

Discussion:

The Forward March of Labour Halted?

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Eric Hobsbawm's review of the recent history of the British labour movement is much to be welcomed. An historical attitude and perspective regarding the trade unions, the central core of the movement is essential. It is a highly readable and thought provoking account. But in painting a broad canvass, certain points are missed and arguable assertions made.

There is an implicit assumption that industrial unionism leads to working class unity and greater combativeness. This needs to be argued through, and though the proposition is, I am sure, theoretically sustainable, practice speaks differently. In the area of the growing white collar unionism, to "force" these new trade unionists into existing industrial union moulds would be the legend of Procrustes—and result in a weakening of trade unionism. The specific problems that face TASS in the amalgamation could be magnified many times. It is my experience in this area that there is a greater staff affinity in a union context on a plant or company basis. The industrial cohesion is often weaker for staff, particularly those professionally qualified across industrial boundaries. The Federal Republic of Germany has 17 industrial unions with very clear dividing lines. Postwar experience does not indicate a growth of industrial militancy or political consciousness there. No doubt there are many reasons for this. The implicit support of industrial unionism should be re-examined in the light of the recent history of the British trade union movement.

Sectionalism

Hobsbawm argues that there is greater sectionalism in the labour movement than there was 30 years ago. This is questionable. There has always been sectionalism. We should reflect on the political success of the 1972 and 74 miners' strikes, the solidarity they engendered. Were they not more successful than the

1926 General Strike? This was the only occasion in the history of our movement where all trade unions fought together in taking strike action around support for the miners. It was in many respects a defeat. Hobsbawm gives credence perhaps to the "myth of the golden past" notion: militancy and political consciousness has declined since the 1930s. This is highly contestable, bearing in mind the industrial dormancy of the 1930s in particular. Baldwin and the Tory government in 1926 won, Heath in 1974 lost.

Hobsbawm contends that the labour movement has stood still for 30 years—or not made substantial progress. True the full political potential of the very powerfully organised British trade union movement has yet to be demonstrated. Particular campaigning successes, important defensive victories, e.g. UCS, and Labour appearing to be the "natural" party of the government are all we can point to. However, the essential point is that British working people are more organised now than ever before. The potential of this fact is enormous and it is itself a major step forward. Certainly in the newer areas of trade union organisation the political significance of trade unions is:

- a) That democracy is a practice which has to be fought for and participated in—not something which is graciously provided by the ruling class.
- b) It challenges the top—down way industry is run.
- c) By its emphasis on activity and participation it challenges bourgeois ideology by weakening its basis of social support. Trade unionism has an imminent radicalisation effect.

The Potential

Of course, in strictly electoral terms these effects are barely noticeable, and in the general political and social arenas little seems to have changed. My

emphasis is on the potential. The necessity of the politically directed struggle of working people as the prime mover of fundamental change to capitalism is exactly the same as 30 years ago, and we seem as far away as ever. My argument is that potentialities are greater now. At last there is no readily mobilisable middle ground mass of non-unionists which can be mobilised to support the capitalist class as there was in 1926.

One of the implications that can be drawn from Hobsbawm's thesis is that the organised labour

movement is not as important as it was in the defining of a strategy for socialist transformation. It follows perhaps that students, women, cultural minorities assume a greater importance. This and the fashionable emphasis on ideological struggle needs to be rebuffed.

The organised working class is central to our concept of a broad democratic alliance, and whilst struggle in all and every possible way against capitalism is essential, their orientation should always be towards the working class.