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SOLIDARITY SKIN-DEEP

At last year's Trades Union Congress much was heard about the "new realism", according to which union leaders were to come to terms with the democratic fact of a Conservative government confirmed in office at a general election on a programme of trade union reform. They were also to reappraise the temper and requirements of their members and modify their policies accordingly.

Mr Len Murray was the embodiment of that revisionist programme. He strove to apply it in the three-cornered dispute between the NGA, Mr Eddie Shah and the law. He was, he thinks, torpedoed by Cheltenham. Now he has the sad duty of sitting in the middle of the platform for the last time, in a week when his previous efforts will all be blown away by Mr Scargill's wind machine.

Instead of a new realism will be the old seeming, as the barons struggle to create an appearance of solidarity with strikers whose conduct many of them heartily disapprove of and whose peremptory demand that all pits be kept open until exhausted or unsafe many of them think unreasonable. They do not want to be tied to the NUM's chariot wheels; nor do they want to see the NUM routed, since their own power would be compromised in the collapse.

The formula that has been produced to provide cover for the confusion is equivocal. The general council affirms "total support" for the NUM's objectives of "saving pits, jobs and mining communities", and total support for measures to make the strike more effective by not moving coal or coke or substituted oil across NUM official picket lines and not using those

materials if they are taken across picket lines. However the same statement goes on to record that the NUM acknowledges that implementation of those measures "will need agreement with unions who would be directly concerned".

Since the main unions in the target areas of steel and power generation have signified that they do not agree to anything of the kind, the formula is self-confuting. Mr Terry Duffy of the engineering workers' union, for one, lays emphasis on that point. Mr Scargill prefers to think that the executives of those unions, whatever their present views, will be bound to further the policy once it has been endorsed by the TUC today.

Even if Mr Scargill is right (and he cannot be right of the steelworkers, who have been through a period of rapid contraction far more severe than anything proposed for the miners and who are therefore tenacious of such jobs as remain) he reckons without the foot soldiers. "We are not in command of some army of conscripts or puppets" (Mr Murray again). The members have minds of their own, and are coming to expect to be afforded the opportunity to declare their minds by ballot. Their reluctance to join hands with Mr Scargill was mapped in three opinion polls reported in yesterday's papers. And there is harder evidence before the eyes of the delegates at Brighton in the duplicated failure to sustain a national dock strike on behalf of the miners.

In compensation, it is claimed that the NUM has been obliged to give the general council of the TUC a purchase on the dispute. That is true; it enters by the same door as the new manifestations

of "total support" are supposed to issue from. The hope of the moderate members of the general council is that this will enable them to influence the miners' picketing tactics and negotiating stance. Perhaps; but with Mr Scargill's ruthless absolutism on one side of the table and a vacillating and divided membership of the general council on the other, it is anybody's guess who will have more effect upon whom.

Once the miners had raised the standard of confrontation the traditions and practices of British trade unionism dictated a display of solidarity from the TUC. But the formula chosen for the purpose is a dishonest one with subsequent recrimination built into it. And it is silent on all the reservations its sponsors feel and could legitimately have expressed about the miners' action.

What is more, by formally associating the TUC with secondary picketing and action it removes the main ground for the inhibition, which has prevailed throughout the miners' strike, against taking unions to court for civil wrongs done through unlawful picketing and industrial action. The effects of such litigation on the attitude of moderate trade unionists will no longer have to be considered since they will already have become implicated in unlawful action through the decision of the TUC. The law may at last be drawn from its scabbard. It may be used as the remedy for which it was fashioned. "We have strict statutes and most biting laws" which we have let sleep;

... so our decrees,
Dead to infliction, to themselves
are dead,
And liberty plucks justice by the nose.

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