

Agency and the Working Class



IN THIS CONTEXT 'AGENCY' is an unfamiliar word. It is used by sociologists and observers of class relations who believe that working people have somehow lost their capacity to respond to the circumstances in which they live. It is argued that as the behaviour of investors has remodelled industry, commerce, and the workplace, over the last thirty-odd years, that working men and women have been rendered incapable of acting in their own interests.

This peculiar idea has sprung from the fact that UK trade union membership has declined from more than 13 million members in 1979 to below six and a half million today. This headlong decline has also been accompanied by a corresponding fall in the numbers of days lost to industrial action. It is as if 'agency' resided wholly in the labour movement – as if trade unions and strikes were the only measure by which people could register their desires and motivate their existence.

It is true, of course, that as industry and commerce has been reorganised over the years everything has changed. People working for Kwik Fit, in Amazon 'fulfilment centres' or nail bars, in offices and shops – those engaged in routine manual or clerical labour – have dramatically changed the way they live. This has altered their thinking and responses to things like trade unions and employers. By and large they no longer think in terms of solidarity or of fighting the boss in order to get ahead.

New conditions have given rise to new responses. Working people express their 'agency' in a number of radically different ways, from voting for Brexit, or Jean-Luc Mélenchon, or indeed for Marine Le Pen. The working class is not some singular entity which can be counted on to do the right thing, whatever that is. Millions of working people, in their manifest diversity, always have 'agency', they don't simply lose it because of the decay of the trade union movement.

Nowadays in Britain people express the need to improve their situation by going on training courses, getting promoted, or simply changing jobs as often as possible. In the sinister language of the day, 'human resources departments' bemoan 'churn'. Because, faced with lousy pay and worse prospects, workers simply leave and look for jobs elsewhere, making recruitment a continuous, and continuously expensive, process for employers.

Consequently, there have been considerable improvements over the years in pay, conditions, and hiring practices. Men fall to their deaths from scaffolding less frequently, asbestos has been removed from offices and warehouses, and the much-ridiculed *health and safety culture* has resulted in improved training, safer workplaces, and better conditions. Contracts of employment have been improved and well-understood protections from the arbitrary actions of bosses and supervisors widened considerably.

These changes have been brought about by the

manner in which workers have voted with their feet, improved their skills, and continuously *upped the ante* in their demands and expectations. This in turn has resulted in government, trade unions, and employers, regulating the private sector labour market and working conditions in a manner which has broadly replaced the open fights and conflicts of the past.

However, in health, education, public administration, and public transport, trade unions and collective bargaining has remained important. Perhaps because of the large-scale of the bureaucracies involved, and the more or less direct relationship to government and the politics of the day. The costs associated with public employment often confront central government and local authorities with the values of solidarity and service to the community inimical to commerce and private profit. So, whilst public employment has not been immune to the pressures experienced in commercial settings, workers in health, education, and transport, have been much more resistant to soporific dictums concerning cooperation and social peace promulgated by the Blairite right of the Labour Party, and the bosses of private companies.

This has kept open a space for those who think of struggles between workers and employers as redolent with the possibility of wider social change. The leaders of the National Union of Rail, Maritime, and Transport Workers will associate current strikes with social ambitions which go some way beyond demands for better pay and conditions. Stalinists, tankies, state-socialists will, no doubt, issue clarion calls to health workers and teachers to join them in the battle for justice. (A General Strike is mooted, no less.)

The intrinsically commercial nature of struggles about the terms on which workers sell their labour power to employers will be masked, yet again, by rhetoric concerning justice and community. This will also obscure what the RMT thinks can be done about inflation and the coming recession. What answers do Mick Lynch (Transport), Ian Murray (Fire Fighters),

Robin Bevan (Teachers), Mark Serwotka (Public and Commercial Services), or Christina McAnea of Unison have to the impending economic and political crises we face – the looming threats to incomes and jobs?

Trade union leaders, in common with Labour's front bench, have little of substance to say about the manner in which wage stagnation is now to be joined by real-wage cuts as inflation takes its toll. Recession, indebtedness, and war, to which the Labour Party and the unions will indignantly point, rest some way beyond the capacity of their imaginations. To be sure, they will blah blah blah against the Tories, but in truth will say little about how to challenge the realities of commerce and the market.

This is because, the Labour Party and the trade unions are not in any sense anti-capitalist. They seek to get the best deal they think they can get, without upsetting the applecart.

The nature of the applecart that we find ourselves in is probably more important than the fulminations of union leaders about the iniquities of executive pay, when compared to working families that have to rely on welfare benefits to make ends meet. The applecart in question is, of course, commercial society or capitalism, call it what you will.

What we are going to do about it is anybody's guess, but pretending, like Mick Lynch, that you are robust opponents determined to get one over on the capitalists, come what may, is a profound deception that can only lead to more trouble and disappointment for people facing extremely uncertain times. Saying that "we all need a wage rise", and if this leads to higher inflation, "so be it" does not come near to approaching the scale of the problem.

We are going to see a great deal of uproar, riots, and disorder, in the coming years as poverty spirals out of control, and people's most modest aspirations cannot be met.

Within the present scheme of things only higher productivity is going to help, but this is not a quick fix and it cannot be achieved without job losses and the

disruption of current working practices. Only a move away from arrangements that rest everything on profitability and the payment of dividends to bond and shareholders – only changing the terms of the argument – could suggest a way forward that might match the socialistic rhetoric our trade union leaders.

The cowardice of Keir Starmer and Labour's Front Bench is breath taking. They clearly view strikes as a failure rather than as a venerable well-tested tactic in the struggle to ensure that negotiations succeed. Unable to match the hyperbole and radical gusto of a Lynch, or a Serwotka, all they can do is deploy the most elaborate evasions in order to avoid saying that they support industrial action for better pay and conditions. This is because they actually don't support strikes or striking workers, preferring always to insist upon the lie that negotiations, without the threat of action, can deliver what we need.

In the meantime, let us hope that railway workers are able to protect their pensions, jobs, and conditions. Let's also hope they win a seven or eight per cent pay rise. This will not keep pace with inflation, but it will be better than nothing. And let us not hear any more nonsense about a General Strike from leaders who would not know one end of an uprising from the other (in the unlikely event that one actually broke out).

