

Trade Union Fightback

The lessons to be learned

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When the Programme for National Recovery (PNR) was proposed for ratification by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) in October 1987, organised opposition was negligible. Most of the left appeared to be almost unaware of the long term consequences of the bureaucrats' adoption of 'social partnership' and only about a dozen independent socialists, Trotskyists and anarchists got together to run a limited campaign, producing no more than a couple of thousand leaflets and posters.

At the beginning of the PNR's third and final year, ICTU held a special conference (February 8th 1990) to discuss its continued involvement in the Programme. To coincide with this conference, the Portobello Unemployed Action Group (PUAG) organised a public meeting under the title '*Withdraw from the Programme; Fight the Cuts*'. This meeting attracted no more than twenty people – including most of those involved in the 1987 campaign. Yet from this small beginning, it was decided to establish a campaign to work for the rejection of a PNR MarkII.

Over the following months, Trade Unionists and Unemployed against the Programme (TU-UAP) was established and managed to build a campaign which attracted the sponsorship of over 300 trade union activists across most unions – both public and private sector -with groups in over a dozen towns and cities. Although the number of campaign activists was considerably smaller than this, TUUAP organised two successful conferences (one of which was attended by over 130 people) and public meetings in at least 10 different venues. In the 3-week period before the vote on the Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP) almost 100,000 leaflets were distributed. In addition local TUUAP groups in several areas produced their own leaflets and sectoral leaflets were distributed among INTO, TUI, Public Sector and Building workers.

TUUAP brought together shop stewards and activists from SIPTU, ATGWU, IDATU, TUI, INTO, ASTI, MSF, CWU, CPSU, IMPACT, AEU, ETU, NEETU, NUSMW, AGEMOU, UCATT, GMBTU, BATU, EEPTU, NGA, PNA, PSEU, NUJ, BFAWU, UMTTIE as well as unemployed activists from Dublin, Thurles, Clonmel and Portlaoise. Groups were established in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford, Dungarvan, Shannon, Clonmel, Thurles, Portlaoise, Dundalk, Drogheda and Letterkenny. Public meetings were held around the country, factories were leafletted, motions brought to branch meetings and to trades councils. For the first time in years there was the genesis of a challenge to the leadership's thinking.

In Dublin, the TUUAP group met fortnightly – and weekly when required. Attendances varied somewhat but there was always a minimum of between 15 and 20, with an average attendance of 25 to 30. There was a constant buzz of activity and TUUAP activists formed the backbone of the Waterford Glass Strike Support Group. Trade union meetings, Trades Council meetings, etc. were all leafletted looking for support for the campaign. Press releases and letters to the papers were issued weekly (sometimes even two or three a week) & several press conferences were held. While the media were not very generous in their coverage, the campaign did make the front page of the national dailies on more than one occasion. In the three week period of the vote on PESP, this activity reached its peak and over 40 people distributed approximately 50,000 leaflets in the Dublin area alone. There was therefore a consistent level of activity and a sense that the campaign was a real and genuine attempt to challenge the concept of 'social partnership'.

Less Glorious

The history of TUUAP in the post-PESP period is, however, somewhat less glorious. The Conference held on 25th May 1991 attracted an attendance of less than 60 with just 9 people from outside Dublin. This conference debated 19 motions — all of which envisaged the campaign continuing on in some form. Among the objectives which these motions set out for a supposedly renewed TUUAP were

to...campaign against the [Industrial Relations] Act...

(Motion A)

...constitute ...as an ongoing campaign...

(Motion B)

...maintain and develop the network of shop stewards and trade union activists built up around TUUAP...

(Motion C)

...intervene in all workers' struggles, initiating support groups for strikes, raising financial support and solidarity...

(Motion F)

...raise in...public sector unions the need for action to defend the C and A scheme

(Motion I)

...renew the struggle...to force a change in the policy of ICTU, as expressed through the PNR and the PESP, to the public sector...

(Motion J)

...produce a regular newspaper/bulletin...

(Motion L)

...provide practical and organisational support to strikes as they occur...

(Motion P)

...stand/support candidates for Branch/Regional/National Executive Committees...

(Motion Q)

The reality however was somewhat different. Having begun life as a single-issue campaign, much of the energy around TUUAP was already dissipated by the time of the conference. The core group of activists had dwindled to less than ten and nothing that was said at the conference indicated that this core group was likely to increase in size.

In fact in the post-conference scenario, the number of activists dwindled even further and nothing more than the rather irregular production of a newsletter was possible. In early 1992, it was decided to attempt to expand this newsletter to a more regular tabloid-size publication. However after just two issues (April/May 1992 and Autumn 1992) this had to be abandoned due to a lack of resources and personnel. While the response to *Trade Union Fightback* (as the paper was titled) was generally positive, the number of people willing to take out subscriptions, take copies for sale or indeed write articles for publication was disappointingly small and meant that the venture was unsustainable.

Poor response

As PESP began to approach the end of its life, several attempts were made to reconstitute TUUAP as a campaigning group with some real base. The name was changed to *Trade Union Fightback* (TUF) at a 'national' meeting held on 22nd May 1993. It was an indication of what was to come that this meeting had an attendance of less than 30 people – with just one from outside Dublin. Despite several mailouts to almost 300 contacts in the months between May 1993 and February 1994, the response was almost non-existent. Dublin meetings – even during the vote on PESP's successor, the Programme for Competitiveness and Work (PCW) – had less than ten regular attenders. In the rest of the country there was only one formal meeting – in Portlaoise where the initiative came from an unemployed TUF supporter. In the end, the campaign amounted to just 5,000 leaflets, most of which were posted to contacts in the hope that they would be distributed.

It is difficult to explain exactly why a campaign which had put up one hell of a fight in 1990/1991 was hardly able to raise even a whimper of protest in late 1993. I think, however, that the writing was on the wall since the conference of May 1991. In hindsight we can see that the attendance at that conference (or rather those who did not attend) was evidence of a huge demoralisation following the ballot. To a certain extent TUUAP had become a victim of its own success. A campaign which had begun as an attempt to maximise the 'No' vote had drawn in such a layer of supporters that some people began to feel that we could actually deliver a rejection of the PESP. When we failed to achieve the result, demoralisation set in. If at that conference in May '91, we had taken stock of the situation, and taken this into account, perhaps we would have adopted a more realistic set of motions.

The subsequent period of time (i.e. 1991, '92, '93) saw an even greater fall-off in general trade union and political activity than had been the case in the previous number of years. Disillusionment with trade unions was more the rule than the exception and TUUAP/TUF's attempts to keep going as a focus for anti-'social partnership' activity fell onto the shoulders of just three or four activists. As the PCW approached, Militant Labour decided to focus its energies on the newly-established Militant Labour Trade Union Group, the Socialist Workers Movement made no attempt to involve themselves in the campaign and again it was left to a handful of activists to attempt to launch a 'national' campaign. It simply proved unsustainable and, following a disastrous campaign, the few people who had attempted to keep the initiative alive were left with no option but to formally wind up TUF – at least for the time being.

Untapped Potential?

In attempting to analyse the level of success or failure which TUUAP/TUF achieved, it is important to start from a position of realising exactly what the initiative represented. Was it laden with untapped potential? With a more 'correct' programme could TUUAP/TUF have become the genesis of a mass rank-and-file movement? Or did it simply tap into an anti-'social partnership' feeling among a layer of activists and provide a forum through which their activity could be co-ordinated?

As already mentioned, TUUAP was established as a single-issue campaign. It had one objective – to defeat the ICTU's planned successor to the PNR (or at least to maximise the vote against).

In a document circulated to TUUAP activists in the lead-up to the Conference of 25th May 1991, Des Derwin (TUUAP Chairperson) stated

“It need not have been a shop stewards campaign. It was never explicitly so and the level of participation indicates that it was hardly a spontaneous initiative from the shop stewards of Ireland! The aim was to defeat or at least oppose the Programme and it could have been an organisation of concerned individuals like most single-issue campaigns. And, let’s face it, as regards its core and activities it was like that, with little participation from the shop stewards on the ground and, of course, no structural participation from union committees etc”¹

Further on, he continued

“At base TUUAP committed many stewards and union activists to opposing the Programmes and to a modestly comprehensive ‘fightback’ alternative programme. For many this was their first embracing of alternative ideas for the labour movement and they may not even be aware of the many other practical and comprehensive proposals for change and advance.”²

So TUUAP achieved the endorsement of a relatively broad layer of trade union activists united on the specific issue of fighting PNR/PESP. It never attempted to present a radical alternative strategy for democracy and change in the trade union movement. While the 300 or so sponsors of the campaign were united in their criticism of the state of the movement and the direction in which trade union leaders were taking it, there was not necessarily agreement on all the tactics and strategies which would be needed to reclaim the movement.

Indeed, there was always a considerable gap between the level of formal support (as expressed by endorsement of the TUUAP statement) and the level of active support. As Des Derwin put it:

“While TUUAP could present itself now and again as an alliance of shop stewards (the Dublin press conferences, the National Conference, the founding meetings of the main groups, its literature), these were exceptional occasions, requiring great organising efforts (and even then only a small minority of the signatories were involved) and the active nuclei in the groups were very small and did not retain the participation of many ‘ordinary decent’ stewards and reps”³

Nevertheless the campaign could justifiably claim to be the biggest and most representative gathering of shop stewards and activists since the national federation of shop stewards and rank and file committees of the 1970’s. As already mentioned, fortnightly meetings in Dublin in the months leading up to the PESP ballot were very well attended (20–30 attended regularly). Many groups outside the capital produced and distributed local leaflets. The distribution of almost 100,000 leaflets in the 3 weeks immediately before the ballot indicated a high level of activism — albeit for a limited period.

¹ Derwin, Des: *Some thoughts on the future of TUUAP*, May 1991. Page 2

² *ibid.* Page 2

³ *ibid.* Page 3

Following the ballot however the unifying factor of campaigning for a No vote was gone. Having provided a co-ordinating structure for trade unionists who wished to oppose the PESP, TUUAP now had to look to the future and attempt to discover a way to use what had been achieved as a base for building a more long-term focus for opposition to the rightward stampede of the leadership.

Narrow Focus

While the majority consensus in TUUAP had been that the campaign should — in the run up to the ballot — confine itself to the maximisation of the No vote, there had been a school of thought — mainly represented by Irish Workers Group (IWG) members active in the campaign — that this focus was too narrow. The IWG paper *Class Struggle* argued

“...lodged within the singleness of purpose with which TUUAP approaches its goal is a fundamental contradiction. Insofar as it limits itself to the single issue of getting out the ‘no’ vote, the campaign has turned its back on the vital need to build an alternative to the Plan. This is a fatal flaw — for when faced with a barrage of propaganda coming from the union tops, many workers who are thoroughly sickened by the programme still see no real alternative to it.”⁴

IWG argued that TUUAP should aim to be more than a ‘vote no’ campaign:

“Its branches and sectoral groups can and must become the basis, not only for mobilising a No vote, but for taking up related issues. The key to this is to develop beyond limited anti-PNR bulletins and begin to organise rank and file bulletins in each sector....They must be constituted as a permanent network of militant activists that will remain in existence long after the battle over the PNR is fought, to co-ordinate a class-wide response to the bosses’ attacks.”⁵

Looking back on the history of TUUAP after the PESP ballot, this is still the question for debate — would TUUAP have been any more of a ‘viable entity’ in May 1991 if it had twelve months previously set as one of its main objectives the building of a rank-and-file movement?

Rhetorical Gesture

There were very few TUUAP activists who were — and are — not fully aware of the need for a mass rank-and-file movement. If, however, TUUAP had set the building of such a movement as an immediate objective, it is likely that differences would have arisen as to the tactics, strategies and indeed structures needed. In any event, to have done so without first establishing a solid base among shop stewards and union activists would have been nothing more than a rhetorical gesture.

A rank-and-file movement cannot be willed into existence. It will not be the cause of on-the-ground activity but will come about as the result of such activity. TUUAP/TUF was never — at any stage of its existence — in a position to declare itself a shop stewards/rank-and-file movement:

⁴ *Class Struggle* No.22 November/December 1990. Page 2 *TUUAP Challenge*

⁵ *ibid.*

“Although it may wish to adopt the aim of establishing a shop stewards movement, the proportion nationally of shop stewards involved in TUUAP, the input from workplaces (as opposed to individual activists) and committees, the level of participation beyond formal support, and the breadth of the basis of that support (opposition to the Programmes) are all insufficient to describe TUUAP or its immediate successor as a shop stewards movement...it would be a shell without any real substance.”⁶

A genuine rank-and-file movement will only be built as a result of both experience of struggle and clearly worked-out ideas of what can be done within the unions. There is no evidence to suggest that had TUUAP from its outset set the building of such a movement as one of its main aims, it would have been one iota closer to the achievement of that aim by the time voting on the PESP had finished.

Low ebb

Industrial and political struggle in the 1990-'91 period – and since – was at a low ebb. Workers' confidence is low and most industrial struggle which is taking place is of a defensive rather than an offensive nature. All trade union activists are aware of the growing sense of apathy and disillusionment and the fact that trade union consciousness can no longer be taken for granted. Attendance at union meetings is extremely low and even Phil Flynn (IMPACT general secretary and current President of ICTU) complained of the low level of participation in the ballot on the PCW.⁷ For a whole layer of workers – both young and not so young – ‘the union’ is something abstract and this sense of alienation is deepened by the *New Realism* and *social partnership* of the leadership.

In a feature in *Industrial Relations News* (IRN) in early 1993, Norman Croke (SIPTU official and recent candidate for the vice-presidency of that union) admitted that centralised bargaining is eroding trade union democracy

“When negotiations take place in camera through the aegis of the Social Partners, active trade union membership participation is severely curtailed. Trade union members and lay officials are relegated to the position of passive observer within their own organisation and workplace.”⁸

Croke noted that in a study of membership participation carried out in the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) – forerunner to SIPTU – during a period of decentralised wage bargaining and reported in IRN 24/1989, 81% of trade union members studied had participated in votes on wage deals. However, the result of SIPTU's ballot on the PESP showed that out of a claimed membership at the time (1991) of 208,000 (he admits that the actual book membership was only approximately 180,000), only 90,805 members voted. In other words, only 50.5% of members cast a vote, showing that 30% more trade union members voted when the wage deal was

⁶ Derwin, Des op. cit.

⁷ Reported in *Irish Times*, Monday 21st March 1994.

⁸ Croke, Norman: *Trade Union Membership Participation in Centralised Bargaining* in *Industrial Relations News* No.2, 14th January 1993. Page 17.

negotiated locally through free collective bargaining. More recently, this conclusion has been reinforced by the vote on the PCW. Of SIPTU's claimed 1993 membership of 197,500, only 91,419 (46.3%) participated in the ballot. (It is interesting to note here that only 61,173 SIPTU members – 31% of the total membership – actually voted in favour of the PCW).

Croke himself carried out a study of the opinions of a sample of 91 lay activist and rank-and-file members within SIPTU – a study whose findings reiterated the fact that centralised bargaining has increasingly isolated ordinary trade unionists from the decision making process. Among the comments made by Croke in the course of his IRN article are

*"...rank-and-file participation at the central decision making forums is all but non-existent.....trade union activists and members have a preference for decentralised bargaining and prefer such bargaining to be undertaken by their elected shop stewards and local full-time Branch officials...the developing consensus or Social Partnership approach to industrial relations within the trade union movement is confined principally to the leadership...The implications for the trade union leadership and movement in containing lay and rank-and-file activists in a passive role...carries with it the danger that the leadership and the movement may become less relevant to its members."*⁹

While we do not need Norman Croke or anybody else to tell us that 'social partnership' is anti-democratic, it is interesting to note that even among the bureaucrats there is a realisation that it is not safe for them to be too open about their duplicity. And while the bureaucracy will remain happy enough with a quiet, disillusioned membership (as long as that membership continues to fund their huge salaries and high-flying lifestyles), our challenge is to turn the apathy into anger and a demand for change.

What's to be done?

The question for trade union activists is not whether rank-and-file activity is a good thing but how such activity can be motivated – in other words, what are the aims, structures and strategies needed to combat the apathy and, in periods of low activity such as we are currently experiencing, where should our energies be directed? With over 55% of all Irish employees unionised, there is a great potential power in the trade union movement. The tapping of that potential poses a challenge for all those interested in building a free and democratic society. It is important that in discussing what can be achieved, we realistically assess the current position and avoid trotting out ritualistic slogans.

On the organised left, the main strategies put forward for trade union work could be summarised as

1. Building Broad Lefts,
2. Rank-and-fileism
3. Building a Solidarity Network (Laying the groundwork) .

It is crucial that we understand what each involves.

⁹ Croke, Norman op. cit. Pp. 18–21

1. The Broad Left Strategy

The principal objective of the Broad Left Strategy is to elect a more 'radical' or 'left-wing' leadership. Those who advocate a Broad Left Strategy do of course usually argue for officials to be electable and re-callable and for them to be paid at the average wage of the members they represent. The fundamental flaw in this strategy is however that it is presumed that by electing a new leadership the unions can be changed from the top down.

This strategy does not however address the basic problem. Just as society cannot be improved fundamentally by electing a 'left-wing' government, neither can the trade union movement be reformed in this way. Pursuit of the Broad Left Strategy means that the election of leaders becomes more important than fighting for changes in the very rules and structures of the movement which would allow for more democratic participation.

Just as Anarchists believe that workers do not need leaders to organise our society, so we contend that the potential power of the trade union movement is stymied by the current divisions between leaders and led. Real decision making is concentrated in the hands of a very small number of people. This situation has been compounded by the amalgamations and 'rationalisation of structures' which have occurred over the past number of years.

Within the current structures, a trade union official's role is that of arbitrator, conciliator and fixer. In order to fulfil this role, an official must have control of his/her members. If an employer cannot be sure that the official can deliver workers' compliance with a deal, why would that employer bother with negotiations at all? It is because of this that officials are so quick to condemn 'unofficial' action (i.e. action which hasn't been given their approval) and this is also the reason why the average official does not encourage a high level of debate and activity among the rank-and-file.

No matter how 'radical' the official might personally be, the structures of the movement dictate that he/she is not in a position to encourage members to fight for their demands. The Broad Left Strategy – while usually padded out by calls for a 'fighting leadership' (whatever that is!) and for internal democracy and accountability – is essentially aimed at the election of a new leadership who will supposedly bring about change from the top. It fails to address the crunch issue – it is not the individual leaders who are the real problem, rather it is the structures which give them all-encompassing power.

2. Rank-and-File

This strategy involves fighting within the trade unions for more democracy, more struggle and more involvement by 'ordinary' members. It is a strategy with which Anarchists would be in full agreement. As already mentioned, however, a rank-and-file movement cannot be willed into existence. Constant repetitious calls for the building of a rank-and-file movement do little or nothing to bring about such a movement. Where such groupings have existed in the past they have come about as a result of groups of workers coming to the realisation that the union bureaucracy is an obstacle to them in their struggle. In circumstances where they are denied sanction for strikes or find themselves being dragged into endless rounds of mediation, conciliation, Labour Court hearings, Labour Relations Commissions etc., workers often come to the conclusion that it is necessary to bypass the union officials in order to fight. It is when workers are in conflict with bosses, when their confidence in the bureaucracy has been eroded and when they themselves

are confident enough to take up the fight that they realise the need for independent organisation within the unions. The point is that — as I mentioned earlier- rank-and-file movements come about as a result of workers' confidence and experience of struggle — not the other way round. At a time of low struggle and confidence, any attempt to build such a movement will attract only a very small number of activists. That is not to say that such attempts (where they arise from a genuine anti-bureaucratic feeling) are wrong, just to counsel against unrealistic goals.

3. The Solidarity Network

Nothing is to be gained by constantly putting out calls for the ideal- a genuine mass rank-and-file movement which would take the power away from the bureaucrats. Indeed the constant issuing of such calls can often provide cover for those who do not wish to make a realistic assessment of the current position and apply themselves to what can be done in the here and now.

In a climate of widespread disillusionment/demoralisation, TUUAP/TUF's great strength was that it provided a forum for an admittedly small layer of activists to come together on a limited platform. It aimed — and to some extent at least succeeded — to break down the isolation felt by the most militant activists. It provided a network for efforts to be pooled against the concept of 'social partnership'. I believe that the correct decision was made at the outset when TUUAP confined itself to the maximisation of the 'No' vote on PESP II. This did not mean that all the other issues which confront the trade union movement were ignored. It meant instead that these issues could be discussed in an open non-sectarian manner.

In periods of low struggle such as that which we are currently experiencing, it is important that trade unionists take stock of the possibilities for action, that we address and debate issues such as:- What is the best way to organise the reclamation of the trade union movement by rank-and-file activists? What tactics should be employed when an upturn in struggle does come? It is also important for socialists within the trade unions to continue to provide support for those struggles which do occur. (In fact such support is even more necessary in periods of low struggle in that those trade union battles which do take place are invariably of a defensive nature). Now is the time for those of us who wish to see wholesale change in the trade unions and their structures to be laying the groundwork, to be identifying key activists and discussing issues with them, to be building contacts within various sectors and various unions. This is work which can often be slow, tedious and unglamorous but it is work which is crucial if we are ever to take realistic steps along the road to building the oft-demanded 'mass rank-and-file movement'. This is what we mean when we talk about building a Solidarity Network, what is involved in reality is the laying of the foundation stones for our greater ambitions.

While TUUAP/TUF has now been formally laid to rest, such initiatives will inevitably arise again. Whether as strike support groups, action groups within individual unions or more long-term pro-democracy, anti-bureaucracy campaigns, workers will always be coming together and discussing the issues which confront us. Anarchists will be to the forefront of these discussions — not as self-appointed leaders but as a 'leadership of ideas' — arguing for change and working to bring about that change.

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