

Whose Realism? Britain's Conservative Party Debates Industrial Relations

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For a brief moment it had appeared that the Tories had finally run out of right-wing rhetoric. The debate on industrial relations at this year's Conservative Party Conference, in contrast to the jingoistic jamboree on Rhodesia or the reactionary ranting about 'thugs on the street', was considerably less theatrical.

Of course there were the standard attacks: on the former Labour government for supposedly being soft on the unions; on the militant mineworker and Tory nemesis, Arthur Scargill, on last winter's public service strikers who were maligned as the English equivalent of the Red Brigades.

Conservative Party Conferences are expensively stare-managed exercises in public relations. Consciously promoting a self-image of a party united in the national interest, internal divisions are papered over and expressions of minority sentiment are discouraged. In the end, weakly worded motions supporting the party program-are are passed by wide majorities. The Conference is less useful for anticipating future policies, and provides more of an opportunity for reiterating the ideology which underlies them.

During the debates on industrial relations, since some of the more vociferous Monday Clubbers remained silent, a more general conservative view of trade unionism in Britain pervaded the speeches.

British industry, contend the Conservatives, is over the barrel to the trade unions, a situation brought about by indolence in management and union domination of the Labour Party. Trade union leaders, who gain their posts undemocratically, treat the workers like serfs": it is not their employer, but their trade union which oppresses them. In turn, rank and file workers are fed up with "left-wing doctrines forced on them by labour leaders in pursuit of their own political ambitions." They are opposed to the political trend dominating trade unionism and want to move unions back from their contemporary political role to their "industrial, historical one"

Consistent with Thatcher's commitment to a monetarist policy of restraint, the public sector workers in Britain came under the heaviest Tory blasts. Again the Tone: demonstrated their propensity for turning things upside down. "Public spending is at the heart of Britain's difficulty" was the dominant message in the White Paper on the budget cuts: the country has been spending more money than it has earned. Trying to bring their 'facts' down to the level of the individual, each "housewife" was reminded that no budget can work unless spending is reduced to match income. In classical Tory fashion, it passed unnoticed that working class families under-spend rather than over-spend, and in such a situation it is more logical to increase income rather than cut back on necessities.

By using the everyday image of the household budget as an analogy for the national economy, Thatcher hoped to divert the concern felt over a twenty per cent inflation away from demands for wage rises and towards support for her policy of monetary restraint.

From the perceptual level of the individual household, the image is unconvincing. From the point of view of public sector workers facing so-called "redundancies", speed-up, "efficiency" drives and threats to any recent gains, the real implications are immediately apparent -- and their response during next fall's negotiations is more predictable. Another winter of discontent is in the works.

Not surprisingly, government employees and their unions came in for particularly sharp attacks as the Conservatives tried to deepen the wedge between state workers and clients. They painted a bloody canvas in recalling the massive propaganda campaign mounted against last winter's public service strikers and placed the responsibility for their policy of cut-backs on the wage increases won by these workers -- the victim as villain. One speaker declared that the strikers had mutinously "threatened the country's military preparedness": it was "no exaggeration to say that servants of the state who, in the pursuit of their own interests, take measures that have the effect of weakening the national defense, are engaged in conduct that falls little short of treason." To remedy this, collective bargaining rights should be stripped from civil service unions and replaced by a determinate income formula and compulsory arbitration.

The (Un)Employment Bill

Although public sector unions were singled out for special treatment, the Conservatives spent most of the debate outlining measures to weaken the trade union movement as a whole, many of which were incorporated in the so-called Employment Bill. In speech after speech, delivered beneath their wall-to-wall banner proclaiming "Realism and Responsibility", the Tories reiterated the three main planks in their program-to curtail even further the ability of trade unions to defend workers interests.

The "silent majority", the Tories claimed, wanted an end to the closed shop which "allowed unions to act like pressgangs". The union card, which had in the past been merely a symbol of financial contribution (an intriguing Tory view), had been transformed by the closed shop into a "license to work". It was a weapon with which the few controlled the many (notwithstanding the fact that closed shops are negotiated between the union members and the employer). Trotting out their used individualistic rhetoric for the occasion, the conservatives pledged to protect those few who chose to leave their work rather than agree to a closed shop, at the same time that their own policies threatened to increase unemployment to an unprecedented two million. The Conservatives promised to grant all workers the "freedom to choose" between belonging or not belonging to a union, thereby removing the "discriminatory practice" of a man losing his job merely "because he doesn't agree with his brothers" and acts against their collective interests. The Tory concern for these malcontents pales into insignificance not only alongside the deliberate policy of creating redundancies, but alongside their support for employer rights to determine unilaterally the conditions of employment. After all, in a free enterprise economy, if someone doesn't like his terms of employment he is free to change jobs. But if a trade union manages to get some small voice in these conditions, then, in the Conservative view, the workers are being oppressed.

In the end, the Employment Bill didn't go far enough for British industry and its spokesmen in the Tory Party. James Prior, the Minister of Employment, added a "conscientious objector" clause for those who refused to join the trade union at their plant, and provided compensation for those who lost their job on these grounds.

But the European Commission of Human Rights is studying a case brought by three former employees of British Rail who were fired after refusing to join a union which had negotiated a closed shop. The ruling, when it eventually comes, is expected to go beyond the limited provisions in the Employment Bill. The Confederation of British Industry, spokesman for the employers, was also disappointed at the limitations of the Bill. Their proposed "Industrial Bill of Rights" would outlaw the closed shop; however they decided not to pressure the government on this point at the

moment because it would impede its passage and thereby delay the implementation of two other provisions.

The second clause sponsored by British industry would provide for legislation to institutionalise “industrial democracy” -- not in the plants but in the unions. In the Alice in Wonderland view of the Tories, where everything is upside down, rank and file workers in Britain are allegedly demanding the right to hold secret strike ballots, a right prohibited by undemocratic constitutions and autocratic leaders. This supposedly overwhelming pressure from the bottom couldn't be permitted to take its own course, however -- the government must act on behalf of the workers and draw up legal guidelines for internal union affairs. These regulations should be “simple to understand” and “practical to operate” so that, in the words of one delegate, “the extremist minorities cannot circumvent them.... They must be Bolshevik proof”.

The Tories nineteenth century views of employer rights and the coercive nature of union-worker relations, are calculated to appeal more to the middle class constituency of the Conservative Party than to the trade unionists themselves. Nevertheless they do feed legitimate grievances. In their determination to get as much mileage as possible from workers' complaints about the undemocratic nature of much contemporary trade unionism, the Tories would have the workers believe that the unions are the most oppressive force that they face. Autocracy at work is part of the natural order of things -- but the “rights” of individual workers must be protected from their own defensive organizations.

In both of these clauses we can glimpse the corporatist face of the Conservative Party. Contrary to their free enterprise rhetoric, they advocate interfering with contracts negotiated between supposedly free agents, and act as the party of state control.

As the third plank in their new scaffold, the Tories promised to guarantee an individual's “right to work”. By this they definitely did not intend taking measures to lessen unemployment (on the contrary!); nor expanding job retraining schemes (which are being whittled away); nor maintaining aid to ailing industry even at its 1979 level. Rather they meant guaranteeing the right to break a strike. The Employment Bill limits the number of picketers and restricts picketing to those workers and those installations directly involved in the dispute. There will be no supporters on the lines, and no secondary picketing.

The Tories promised to protect an individual's “right to work free from violence and intimidation.... There must be no more Grunwicks!” The economic coercion underlying the need to sell labour power in capitalist society was accepted as a blind natural law, while conscious means to gain collective ends in the face of enormous objective difficulties were rejected as “intimidation”.

The National Emergency

Much to the displeasure of the hard-liners in his Party, James Prior realized that this systematic campaign to weaken the trade unions could not be implemented all at once. The Employment Bill was merely a widening of the wedge. Relying on a “softly, softly” approach -- his words -- Prior claimed that many of the directions from the Party Conference were “controversial and difficult.... Great issues are at stake and we cannot afford to get them wrong.... The path is long and it is strewn with many rocks.”

It doesn't require a very long memory to recall the fate of Britain's last Conservative government, headed by Edward Heath, which was brought down in 1974 by political strikes

spear-headed by the mineworkers.

It is the potential strength of the workers' response which the Conservatives fear. In addition to legislative attempts to curtail trade union influence from above, the recipe for Tory success depends on a strong dose of crisis ideology. They hope to convince the workers that a diminution of both their real and their social wages in the interests of capital accumulation is the only solution to the "national emergency" facing Britain. With a systematic use of this ingredient the Tories hope to sap trade union strength from below, where it counts, and thereby to forestall a recurrence of any direct action. They want to prevent yesterday's memory from becoming tomorrow's reality. The Conservative Trade Unionists are aware that, in many cases, the union leaders are (in their words) "more moderate and responsible than the workers they represent". It was militant rank and file workers who defied much of the union hierarchy as well as the Labour Party and brought about the winter of discontent. Many labour leaders had claimed, in effect, that the short-term objectives of the public service workers were in contradiction with the long-term interests of their class, which were bound up indissolubly with the Labourite brand of social democratic corporatism. They feared that the disruption of social services caused by direct action would play into the hands of the Conservatives and help push the "iron maiden" into power. In this respect these Labour officials played their historical role of working to smooth out the class struggle while protecting their self-interest as politicians and union leaders.

In contrast, the Conservatives are a bit more of a blunt instrument. In times of special economic difficulty they increase their vote by pandering to backward sentiments among the population and striking a few resonant chords. Once in power, however, they can only breathe stale life into obsolete' policies -- and a retreat to the supposed liberties of a mythical nineteenth century laissez faire with the likes of Friedman is hardly the answer to the contradictions of Keynesianism.

While the need to weaken the collective power of the working class is an essential prerequisite if the conservatives are to succeed in dismantling some of the fundamental components of the welfare state, their policies will predictably elicit the opposite response. In the context of the present state of politics in Britain, however, the Conservatives will, in turn, unwittingly enhanced the legitimacy of the Labour party which is usually more innovative in its efforts to save British capitalism. Despite some fertile ground, the prospects for anything more politically effective appear remote.