

What's the point of the unions?

FOLLOWING THE highest-profile TUC conference in almost a generation, the Dispatches programme: What's the point of the unions? promised to shine a light on trade unionism in 2010.

Greg Maughan

The first section concentrated on RMT general secretary Bob Crow, who the tabloids are desperately trying to make into a demon figure. And the programme was designed to repeat this.

But for many workers fighting cuts, footage of Bob speaking is extremely positive. The solid strike action of RMT and TSSA members last month was given as an example of how the trade unions can have a massive impact when they take action.

The documentary points to the RMT tactic of balloting for action early, to have a mandate in negotiations. A representative from Transport for London criticises this, but the narrator is forced to admit: "Bob Crow's approach was highly effective in delivering results for his members."

Ex-Tory MP and rail operator Steve Norris commented on Bob Crow: "This is a guy who believes in this mission to destroy capitalism. If

he thought he could, he'd bring the government down tomorrow." A lot of workers would agree with that.

Then the documentary went into the wages of some of the trade union general secretaries. Derek Simpson of Unite earns £200,000 a year. One TUC delegate expressed the opinion of many trade unionists when she said: "It's bad. It's the same as the greedy bankers. Sorry, but it is."

When the tabloids and the establishment media attack trade union representatives for the wages they're paid, it is done from the point of view of opposing collective action and supporting the current economic system.

But in the Socialist Party we believe that trade union members should have control over the election and pay of their representatives and fulltime officials. We stand for representatives to be on the same average pay as their members.

As well as making sure that people stay in touch with the workers they represent, this also closes down a common line of attack for the establishment.

Lastly, the documentary detailed how Unison failed its members on the 'equal pay' Single Status agreement and how 'no-win, no-fee' lawyers have taken up cases that the union rejected and won women



Bob Crow speaking at a rail workers' rally.

photo Paul Mattsson

workers thousands of pounds in compensation. The implication is that the trade unions have abandoned their members and that workers are better off taking individual action.

But the root of all this is the Unison leadership's acceptance of Single Status without mounting a campaign for extra funding from central government to raise women workers' wages.

The trade union movement is not one homogeneous body; there are

many different facets to it. But the basic idea of collective action to defend our interests will come to the fore as workers feel the bite of the cuts. Through personal experience, many will draw the conclusion that the type of trade unionism outlined in the first third of this documentary is what we need.

The programme is interesting and worth a watch with a critical eye.

• Dispatches: What's the point of the unions? 27 September, 8pm. Available on the Channel 4 website.

South Wales: Fight for car workers' jobs

OVER 220 workers are facing the dole with the closure of TRW in Resolven (ex-Cam Gears). Coming on the back of closures of Bosch, Borg Warner and Linamar - over 1,500 car workers in South Wales have been put on the scrap heap as the area threatens to become an industrial desert.

A South Wales car worker

This is at a time when thousands more workers in the public sector are threatened by the Con-Dem coalition's cuts. Neath and Resolven in particular will be hammered by the closure.

TRW says that there is no alternative, that there is 'overcapacity' and that one of the European plants has to go. What they don't say is that Resolven has been part of a blind bidding process where plant has been put against plant to offer concessions - cuts in wages and terms and conditions at a time of increasing inflation.



Linamar workers during their battle for jobs.

photo SP Wales

In desperation, the workforce offered a 15% cut but it wasn't enough for TRW. Pensions weren't part of the deal because the company closed the final salary scheme last year.

After suffering years of the company demanding concessions and with the threat of closure, workers

have rightly refused to give up their enhanced redundancy which would only make them easier and cheaper to close.

This closure can be fought and defeated. At the very least TRW can be forced to improve the redundancy deal for the whole workforce. But for this to happen TRW must be told to

expect a war to the end. TRW isn't a stand alone plant in Resolven, but part of a national and even international company.

There should be an immediate meeting of TRW convenors and shop stewards with support pledged if Resolven fight. This should be supplemented by a community campaign centred on Resolven but reaching out far and wide. Parallel with a campaign for a strike ballot, a public meeting or march in Resolven could give the workforce the confidence to fight and send a clear message that this is a fight to the end.

The community can't afford to lose another factory, it should be nationalised to save the jobs and skills.

• Open the books - what's the real position within TRW?

• Organise a national meeting of TRW shop stewards to support Resolven.

• Fight the closure - campaign for a 'yes' vote in a strike ballot.

• Organise a demo in Resolven to involve the community.

Ballot victory against social enterprise

HEALTH WORKERS in Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland Community Services (MRCCS) have voted for a second time to keep services within the NHS, as opposed to transferring to a "social enterprise".

700 of the 1,000 staff in MRCCS voted in the ballot. Over 500 (66%) voted in favour of staying within the NHS. The two proposed options to manage these services were to create a social enterprise outside of the NHS, or be managed by a local Foundation Trust.

By April next year, all community health care services across the country have to be managed outside of Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) which are to be abolished. A previous ballot was less conclusive but also against social enterprise. The results were not to management's liking so a further ballot was called.

The option of social enterprise was recognised as a threat to NHS terms

and conditions and a move towards the privatisation of health care. Locally Unison had campaigned against the social enterprise model and welcomed the result.

The MRCCS board will now make recommendations to local NHS providers to host community services. This also needs to be approved by the Regional Strategic Health Authority.

These workers have faced several changes of employer over the past few years under New Labour's 'reforms', which included social enterprises and cooperatives, which in reality were an opportunity for management buy-outs and the extension of the market into the NHS.

This result shows the loyalty of workers to the principles of the NHS and a determination to resist attacks on their terms and conditions. Unison's leadership should take note and build on such campaigns.

Bosses try to rewrite history

IN AN ATTEMPT to obliterate the memory of a historic victory against the effects of privatisation, bosses at Whipps Cross Hospital Trust in East London removed a collection of photos of striking porters and domestics from a union notice board. The photos were taken away by management from a locked notice board without consultation.

The workers greeted with anger and disbelief the written response from the Trust which stated that the photos had been removed because they were "political and offensive".

One Unison member told The Socialist: "What is political and offensive is this millionaire government's failure to disclose their secret plans to destroy our NHS during the general election campaign".

Health workers also find "unelected and unaccountable Trust bosses that are currently privatis-



ing whole swathes of our services and jobs" highly political and offensive.

Another union member said the return of the photos was being sought and that: "Attempts to deny workers their rights and roll back previous union advances underpinned this act. But its effect will be to educate and alert workers and reinforce their resolve to act in united action with other public service unions and the community to defeat all attacks".

inbrief

Migrant workers protest

The chant of "hands off our workmates, no one is illegal!" echoed outside the London office of contract cleaning company Initial Rentokil on Saturday 25 September.

Workers had gathered in an action organised by the London region of the transport union RMT in response to Initial Rentokil using the immigration police to intimidate migrant workers who were seeking to get organised. One worker who had complained to management after not receiving his back pay, a common occurrence according to workers at the company, was reported to the immigration authorities by management and subsequently arrested.

As London RMT regional organiser Steve Hedley pointed out at the protest, Initial Rentokil was well aware of the immigration status of these workers when they hired them.

Glenroy Watson, secretary of RMT Finsbury Park branch, told the protest that the RMT would not allow its members to be intimidated by a union busting company. He warned that bigger and louder protests were planned outside Rentokil's office until it ends its bullying behaviour.

**Neil Cafferky, London
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Defend the Four

The four Socialist Party members who were banned from holding office in Unison for between two and three years following a witch-hunt are presently putting their case at a second Employment Tribunal. They are challenging the charges that the Unison bureaucracy imposed on them and which the four believe were unjustified. A report of the proceedings and outcome of the Tribunal will be announced once the result is known.

Tube strike

The London RMT and TSSA 24-hour strike planned to start at 6.30pm on Sunday 3 October is going ahead. The unions and employer went to ACAS. The union representatives said that if the employer was prepared to enter meaningful talks and suspend all job cuts, new rosters and all attacks the unions would suspend strike action. Management refused, demonstrating their scant regard for the safety of the public. So reluctantly, tube workers are continuing the industrial action to defend jobs, services and the safety of staff and passengers. The dispute so far has been a resounding success. On the last strike day, two thirds of trains did not run and over 100 stations were closed. TSSA members took strike action in London for the first time since 1926. The overtime ban in between strikes has also been successful - stations have had to close, and the action taken by engineers has lost millions of pounds in cancelled work.

Management have a plan, "Operation Horizon", in which they aim for a complete restructuring. The government spending review on 20 October also looms, threatening a further 20-40% cut in London transport.

Reg Johnstone