

TUC Crisis

Thoroughly Modern Movement

The GMB prefers these days to be called 'Britain's General Union'. Its leader **John Edmonds** is a fierce moderniser but equally vehement critic of EETPU-style 'business unionism'. He is also a key TUC general council member. He discusses here with *Charlie Leadbeater* the battle for the labour movement's future

Do you think that the EETPU will be expelled or suspended at congress and which would you prefer?

Of all the possible options the one that I, and I think most trade unionists, would prefer is for the EETPU to change its mind, and to decide in spite of everything to keep the rules as they were pledged to do, and to stay within the TUC. I'm bound to say that is extremely unlikely. If they don't change their minds, there seems to be little alternative to expulsion. That is very sad and it will be very damaging for the trade union movement.

Outside the TUC, the electricians will be free to sign whatever agreements they like, with whatever companies; and dissatisfied members from a range of unions could join them. Isn't it quite likely that they will become an increasing thorn in the side of the TUC, and they could survive and possibly flourish outside?

I doubt very much whether the EETPU in anything like its present form could flourish outside the TUC. I've no doubt that an organisation could survive, based on dissident trade union members, a particular right-wing political philosophy and a policy of giving the employers the benefit of the doubt in any argument between members and employers. I'm not sure I would describe that as a trade union, but there is a market for that sort of organisation. The EETPU at the moment is an authentic trade union. It has within it a lot of good union members who have committed themselves to the trade union movement over many years. There is no doubt the EETPU will lose a great number of those members. They just will not want to be outside the mainstream of the trade union movement. The EETPU will pick up some dissident members elsewhere, but I think the numbers will be rather small;

they will lose that core of trade union activists on whom every union depends. The EETPU is going to be an irritant or an inconvenience, but that's all it's going to be. Having shed its members who believe in mainstream trade union ideology it will be looking for people of a very different ilk.

If the EETPU does go, it's unlikely that they will come back within a three-year period. Once the governing body of a large organisation has made a decision as dramatic, I would say as catastrophic, as this, they feel under an enormous obligation to prove the correctness of that decision to their members. I think the nature of the EETPU executive in recent years is that they don't change their minds too easily: they will sustain a great deal of damage before they even begin to think that they may have taken the wrong step. But during that period, of course, the trade union movement is going to change dramatically in its structure and make-up.

In general there are two ways the EETPU could be brought back within the TUC. One is that the TUC changes and this persuades the EETPU that its future lies inside it. The other is that life is so painful outside, that it is forced back in. Take the second of those options. Other things being equal, the EETPU will survive outside the TUC. So in one way or another, won't you have to launch a recruitment drive against it, to make life so painful that it can't bear not being in the TUC?

The situation is extremely unstable and the likelihood is that if expulsion takes place in September, then sometime before the end of this year a membership battle will start somewhere. If that happens it is likely to get fiercer and fiercer because there are many people in the mainstream of the trade

union movement who are keen to punish the EETPU. I think that's a self-destructive attitude, but a lot of people feel it. Now it may be that by the middle of '89 there is some way of living together, where people in various industries have suffered enough, where the EETPU has been squeezed out of industries in which it has a minority interest, or - where it's got a strong interest - other unions perhaps will decide to find a way of living (with that. I don't know, but that seems a likely outcome.

What I'm worried about is that the main task of the trade union movement in the late-80s is to recruit new members, in those parts of industry where trade unionism is weak and where people desperately need trade union representation. This internal battle will reduce that recruitment effort: we will waste resources and energy that should be better-used.

Will there be, or should there be, moves to exclude the EETPU from local joint negotiating committees, where its ability to represent its members depends on being able to work with TUC unions? Because that's an obvious lever to use against it.

There are going to be many examples where trade union activists, local union officials, are going to demand that the EETPU is excluded. If there is the regrettable but sad membership battle that many people are predicting, where the EETPU continues to take a very high profile in attacking other unions, then it's very difficult to work jointly with people who are telling you on a day-to-day basis that you're entirely wrong in all your political judgement, entirely wrong in all your industrial strategies and that you are pretty unwholesome people anyway. It's a bit difficult to make common cause with the people who are saying those things. The pressures are going to be to isolate the EETPU. Now, I hope, I trust, that we can move slowly if we're going in that direction at all, because I still think the potential damage to the movement is so heavy that we ought to give opportunities for tenth, eleventh, twelfth thoughts - even the hundredth reconsideration. That I'm sure will be regarded by many of my colleagues as wimpish, an indication that really there's no stomach for the battle. In a sense there isn't, because the battle is going to hurt trade union members and we ought to be doing more useful things for our people. An internal battle, a civil war, is the last thing any of us want.

So basically you would prefer to see some sort of working relationship which will allow some room for reconsideration?

Yes. We actually have to live together as well as working together.

But it is a gamble. For what could be established outside the TUC is an entirely different culture of unionism with an

entirely different ideological and political orientation which, in the long run, will only benefit employers.

There is an enormous gamble here, but I think the gamble is being taken by the EETPU. The TUC in the end has to concentrate on its own survival and it cannot allow an organisation to break rules that have been decided jointly. Now if, once it is outside the TUC, the EETPU gains some real momentum - and I don't mean a certain amount of hype from parts of the media - that will only come about as a result of a failure by the TUC to capture the high ground and to demonstrate its worth to working people as a whole.

The GMB is putting to the TUC in September suggestions to achieve a limited number of important objectives. We should forget a bit about influencing the grand sweep of history and instead concentrate on specific targets like, for instance, establishing a proper database on all health and safety issues, so that the TUC becomes the resource centre on health and safety for the whole union movement. The TUC should be doing a lot of work on labour markets to provide the basic research for trade union organisational efforts. It should have a development fund to back unions' organisational efforts in very difficult recruitment areas. And there should be a proper TUC programme for explaining trade unionism in schools and colleges using modern communications techniques to give a presentable and convincing picture of what trade unionism is about.

The GMB over recent years has been keen to limit TUC objectives to some obviously worthwhile and achievable things and to leave out quite a lot of the bullshit. I think that if the TUC proceeds on that basis then membership of it will be seen to be very valuable. The TUC can fund and provide a real support for the whole trade union movement on health and safety, recruitment and education. The EETPU can't compete with that.

That is a question the EETPU has raised very clearly: what is the point of being a member of the TUC anymore? The TUC, as it stands, probably doesn't do very much for quite a few unions. Isn't part of the reason why the EETPU is able to split off in this way that the TUC hasn't laid out a vision of a modern trade union movement which can overcome the EETPU's attempt to monopolise the imagery of 'the modern union'?

Yes, I wouldn't put it quite like that, but I accept a large part of that argument. There is still a great deal of hankering after the days when the TUC was welcomed into the corridors of power. And at some stage in the future that easy access to Whitehall may again be the main role of the TUC. But even if that happens, other things will still need to be done to spread trade unionism into areas where it has been weak; to ensure that trade unionism is attractive in the service trades, is



Edmonds: Keen to limit TUC objectives

attractive to women, is attractive to people working in small groups rather than the traditional great industrial combines. There has to be an appeal to that world, those people: a very clear TUC vision of where it's going. Now, my own union - and others, such as MSF - do have a very clear idea of where we are going. Our ideas may not coincide perfectly, but many of them run in parallel. But what the TUC hasn't been able to do in recent years is bring that all together in some vision of trade unionism.

Do you think the Special Review Body report has settled the question of single-union, strike-free agreements?

God, I hope so, because we have spent so much time looking sideways at the issue. The argument should never have been about single-union deals because every trade union in the TUC signs single-union deals: that in itself is uncontroversial. We've all done those deals as a very sensible way of handling industrial relations and reducing inter-union competition on new sites. But on existing sites where there

'The argument should never have been about single-union deals because every trade union in the TUC signs single-union deals'



are three unions, it is unreasonable to say to the members of two, 'Sorry, you must go and join the third' - particularly when it's the employer deciding which of them should represent the workforce.

As far as no-strike deals go, in the public utilities we have had unilateral arbitration for years, and it prevents the worst type of sporadic industrial dispute in a major public utility. But at the same time it gives people an opportunity of arguing the case in a very robust way, and if necessary, of taking industrial action. But the problem with the EETPU is that it puts together a package which it thinks is attractive to the *employer* and if that package isn't attractive then the union offers something else, all the time saying to the employer: 'Well if that isn't what you want, tell us what you do want and I'm sure we can meet it'. It's that approach which is unacceptable.

But isn't there a problem on greenfield sites where there is no workforce in existence, and so no-one to consult? Isn't

Future Under Review

The Special Review Body of 21 general secretaries was established by the 1987 Trade Union Congress to draw up a report on future union strategy. It was given a wide-ranging brief covering financial services, the role of the TUC in promoting unionism, and recruitment organisation.

But its initial task was to examine union competition over recruitment and recognition at new manufacturing plants being built ('greenfield' sites). For many in the TUC it was a way to bring some order into increasingly cut-throat competition over single-union, strike-free deals, and to establish a set of rules to regulate competition. The EETPU saw it as a further infringement of its freedom to sign these agreements.

The document to be presented to September's congress was drawn up by John Monks, the TUC's deputy general secretary, and one of the sharpest thinkers in the union movement.

The report is one of the best recent surveys of changing pressures on unions: from new patterns of employment to employers' new industrial relations strategies. It notes that with membership declining or growing less strongly than the overall growth in employment, union competition for recruitment is becoming both more intense and more widespread. In addition, employers establishing new sites are generally only recognising a single union.

The report considers several changes to union structure to help ease competitive tensions: the creation of industrial unions; amalgamations; a rule which would give a union a year to recruit at a greenfield site before opening it up to competition. It rejects these options and recommends a new code of conduct to regulate the

signing of these agreements. The report says single-union agreements are here to stay. It says strike-free arrangements are also useful and widely used. But what it is opposed to is unions giving up the right to strike to win recognition from an employer.

The report says: 'On no-strike arrangements, the TUC's interest is in seeing unions not appearing to be engaged in a Dutch auction with employers when competing for recognition by giving away the ultimate lawful rights of unions to call out members on official strike.'

This is enshrined in a clause to be incorporated in the code of conduct which reads: 'Unions, when making recognition agreements, must not make agreements which specifically remove, or are designed to remove, the basic democratic lawful rights of a trade union to take industrial action in advance of recruitment of members and without consulting them. If faced with an employer insisting on such procedures the union should consult the TUC'

Beyond that the report goes on to outline some much more interesting ideas for the TUC's future role in recruitment strategies through providing a local labour market information service for unions, helping with recruitment drives in new towns, providing advice with the recruitment of special target groups of members, and educational work to promote trade unionism among the young. These themes, as well as TUC plans for financial services to members, will be explored in the second phase of the SRB's work, following congress.

The Special Review Body - First Report is available from the TUC, Great Russell St, London WC1, price £2.50.

'The battle is going to hurt trade union members and we ought to be doing more useful things for our people'



the TUC going to have to come round to some mechanism to allow workers a choice over agreements, even on a greenfield site?

Yes, there's no doubt about this at all. The EETPU is keen to push everybody else into false positions for its own tactical advantage. Yes, it's a good idea, where there are a number of unions trying to recruit the workforce in a particular establishment, to give a choice to the working people. But not, as is the case at the moment, to the employer. In many countries, the fact that the choice should be the choice of the employee, rather than the employer, is enshrined in law.

How much of a risk do you think that is,

that the AEU might leave the TUC along with the EETPU?

They've repeatedly said no at the highest level: in private as well as in public. They are not going to leave the TUC. If the EETPU tries to use the AEU to fight the EETPU's battles, relations between the two unions are bound to worsen. I think a lot of people in the AEU would resent being used as a kind of battering ram on behalf of the EETPU executive.

Do you think the EETPU should be excluded from the Labour Party?

I think we should follow the same principle in the party as we have so far in the TUC. That's to take the thing steadily stage by stage. If the EETPU

chooses to be expelled from the TUC then I think the Labour Party national executive committee should immediately begin its own enquiry about whether it is feasible for the EETPU to continue to be affiliated. Legal advice will have to be taken. But there will also have to be soundings among the trade unions and among the constituency parties, because in the end the people who can join the Labour Party or any other party are those who are acceptable to its existing members. But I don't think there's any point in precipitate action. A lot of speeches by EETPU leaders revolve around the argument that there's some grand conspiracy working against their union. If precipitate attempts are made to expel the EETPU from the Labour Party I think it would just fuel those images of conspiracy.

Finally, is this an historic split in the TU movement, or is it part of something less than that, a temporary separation which will be resolved after a few years?

I think it is a splintering. We're talking about a union of something over 300,000 members, which has been losing members pretty regularly for a number of years now, splitting away from an organisation of over *nine million*. What I fear is this. The EETPU has a particular view of what trade unions ought to do. Some of those ideas are good, a number of them are not very good. But they are all packaged together with some very unattractive ribbon.

The sad thing might be that the TUC will be so keen to dissociate itself from the EETPU that it will move away from those good ideas that are already part of our own culture and our own activity, for the sake of proving ourselves different. We may even, if we're not careful, fit ourselves into exactly that stereotype that Eric Hammond has drawn for us. That is, backward-looking people who can't come to terms with the modern world. The irony is that a craft union like the EETPU has no place in the modern world. That is the basic problem that Eric is trying to resolve, claiming modernism for an organisation that by its fundamental nature is appropriate to the 19th or early 20th century and not to the 21st century. This is the time of the general union that will represent all grades, all industries, and will give that widespread protection.

Punishment and recruitment wars will divert energy. What we have to do is to have a coherent view of what trade unionism will mean in the 1990s, but also to talk about it in an attractive way. The split of the EETPU is an important and damaging diversion, but one which we shouldn't become obsessed with. It shouldn't move us off our own drive to modernise the movement, to demonstrate that the things we should be doing, in the mainstream of the union movement, are the real heartland of modern unionism. •