six weeks.

The appeal body decision to throw out all charges against Morning Star editor John Haylett and to condemn the disciplinary procedure approved by the People's Press Printing Society management committee is a vindication of the stand taken by the paper's National Union of Journalists chapel.

Journalists maintained from the outset that the charges against John were both trumped-up and trivial and should be dropped. We were convinced that the decision to suspend and later sack him could not be justified on such a flimsy evidence. However, we believed that a majority on the management committee was not prepared to see reason ... they wanted him out. We suggested that John be reinstated and that discussions be held on any perceived problems, but the management committee refused. It was determined not to have him back in the building.

In the face of such intransigence, the chapel gave notice of its intention to respond in the same way that countless trade unionists have countered a management that refuses to hear any view other than its own.

Some management committee representatives have criticised the journalists for going on strike against a management that is composed of people who are committed to the labour movement, but such a committee should operate on the basis of the best industrial relations practice. It didn't.

Management gave every impression of having made its mind up from the start that it wanted John sacked. All that it lacked was any credible charge to lay against him, so it presented a dossier of allegations - some going back years - to try to justify the claim that he was guilty of gross industrial misconduct.

The appellate body concluded that management had not carried out the disciplinary procedure that it had negotiated with the NUJ, but this should not have come as a surprise, because they had already been told that by the chapel, by the national union and by NUJ standing counsel John Hendy QC.

Mr Hendy expressed his legal opinion that the disciplinary procedure followed was hopelessly flawed and that the management committee was "tainted" as a result of its decision to reject John's reinstatement and could not, therefore, sit as an appeal body. He suggested that its only constructive role was to "quash the decision

to dismiss" at its March 14 meeting.

"Alternatively, by agreement with Mr Haylett, it may be possible to find an alternative appellate body (such as three independent and impartial persons agreed by both sides) by way of variation to the contractual disciplinary rules."

Print union GMPU proposed as chair one of its most experienced and respected officials, Alf Parish, now retired, who was agreed by both sides. Management and unions each nominated a further representative and the decision of this three-person body was unanimous.

We would have preferred the management committee itself to clear up the problem which it started or to have reinstated John pending the appellate body's decision, which would have made an earlier return to work possible, but it remained intransigent.

Our view is that this dispute has been a massive own-goal by the PPS management committee, which should draw appropriate conclusions. Morning Star journalists would not have been taken seriously by the rest of the movement if they had failed to react against what we saw as a fit-up against John Haylett.

When we write of workers' rights and trade union or political principles in future, the movement will know that we practice what we preach.



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TRADE UNIONS AND LIFELONG LEARNING

HEALTH & SAFETY

ENFORCEMENT | ASBESTOS BACKDOWN

It's common knowledge that the last government set about relaying the laws on health and safety in favour of employers as part of its continual deregulation process. To some extent they were successful, (probably one of the few successes they can boast about).

The Tory Government and New Labour (spot the difference) decided they were going to get tough on those who break the Law. Well correct me if I am wrong but isn't knowingly and willingly exposing an employee to untold dangers which may or have resulted in injury or even death, against the law.

But still the punishment if any, hardly fits the crime.

Enforcement of health and safety law is the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and for many employees (usually without trade union support and influence) the HSE is the only form of defense. However enforcement has taken a back seat and the main function of the HSE appears to be that of advisers and babysitters to employers. I'm all in favour of the HSE providing expert advice to employers who wish to implement sound preventative measures and actually care about the safety of the workforce. But I draw the line at pampering employers who disregard the law and the well being of their employees.

I know of companies where conditions and standards of safety are considered to be extremely poor. I have first hand experience of at least one of these companies. Even visits from the HSE following accidents/incidents and numerous complaints have resulted in little or no action being taken.

Enough is enough, the Law of Health and Safety and enforcement must be applied rigorously and employers responsible for harming their workers should be made to pay not just through insurance but personally.

I am currently in the process of arranging a meeting consisting of regional safety/personnel officers and the HSE. This may give us the opportunity to directly question the HSE on their current policy on enforcement and express other concerns we have. This meeting hopefully will take place within the near future and anyone wishing to raise a question or put forward specific complaints should contact **Tony Ridgeway, Trade Union Safety c/o 2 Beech Avenue, Mansfield, Notts. NG18 1EY. Tel. 01623 424722 Fax. 01623 424723.**

The Government's decision to backdown over its proposed ban on all asbestos products is a cruel blow to many people. Those who have, or are suffering, as a result of this killer, their families and campaigners have as usual been ignored. The reasons for this backdown, well experts (I wonder who pays their wages), have demanded more evidence to show that substitute materials are safer. Secondly pressure including political has come from asbestos producing countries. *If the substitutes are not considered to be safer, then what have all the other countries who have a ban on asbestos been using?* Once again those with the power and money have been able to beat down the opposition.

As for politics, well I don't claim to know much about this subject or how it all works. It seems to me that politics exist solely to screw up the lives of working class people in any way it can. Last year in the UK almost 4000 people died from asbestos related disease, over the next 10 - 20 years this figure is set to triple. Isn't that enough deaths to warrant a ban now, or are the powers-that-be going to allow many thousands more to be exposed to the dangers of asbestos, before coming to a right decision.



"His entire adult lifespan is exactly eight hours. He won't be around long enough to need benefits."

HEALTH & SAFETY



DANGER!



TRICHLOROETHYLENE

Trichloroethylene (trike) has been used widely for many years throughout a variety of industries and processes. For instance, in engineering its use has usually been that of a solvent/degreaser cleaning metal components.

Trike is a colourless liquid with an odour resembling chloroform. Vapours have a narcotic effect and vapours when mixed with a heat source decompose to give off amounts of hydrogen chloride or phosgene. Although its use has diminished in recent years as safer alternatives are introduced, some companies choose to continue with its use.

Without stringent safeguards to prevent exposure or contact with the liquid and vapours persons working with or in the vicinity of this substance are at risk.

Trike can enter the body through inhalation via the lungs absorption into the skin. Ingestion, although not unknown, would be considered extreme.

Acute effects may include irritation to the eyes, nose, throat and respiratory system

Trike is a powerful anaesthetic and excessive exposure may lead to unconsciousness. Heart failure can also occur following excessive exposure. Chronic effects, absorption through the skin will remove the skins protective barrier leaving it open to infection such as dermatitis/eczema. Accumulation in the body allows it to pass into the bloodstream. This may result in irreversible damage to the liver and other vital organs.

Research over the past few years has shown that brain damage can also occur following exposure to the substance and its vapours.

Trike is a suspected carcinogen and should be treated as such.

A local engineering company uses trike constantly, with employees as young as 16 years old involved in its daily use. The protection provided by the employer consisted of the overalls, dust mask and occasionally rubber or PVC gloves. Although an extraction system was fitted to the trike tank, this regularly failed. Drums of trike were often punctured as a result of incorrect manual and mechanical handling.

When questioned on this issue the employers response was "We've always done it this way and nobody's been harmed". Well, if this employer had

taken time to look at the number of days taken off through ill health for those working on or near the process. If the employer had actually listened to complaints from welders who were overcome by vapours mixing with the heat source. If the employer had listened to all other complaints and acted on them. If the employer had obtained proper information including up to date safety data sheets then maybe he would have been aware of the harm actually being caused.

Working with solvents of this nature without proper protection and safeguards can have devastating consequences. A proper risk assessment which should include all aspects including PPE information data sheets etc is vital. Complaints of ill effects must be taken seriously and a system to eliminate or greatly reduce the risk of exposure to the liquid or its vapours must be in place.

Better still pressure the employer to consider a safer alternative.

P.S. Did you know that excessive exposure to solvents etc can result in hearing damage.

CONGRATULATIONS

to

TOMMY HIRST

On over 25 years as Secretary of Retford & District TUC and on your work in the community.

From your comrades at Worksop & District

TUC



FEATURE

A MESSAGE FROM HULL

Ian Juniper's article in the last Notts TU News was of interest to me, because up here in Hull, we are thinking along the same lines.

Hull Trades Council is possibly at its lowest ebb, with meetings sometimes consisting of no more than a dozen activists, and activity being carried out by a slack handful. We recently confronted this situation head-on and concluded that the key to building up Hull Trades Council (and with it, trade union organisation in the city) lies in two areas - effective solidarity action for workers in disputes and improving Trade Union News.

We publish a monthly (copy enclosed) similar to your own Notts TU News and as Ian so rightly says, the potential of such publications is enormous.

Regarding the Notts Evening Post, the situation is exactly the same in Hull and of course in every town in the country. I was a journalist with the Hull Daily Mail for seven years and I saw things from the inside - stories ignored, rewritten, cut down. The worst aspect of it all was that, very often, an important story for working people would be lost amid all the dross, especially when written in a "balanced" way.

My message is: ignore the capitalist papers - we're always going to be misrepresented, sneered at and anyway, who needs them when we have our own publication? If the journalists at Notts are the same as in Hull, we will beat them hands down to the real stories. We have the contacts and they don't. They are all middle class college boys and girls from other towns, who don't know anyone. They sit in their offices all day writing dross (remember the bosses don't care about content, as long as there's something to wrap around the adverts) and rely on press releases and people coming to them.

Once trade unionists and potential trade unionists realise there is a publication which reflects their daily lives and stands up for them, the situation could rapidly change in our favour.

A good example of what I mean happened in Hull last year. A caravan worker was sacked because he beat his boss at snooker on a night out. Our local UCATT full-timer gave it to the Hull Daily Mail. It

should have appeared first in Trade Union News, done properly, hundreds of extra copies should have been printed and handed out at all the caravan factories in the area and donations asked for. The Hull Daily Mail should have had to follow up our story, but not until we had sold it to the nationals and made a bit of money for ourselves.

I foresee a time when Trade Union News and your Notts equivalent will be weekly and eventually daily publications, supplanting the capitalist papers, which in comparison, will look old and tired. There are, of course, many obstacles. The writing must be good, it must be socialist in character and it must stick with the grassroots. We have a world to gain and a fighting, confident, socialist press is a necessary first step.

So, all you Notts socialists, take up Ian Juniper's offer - write the articles which will resonate with your workmates and neighbours and transform your lives.

Rob Rooney

A TRIBUTE TO HARRY LOACH

Our eldest delegate to Council - Honorary Delegate Brother Harry Loach - has recently died. In recognition of the contribution Harry has made to his Union (over 50 years as a UCATT member), and to Nottingham Trades Council, we are dedicating our May Day activities to him, and will print a full appreciation of Harry in the next edition. He will be sorely missed, but there's no doubt that Harry, of all people, would be the first to urge us to get on with the job. We'll do our best mate.

FEATURE

DEAR JON...

One of the most enjoyable parts of listening to Arthur Scargill, used to be when he turned on the media hacks present in the hall to indulge in a bout of media-baiting, (one of my own favourite pastimes, if you know what I mean). Somewhat poignantly in recent years he still continued to do this in his set speeches, even when the scribblers were no long there to hear it. Thereby hangs a tail, as they say. The recent Reclaim Our Rights Conference in London, unfortunately in my 'umble opinion, was more about re-affirming his role as Class Struggler-in-Chief, rather than co-ordinating the struggle in general - although the activists there will obviously continue to do business as usual. The real point is how you do the business beyond the portals of temples like Central Hall, Westminster - where some one would do well to chase the money grabbers out - and what contribution Conferences like this can make to that. Conferences which end up merely passing some motion, always assuming that there are enough copies to go round, which there weren't, just don't cut it.

It was interesting what was going on outside the Conference Hall, what with the beggars on the goldpaved streets of London, whilst inside this great citadel of Christianity, like a great big conscience just across from the Palace of Westminster, staff were throwing in the bin stacks of sandwiches, and good food delegates to the International Conference on Tremors had left. And, of course, our Conference delegates were expected to pay exorbitant London prices for our quiches and salades.

Down the road in Trafalgar Square, thousands of young working class people and others, were on the streets campaigning for the legalisation of cannabis, with people from Norfolk - inevitably - in the forefront. It was a brilliant event - those cats will eventually blow away the Straw man, whether the unions get involved or not. To ignore issues which are important to masses of people, or to treat them with condescension, dooms the agenda fetishists and motion mongers in the labour movement to utter marginalisation. Out of sight, man! Supporting this campaign means striking a blow, as you might say, for freedom.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, that Conferences like Reclaim Our Rights shouldn't be held in places like Central Westminster Hall merely to ape the other parties, not when thousands of working class youth are on the streets, even if the Demonstration was called by the Independent (Hats off to them, I say), and should be organised in such a way as to facilitate "bottom-up" participation and organisation, rather than "top-down" leadership. Still I may be wrong.

One thing I was wrong about in the last issue, was when I said the Evening Post failed to let people know that the Notts County Council Leisure Services' consultation with the

Voluntary Sector, had been changed to the other side of town. It did and I have been instructed by the Notts Trade Union Ombudsman to apologise profusely for the fact that my magnifying glass was faulty and failed to detect the said piece - and above all for my breach of journalistic ethics in getting my facts wrong. After all, Jon, I AM ONLY HUMAN; and I am sorry that I have dragged the good name of Notts Trade Union News into the gutter. I can only reassure you that I have absolutely no intention of posing for Page 3 by way of apology.

Having doffed my cap to the NEP, so to speak, one piece of factually incorrect reporting came to my attention, when it reported the opening of a certain sports shop by the side of Nottingham's Council House; (the name of the shop is obviously commercially sensitive and I cannot reveal my sources). It alleged that a number of local sporting heroes from the local football clubs, were to be there to try to write their names for any young impressionable children who dragged their parents along and persuaded them to part with their hard-earned cash for over-priced, uncomfortable football togs, otherwise known as replicas. Imagine my chagrin when I flounced into the shop, only to be told that the NEP had given out the wrong information. How could I console my young five year old child (I think he's five), whose hopes and dreams were so cruelly dashed by such blatant media misrepresentation, by such a criminal inability to get the where, what, when, who and God knows what of a simple news story right. How could I as a caring, compassionate, sensitive kind of soul, make this up to my boy as he stood there non-plussed and cheated, lifting an accusing finger in my direction. Actually, he wasn't pointing at me but at the ice cream van in the Square. So I bought him an ice and a Celtic t-shirt instead. Ole Cagger seemed happy enough with this, which was nice. I wonder whether the NEP will refund our bus fare - some hopes.

Anyway, Jon, I know you're busy and I don't want to keep you away from writing all those funding applications (jammy bugger!). Suffice it to say that for the next edition, I will be highlighting two stories which the local media totally blanked out with the same old shibboleth, "What's it got to do with Nottingham?" Well I'll tell you - in the meantime if you have any stories for the local media, like a pile-up on the Mansfield Road, (two dogs going on the same spot - that kind of thing), you know where to send them. And if you don't use this article, I shall be going to the Press Complaints Commission. Fraternally

Ian Juniper

TUIREG ANNUAL SCHOOL 1997

ILO: INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' CHAMPION?

10th - 13th July: Ruskin College

TUIREG

The Trade Union International Research and Education Group, was founded in April, 1976 and is based at Ruskin College, Oxford. It is concerned with promoting International Solidarity and Development Issues in the UK and other European Trade Unions, and building links between them through projects and workshops on international issues. Its Overseas Programme aims to develop Trade Union Work of a development nature in co-operation with Trade Unions in the South.

(Walton Street, Oxford, OX1 2 HE. Tel: (01865) 54599/56564 FAX: (01865) 5511313).

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISATION (ILO)

The International Labour Organisation is the United Nations agency which deals with employment and labour market issues and whose mission is to improve standards and conditions of work and to encourage productive employment throughout the world.

(London Office: Millbank Tower, 21-24 Millbank, London, SW1P 4QP. TEL: 0171 828 6401 FAX: 0171 233 5925)

The School looked at the history, role and organisation of the ILO, and particularly focused on the way it has adapted to the challenges of the modern globalised market economy. This focus revealed both strengths and weaknesses in the Organisation, but certainly revealed an acute lack of

awareness of its activities within the British trade union movement.

The visiting speakers were: Bill Brett, Vice President, ILO Governing Body/General Secretary IPMS: Michael Walsh, Head of International Department, TUC; Peter Brannen, Director, ILO, London; Sian Morgan, International Division, Dept of Education and Employment; Bob Kylo, ILO's Bureau for Workers' Activities.

Summary of the Main Issues

The ILO had little profile in the British Trade Union movement until the issue of GCHQ became acute in 1984 - until then the latter had not been a great "customer" of the ILO in terms of complaints that basic labour standards were being contravened. Viewed from the narrow perspective of British preoccupations, there was a real lack of awareness of the ILO's international work, which was apparently greatly respected in developing countries where it was often seen as a life-line in the struggle for basic human rights, being able to draw attention to the fact that they were being abused. However, its lack of a direct enforcement capability was perceived by activists at the School as a debilitating defect of its structure.

However, the fact is that the ILO is unique among UN agencies in having a tripartite structure: governments, employers, and trade unions all participated in its work and in its decision-making processes. This inevitably meant that it was a cockpit of international politicking - and since 1990, there had been some very bizarre combinations of governments opposing ILO initiatives. This extended to the election of its officers, which Bill Brett elaborated on at some length, he eventually having "emerged" as the Vice President of the ILO Governing Body.

TUIREG ANNUAL SCHOOL 1997

(Contd. from previous page)

Indeed, the ILO was an intensely political organisation, having been created at the end of the First World War to "avoid revolution", through promoting greater social justice internationally. Its fundamental work has been concerned with the creation of an international labour code.

This code consists of instruments which are either legally binding (Conventions) or voluntary (Recommendations), and which lay down minimum standards to be achieved in areas which include the protection of such basic human rights as freedom of association, the abolition of forced labour and the elimination of discrimination in employment as well as in a large number of more technical aspects of the regulation of the world of work. To date 181 Conventions have been adopted, together with 187 recommendations, and the number of Ratifications by the 171 member states is over 6,100.

The fundamental ILO Convention is No 87 (1948) which establishes the rights of Freedom of Association - this establishes the right of all workers and employers to form and join organisations of their own choosing without prior authorisation. It lays down a series of guarantees for the free functioning of organisations without interference by the public authorities.

New Labour - Newspeak

Brett said that while Portillo wanted to get Britain out of the ILO, the UK Government was now committed to fulfilling its obligations. However, it was reported by Bob Kylo of the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities that when Convention number 96 on Fee Charging Employment Agencies (1949) was recently being revised in June, 1997 prior to this year's ILO Conference, a proposal that Employment Agencies should not make workers available to a user enterprise to replace workers of that same enterprise who are on strike, was voted against by a DTI official in the relevant Technical Committee on behalf of the British Government.

Subsequently, this wording failed to be incorporated into the revised Convention which was then adopted by the Conference (on the 19th June), although it did appear in Recommendation which was also adopted, but this has far less moral imperative towards its actual being put into practice by member Governments. This issue was particularly significant in the context of the British Airways dispute and the aggressive tactics of management (about which the students at the school sent a collective letter to The Grauniad - please see attached).

Indeed, while some people at the school were prepared to give the new - or rather, New - Government a chance, others saw in its stated commitment to "flexible Labour Markets" potential conflict with its ostensible commitment to ILO. Indeed, there was a perception that the Blair Government 'liked what they'd inherited' as far as the existing industrial relations situation was concerned and envisaged little change being forthcoming. But after all's said and done; 'They told you so'.

The circumstances of the vote described above pointed up that the ILO operated by "consensus" and that if Conventions were drafted too strongly, they would not be ratified by member Governments. Yet the ILO was "the best we've got" (Brett).

From the neo-liberal school of economics, and the drive towards deregulation, the ILO is now obsolete with no need to continue standard setting. A programme of updating and modernising was now taking place to make standards more 'relevant' - a process of weakening in the guise of modernisation.

Governments were also criticised by employers for ratifying measures in Geneva which they had no intention of implementing in their own domestic parliaments.

(Of which more in Part II)

Ian Juniper - July, 1997