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POLITICS, INDUSTRIAL POLICY AND DEMOCRACY:
THE ELECTRICIANS' UNION, 1945 - 1988.

by

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SUMMARY

The post-war history of the Electricians' union has been a very stormy one indeed. During the 1950s, when the union was controlled by the Communist Party, there began a stream of allegations from within the union and from the press that the leaders of the ETU were engaged in electoral malpractice. Eventually, in 1961, the High Court did find that some ETU leaders, who were also members of the Communist Party, had used "fraudulent and unlawful devices" to secure the re-election of the Communist General Secretary of the union in 1959. Following the trial the ETU was expelled both from the TUC and the Labour Party, but they were re-admitted in 1962 after a new right-wing leadership was elected to office. Since 1962 the right-wing has enjoyed an uninterrupted control of the Electricians' union. Its opponents claim that this control has been maintained because, under the name of reforms, a huge reshaping of the union's internal democracy has occurred which has been effective in undermining any oppositional challenge and has placed more and more power in the hands of the Executive Council.

The thesis is an examination of these two periods of the union's history, and the different strategies pursued by the Communist and right-wing leaderships. It details the rise of the Communist Party in the ETU, and considers the allegations of ballot-rigging that led to the 1961 trial. It examines the remodelling of the union in the 1960s, charts the rise of the organized opposition to the leadership in the 1970s, and considers the controversial "strike-free" agreements that the union has negotiated in recent years. However, the thesis attempts to do more than just chronicle particular episodes in the post-war history of the Electricians' union: it also attempts to understand this history by the use of two broad theoretical approaches.

Firstly, the union's internal history is considered in the light of the wider political and industrial factors that have shaped and re-shaped that history. In other words, the union's democracy cannot be understood by solely examining its internal workings, "external" factors also have to be considered. From this perspective it is argued that the ballot-rigging and bureaucratic manipulation that took place under the Communist leadership cannot

be understood simply in terms of a faulty electoral process open to abuse by unscrupulous men. Rather, those factors that allowed the CP to legitimately take charge of the union in the first place, and those which compelled some members of the ETU to eventually abuse the union's electoral process, were intimately linked to the post-war industrial climate and in particular the political and industrial strategies of the Communist Party. Similarly, the remodelling of the union's democracy in the 1960s, and the history of the union up to the present day, has to be understood not just in terms of an authoritarian leadership, but by reference to the particular circumstances that allowed the right-wing to take control of the union, and the political and industrial policies that underlay the reshaping of democracy in the union.

Secondly, throughout the thesis there is an engagement with Robert Michels' "iron law of oligarchy". Michels' theory was expostulated in his Political Parties (1911) and can be summed up in his famous dictum "who says organization, says oligarchy", and in his assertion that in the trade union movement the "authoritative character of the leaders and their tendency to rule bureaucratic organizations on oligarchic lines, are even more pronounced than in political parties." This theory is critically considered in the context of the actual workings of the post-war Electrician's union.

Overall, the thesis attempts to do a number of things: to give a particular account of the major episodes in the union's post-war history, which range from the ballot-rigging of the 1950s to the "strike-free" deals of the 1980s; to explore the relationship between the political and industrial policies of the CP and right-wing leaderships and the union's democracy; to offer a critical appraisal of Michels' "iron law of oligarchy; and, finally, as the union faces expulsion from the TUC, to consider the future prospects for democracy in the EETPU.

ABBREVIATIONS

Trade unions

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AUEW	Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers
APEX	Association of Professional, Executive Clerical and Computer Staff
ETU	Electrical Trades Union
EETPU	Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union
EESA	Electrical and Engineering Staff Association
GMWU	General and Municipal Workers Union
GMBATU	General, Municipal, Boilermakers' and Allied Trades Union
NGA	National Graphical Association
NUGMU	National Union of General and Municipal Workers
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
PTU	Plumbing Trades Union
SOGAT	Society of Graphical and Allied Trades
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TSSA	Transport Salaried Staffs Association

Other organizations

ACAS	Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service
CP	Communist Party
IS	International Socialists
IWC	Institute for Workers' Control
JIB	Joint Industry Board (for electrical contracting)
LCDTU	Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions
NBPI	National Board for Prices and Incomes
NIRC	National Industrial Relations Court
SJIB	Scottish Joint Industry Board
STUC	Scottish Trades Union Congress
SWP	Socialist Workers Party

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years the Electricians' union has gained a certain notoriety and has seldom been out of the public spotlight. The attention the union has received has been due to its signing of a number of highly publicized single union "no-strike" agreements and its controversial role in the News International dispute at Wapping. Because of these activities the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU) now faces possible expulsion from the TUC, and is itself threatening to leave the TUC and form a rival trade union confederation. However, the Electricians' union is not unaccustomed to publicity or controversy: its post-war history is full of both. Few union leaderships can have had as much vilification directed at them from within their own ranks, as well as from the wider labour and trade union movement, than have the leaders of the post-war Electricians' union. The focus of this criticism has not only been the politics and industrial strategies of both the Communist leadership of the union in the 1950s and the right-wing leadership from 1962 onwards but, to an unprecedented degree, the internal democracy of the union. No post-war trade union seems to have spent as much time wrangling over its own democratic procedures as the Electricians' union, and, given the history of the union, this is hardly surprising.

During the 1950s, when the union was controlled by the Communist Party (CP), the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) was regularly attacked in the popular press and by the right-wing of the labour movement as the union that automatically made every strike official, and, with some justification, as the union whose policies slavishly followed those of the British CP and the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. At the same time a systematic campaign was conducted in the media alleging that the CP held its leading positions in the union through ballot-rigging. In 1961 an internal opposition grouping centred around the former Communist Les Cannon took the union to court in the famous ballot-rigging trial, where it was proved (and later admitted by the CP) that certain members of the ETU, who were also members of the CP, did rig the 1959 ballot for the election of General Secretary of the union. In these

circumstances it was easy for the opponents of the ETU leadership to forge an unpalatable connection in the minds of many trade unionists between communism, strikes, and ballot-rigging. Indeed, journalists such as Woodrow Wyatt had been warning of the takeover of British trade unions by Communists long before the ETU ballot-rigging trial. The trial seemed to be a graphic confirmation of the association that Wyatt and others had been making over the years between the politics of the CP, their industrial strategy, and electoral malpractice.

Following the trial judgement of 1961 the union was expelled from the TUC, only to be re-admitted in 1962 after the union was captured by the right-wing. Under Les Cannon's leadership in the 1960s the ETU was completely remodelled along industrial lines, its internal democracy totally transformed, the CP banned from holding any office in the union, and an industrial and political strategy pursued that made the union one of the most slavish supporters of Harold Wilson's 1964-1970 Labour Government. So, with Cannon, we see a new political leadership, a new industrial strategy, and the introduction of an internal democracy that was characterised by increasing bureaucratisation and centralisation and the use of the ballot as the acme of union democracy. We also see the emergence of the union's now distinctive abrasive style - its disregard for many of the conventions of traditional trade unionism and its hostility to the mainstream policy of the TUC - and an overall philosophy that was modelled on American business unionism and, in particular, the example of Walter Reuther, head of the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW) between 1946 and 1970.

Soon after Les Cannon died late in 1970, the man who is most associated with the union's distinctive style and policies, Frank Chapple, took over the leadership of the EETPU. Under Chapple's leadership the EETPU was to become even more centralised and bureaucratic, the philosophy of business unionism more pronounced, and the internal democracy of the union even more circumscribed than it had become under Cannon's leadership. But Chapple and the leadership of the union had to implement their policies in the highly charged industrial and political climate of the 1970s, a climate that had produced a growing organized opposition within the EETPU to the leadership. In this period, especially during the

early 1970s, we see the union's industrial strategy being shaped and re-shaped by the clash of forces inside and outside the union.

Chapple's successor, Eric Hammond, took charge of the union in 1984. He has continued on the course that Cannon and Chapple set the union on in the 1960s and 1970s, but in a period in which the trade unions are generally regarded to be in "crisis" (essentially because of declining membership) his response to this "crisis" has marked him out even from his two controversial predecessors. It has not just been his attacks on the leadership of the National Union Mineworkers (NUM) during the strike of 1984/85, or his hostility to the organized internal opposition in the union that has marked him out. Rather it has been the strategy which has led the EETPU into accepting Government money for union ballots in defiance of TUC policy, which has involved the union in "no-strike" deals and the debacle at Rupert Murdoch's News International plant at Wapping, and which now may well result in the EETPU either being expelled from the TUC or leaving of its own accord. Hammond's strategy is an extreme response to the "crisis", and one that puts the present day union's philosophy with regard to trade union and industrial democracy into high profile.

In the thesis that follows these episodes in the union's post-war history will be examined in detail. But my aim is not just to detail the major episodes in the union's internal history; the thesis also attempts to examine the relationship between the politics of the Electricians' union leaderships, the industrial strategies they pursued, and the conflicts and changes that such policies have produced in the internal democracy of the union. Related to this, the thesis is concerned to show how the prevailing social, economic and political forces impinge on the internal operation of the union. Overall, then, the primary intent of the work is to place the stormy history of the union's internal democracy within the context of the wider social forces that have shaped and re-shaped that history. The argument that is presented is that the union's democracy cannot be understood by solely examining its internal workings. Consequently, "external" factors are at times given as much attention as internal ones, but the balance shifts throughout the thesis depending on the particular episode that is being examined. My study of the union's democracy

is more than an examination of the internal relationships that exist between union leaders, officials and the rank-and-file, but these relationships are of course central to any understanding of the Electricians' union. And any study of union democracy that wishes to explore these relationships, as this one does, cannot avoid an engagement with the theoretical insights made by Robert Michels in his seminal work Political Parties.

Robert Michels' "Iron Law of Oligarchy"

Robert Michels' Political Parties has probably served as the theoretical starting point for more studies of trade union democracy than any other single work. This continued attraction derives from Michels' famous contention that all democratic organizations, despite their avowed democratic principles, are dominated by oligarchical cliques who pay scant regard to the people who are supposed to control them. Indeed, he says, in the trade union movement the

"authoritative character of the leaders and their tendency to rule democratic organizations on oligarchic lines, are even more pronounced than in political organizations." (1)

It is not the case, then, according to Michels, that a "two-way system of control" operates in trade unions between the rank-and-file and the leadership which sets limits on the legitimate powers of each. (2) Rather, this "two-way system of control" is only formally accepted as the basis of trade union democracy, whereas in reality a "one-way system of control" operates that places actual power in the hands of an oligarchical elite.

For Michels the principal cause of oligarchy in democratic organizations such as trade unions, was "the technical indispensability of leadership" and their "detachment from the mass", which in turn was a product of the demise of direct democracy and the growth and complexity of the division of labour in the mass organizations of late nineteenth century capitalism. (3) This division of labour placed more and more power into the hands of the oligarchical groupings and bureaucracies that controlled trade unions, and far from the members being able to exert control

over these bureaucracies through representative elections the reverse had in fact taken place, with the bureaucracies assuming the form of an "endless screw" with at best one elected oligarchical clique replacing another. What passed for trade union democracy, then, was in most cases merely the re-election of the same elite or the chosen successors of that elite, or the periodic rotation of competing elites within a union. Either way, the majority of members had no real control or influence over the direction and policy of their union. Nor were the majority of trade union members much interested in the affairs of their union, says Michels:

"The majority of members are as indifferent to the organization as the majority of the electors are to parliament." (4)

And even if they were interested their incompetence would prevent them from seriously challenging the power of the leaders:

"The incompetence of the masses is almost universal...and this constitutes the most solid foundation of the power of the leaders." (5)

Moreover, said Michels, free from the environment of the workplace, trade union leaders undergo "a profound psychological transformation" which only serves to reinforce and broaden the conservative and oligarchical tendencies that are inherent in democratic organizations. The manual worker of former days "becomes a petty bourgeois or even a bourgeois" and "his political and social education will seldom suffice to immunize him against the new influences" (6) This social and ideological separation from the members they supposedly represent is reflected in a deep organizational conservatism:

"The...doctrines are, whenever requisite, attenuated and deformed in accordance with the external needs of the organization. Organization becomes the vital essence...more and more invincible becomes its aversion to all aggressive action...Thus, from a means, organization becomes an end." (7)

Though Michels' "law of the historic necessity of oligarchy" has been ably criticised by Hands, and although he himself stated

rather oddly in Political Parties that he was not concerned "with the causation of oligarchy in trade unions", his theory has still attracted widespread acceptance because, as Hyman observes, "it does appear accurately to fit the facts of the development of national union organisations. Repeated studies have appeared to underline his diagnosis." (8) So much so that Lipset could write that most of

"the literature which deals with the problem of bureaucracy and oligarchy either simply documents this fact in one or more unions, or reworks Michels' classic analysis of the conditions that breed oligarchy..." (9)

When I first set out on my study of the Electricians' union I must admit that I did expect it to be just one more addition to the literature that confirmed the "iron law of oligarchy". A cursory examination of the union's post-war history seemed to be enough to chalk up another victory for Michels. After all, went my reasoning, the union had been controlled by "Stalinists" rigging ballots for a period of thirteen years, and this was followed by an as yet uninterrupted period of right-wing control: surely this was evidence enough to confirm Michels' theory. And, indeed, as we shall see, Michels is confirmed time and time again in the study that follows.

Yet as the work progressed, the Michelian account became less and less convincing. Many of the events under examination just did not fit so easily into his account, no matter how hard I tried to make them. In particular, Michels took no account of areas of union activity where rank-and-file members exerted a level of control over their own affairs that was largely outside the control of their own leadership. The strong, independent workplace bargaining that developed in Britain in the post-war period is a prime example. Nor did his account recognize that many rank-and-file union members were far from being incompetent or apathetic, but were themselves fully aware of the problems of leadership and formed oppositions within the unions that were, contrary to Michels, often successful in checking or challenging the powers of their leaders. Les Cannon's *Reform Committee* of the 1950s and the CP's *Flashlight* grouping formed in the 1960s, are examples in the

Electricians' union. Reality is not as one-dimensional or as monolithic as Michels would have us believe then. True, Michels was writing in 1911, and true Political Parties is not an explicit study of trade unions, but his general theory, which is meant to be applicable to all forms of democratic organization, is clear: even the strongest of democratic movements could only contribute "to the enfeeblement of oligarchic tendencies". Historically, he said, "evolution mocks all the prophylactic measures that have been adopted for the prevention of oligarchy". (10) However, the views of Michels have not gone unchallenged.

The "Iron law of democracy"

Even when he wrote Political Parties in 1911 Michels' analysis of trade unions was not altogether new. Such diverse political figures as the Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb and the revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg had already analysed the growth of a trade union bureaucracy in their respective countries. In their 1894 History of Trade Unionism, the Webbs had already welcomed the shifting during the course of that century of the leadership of the trade unions "from the casual enthusiast and irresponsible agitator to a class of permanent salaried officials expressly chosen out of the rank and file of trade unionists for their superior business capacity". (11) As early as 1906, Rosa Luxemburg in her pamphlet *The Mass Strike*, had noted that the rapid growth of the German trade union bureaucracy had led to a "specialization of professional activity" and an "overvaluation of the organization, which from a means has gradually been changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated". (12) But unlike Michels, the Webbs and Luxemburg did not believe that oligarchical control was inevitable in trade unions. They had totally different solutions to the problem of oligarchy of course. The Webbs believed that the trade union leaders could be placed under the democratic control of the membership by the development of effective representative institutions, such as existed in the British cotton spinning union. While Luxemburg believed that the trade union leaderships could be "swept away" in times of high political and economic struggle.

Since the time of the Webbs and Luxemburg many others have pointed to the counter-tendencies and compulsive democratic pressures that operate against Michels' "law", and many trade union and political activists have attempted to construct organizations within the unions that would not only check the oligarchical power of leadership but act independently of them if need be. (13) But one essay in particular, written at the time when Lipset was lamenting the fact that most pieces of work tended to confirm or amend the Michelian account (his own joint work on the American International Typographical Union being a case in point), most clearly presents the counter-thesis to Michels - Alvin Gouldner's 1955 essay *Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy*:

"It is the pathos of pessimism, rather than the compulsions of rigorous analysis, that leads to the assumption that organizational constraints have stacked the deck against democracy". (14)

This terse remark seemed to be specifically designed for those who had been caught in the Michelian snare. This was followed by Gouldner's more general point:

"When...Michels spoke of the "iron law of oligarchy", he attended solely to the ways in which organizational needs inhibit democratic possibilities. But the very same evidence to which he called attention could enable us to formulate the very opposite theorem - "the iron law of democracy". Even as Michels himself saw, if oligarchical waves repeatedly wash away the bridges of democracy, this eternal recurrence can happen only because men doggedly rebuild them after each inundation. Michels chose to dwell on only one aspect of this process, neglecting to consider this other side. There cannot be an iron law of oligarchy, however, unless there is an iron law of democracy" (15)

The end result of this encounter with Gouldner and the literature that was critical of Michels was not to jettison Michels, but to approach my study of the Electricians' union with

a keener eye for democratic tendencies, as well as oligarchical ones. In fact, I found there to be a constant tension between the two, one dominant at one particular time and one at another, depending on the relation of forces inside the union at any given time. This tension between the "iron law of oligarchy" and the "iron law of democracy" I have referred to in the dissertation as the Michels/Gouldner debate. This is not to say that only Michels and Gouldner are referred to, far from it. Such diverse figures as Max Weber and Antonio Gramsci are brought into the framework of the discussion set by Michels and Gouldner. This debate will be considered at points throughout the study in relation to the actual workings of the Electricians' union.

The thesis that follows attempts to do two things: firstly, to give a particular account of the union's post-war internal history; and secondly, to consider periodically the Michels/Gouldner debate in the context of the actual history of the Electricians' union. The thesis is divided into four parts consisting of twelve chapters:

PART ONE THE TRIAL

Part One examines the accusations of ballot-rigging that were levelled against the Communist leadership of the union in the 1950s, accusations which eventually led to the famous "ballot-rigging" trial of 1961 and which totally discredited the union's democracy.

Chapter One

The rise of the Communist Party in the Electrical Trades Union

This chapter attempts to explain why by 1956 all the leading positions of the ETU were held by CP members or "fellow-travellers". It argues against the widely held belief that these positions were secured and retained by electoral malpractice. Instead it argues that the rise of the CP in the ETU can be explained by the Party's war-time popularity and their post-war political and industrial strategies.

Chapter Two

Ballot-rigging and the Communist Party

From the mid-1950s onwards a stream of press articles, most of which dealt with the treatment of opposition candidates in the union's elections, began to appear alleging electoral malpractice in the ETU. A detailed account of the charges levelled at the Communist leadership of the union and their response to them is given in this chapter.

Chapter Three

The Trial and its aftermath

It was proven at the 1961 trial that the principal officers of the ETU, all members of the CP, had used "fraudulent and unlawful devices" to secure the re-election of Frank Haxell in the 1959 election for the General Secretaryship. Besides detailing the events of the trial and its aftermath, this chapter tries to explain the reasons why the CP leadership of the union resorted to ballot-rigging.

PART TWO THE NEW MODEL UNION

Part Two concentrates on the shift in the union's political and industrial stance and the wholesale remodelling of the union's internal structure that took place under the new leadership of Les Cannon during the 1960s, and the consolidation of the "new model union" in the 1970s.

Chapter Four

The remodelling of the ETU

In January 1962 the new right-wing Executive Council of the ETU took office. By 1969 they had almost entirely reshaped the internal structure of the union, a reshaping that they claimed not only made the union more efficient but far more democratic. This claim is considered in this chapter. The chapter also attempts to explain

the remodelling in terms of the union's developing philosophy - business unionism.

Chapter Five

Consolidation, centralisation and growth

Charts the continuing centralisation of the union's internal structure and the rapid growth in membership under the leadership of Frank Chapple during the 1970s.

PART THREE THE CHALLENGE OF THE OPPOSITION

Part Three details the conflicts between the EETPU leadership and the opposition in the union in the 1970s.

Chapter Six

Strategies for reform: the rise of organized opposition

This chapter examines the development of *organized* opposition in the union, with particular attention being given to the conflicting strategies for internal reform of the two largest political organizations operating within the union in the 1970s - the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party.

Chapter Seven

The EETPU and the Industrial Relations Act

In this chapter we examine how the leadership's position on the Conservative Government's 1971 Industrial Relations Act was shaped and re-shaped by external events impinging on the internal democracy of the union.

Chapter Eight

The EETPU and the Social Contract

Shows how the reponse of the leadership to three strikes of its own members was influenced by the 1974-79 Labour Government's Social Contract.

PART FOUR STRIKE FREE

This final part considers recent developments in the EETPU, set as they are against the back-drop of "Thatcherism" and the "crisis" in the trade union movement.

Chapter Nine

Ballots and union democracy

At the Wembley conference of union executives in 1982, it was agreed that unions should not accept funds for union ballots under the provisions of the 1980 Employment Act. The EETPU was the first union to defy that decision and was subsequently threatened with expulsion from the TUC. This chapter looks at the EETPU's stand, and the response of the opposition inside and outside the union. Eventually, however, the TUC backed down on its opposition to ballot funding. One result of this climbdown has been a shift towards a view of union democracy that sees the ballot as the central democratic mechanism, a view that is most strongly held by the EETPU. This shift towards a "ballot only" type union democracy is also examined in this chapter.

Chapter Ten

The EETPU and the Wapping dispute

For over a year (January 1986 to February 1987) one of the most bitter disputes in British labour history was fought outside Rupert Murdoch's News International printing plant in Wapping, East London. The role of the EETPU in this dispute is chronicled in this chapter.

Chapter Eleven

Single-union strike-free agreements and industrial democracy

This chapter examines the furore surrounding the signing of a number of "strike-free" agreements by the EETPU. It argues that although only one other major trade union (the AEU) has negotiated similar agreements, nevertheless, all the components that go to

make up the "strike-free package" - single-status, single-unionism, and especially flexible working - are all major features of agreements willingly negotiated by other unions. So although the debate concerning "strike-free" clauses is extremely important, it tends to detract from a more generalised appraisal of the "new realist" strategies being pursued by most other trade unions. This chapter also argues against the position of the EETPU leadership, a position supported by Bassett in a recent book Strike Free, that the agreements are an extension of industrial democracy in the workplace.

Chapter Twelve

Conclusion

The two strands of analysis that were set out in the introduction - the social factors shaping the union's democracy and the Michels/Gouldner debate - are now reconsidered in this chapter. Finally, the future prospects for the EETPU are considered.

The material for the research was gathered from a number of diverse sources, as the EETPU would not allow me access to their own archive at Hayes Court. I would like to thank for their assistance the staff of the Local History Department of Dundee Central Library and the staff of the British Library of Political and Economic Science, London. In particular I would like to thank Mr. R.A.Storey, the archivist at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, for his assistance with the Cannon Papers. My thanks are also extended to George Matthews of the Communist Party Library and Archive and to the editors of *Flashlight*. Many individuals deserve my thanks, but in particular I would like to thank Professor John Eldridge and Bert Moorhouse of the Department of Sociology, University of Glasgow, for their encouragement and critical support throughout the research, and Mr.A.B. McLuckie, an Executive Councillor of the EETPU, for allowing me access to the documents held at the union's Motherwell office, and to John O'Brien, a leading oppositionist in the EETPU, who supplied me with

assorted material on the union and was kind enough to answer a number of questions I put to him.

PART ONE THE TRIALCHAPTER ONETHE RISE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN THE ELECTRICAL TRADES UNION

By 1956 Communist Party members held the following leading positions in the ETU; President, General Secretary, Assistant General Secretary, 4 of the 5 National Officers' posts, 6 of the 11 Executive Council seats, and 20 of the 39 Area officials' positions. On top of this, many of the non-Communist officials in the union were said to be "fellow-travellers" of the Communist Party. According to Les Cannon, who led the campaign to oust the Communist leadership from the union, and who was to become its General Secretary in the wake of the 1961 ballot-rigging trial, the ascendancy of the CP in the union was so great "as to be almost an embarrassment to the Party":

"In practice, the Communists try to ensure that only about three-quarters of the members of the Executive Council are card carrying Party supporters." (1)

This dominance was widely disproportionate to the actual strength of the CP in the ETU, where it was estimated to have about 700 members out of a total union membership of 228,000 in 1956. (2) Nor could the political influence of the CP at national level seem to account for its prominence in the union, since it only polled 33,144 votes at the 1955 General Election, and the Party's membership had fallen from a wartime peak of 56,000 to stand at 33,095 in 1956. How then did the Communist Party come to control the ETU?

Today the instant response to this question is that the CP secured and retained their control of the union by rigging the ballots for union office. And certainly it was proven at the 1961 ballot-rigging trial that the President, General Secretary, Assistant General Secretary and two others, all members of the Communist Party, had used "fraudulent and unlawful devices" to secure the re-election of Frank Haxell in the 1959 election for the General Secretaryship. What was not proven, however, was that the

majority of Executive Council positions (let alone the minor posts in the union) held by CP members were secured or retained through ballot-rigging. This was the accusation levelled at the ETU leadership by the *Daily Telegraph* as early January 1956, and subsequently taken up by Les Cannon's opposition grouping in the union (the *Reform Group*) with the support of a press campaign. They claimed that the few "well-placed, rigidly disciplined and apparently ubiquitous" Communists were able to control about 150 of the union's 700 branches, and that it was through this manipulation of the union's internal democracy that the CP exerted its disproportionate influence in the ETU. (3) Moreover, it was this power base in the branches, they claimed, coupled with its control of the leading bodies of the union, that allowed the Communist Party to make a mockery of the union's democracy and rig many of the ballots for union office. But before we examine in detail the allegations of ballot-rigging levelled at the ETU leadership during the 1950s, and before we deal with the specific allegations surrounding the trial, an explanation other than that of ballot-rigging will be offered for the rise of the CP in the ETU.

There are at least two major reasons that can be offered as an explanation for the rise of the CP in the post-war ETU, both of which concern the political and industrial shifts made by the Communist Party of Great Britain: (1) the CP's war-time popularity after the Nazi invasion of Russia in June 1941, which enabled it to establish a firm industrial base in the trade unions, and especially in the ETU; (2) the CP's post-war industrial militancy, exemplified by the electricians' union, which dovetailed both with the working class opposition to the Labour Government's wage controls of the late 1940s, and with the sectional militancy of the post-war shop-stewards movement.

(1) The Communist Party's wartime popularity

On 2 September 1939, the day after Poland was invaded by Hitler's troops, the *Daily Worker* published the CP's manifesto on the war. Shortly afterwards, on 12 September, this was re-published in the form of a pamphlet by Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party, under the title *How to Win the War*. It stated:

"The Communist Party supports the war, believing it to be a just war which should be supported by the whole working class and all friends of democracy...

The prosecution of this war requires a struggle on two fronts. First to secure the military victory over fascism, and second, to achieve this, the political victory over the enemies of democracy in Britain." (4)

Two days after the publication of Pollitt's pamphlet an important broadcast from the Soviet Union referred to the war as "imperialist" and "predatory" on both sides. (5) Clearly, Stalin's position on the war contradicted the British CP's characterization of the war as a struggle against fascism. The war, the Communist International declared a few weeks later, was imperialist and unjust and consequently:

"In no country can the Working class or the Communist Parties support the war." (6)

The reason for the Soviet Government's position became clear on 28 September with the announcement of the details of the Nazi-Soviet "Declaration" on the war signed in August, in which the two states undertook to be neutral to each other if one of them should be involved in war.

Pollitt's pamphlet was now withdrawn, and he himself was removed from the General Secretaryship of the Party. Then on 7 October 1939 a new manifesto was published in the *Daily Worker*, which declared that the "war was not a war for democracy against fascism" but "a fight between imperialist powers over profits". (7) In practice the new line meant that the CP campaigned in support of strikes, for better air raid protection, against profiteering, for the nationalization of the munitions industry, and for the extension of shop-steward organization. To some extent this anti-war radicalism payed off, as membership grew by several thousand and the Party's publications all increased their circulation. Nevertheless, writes Pelling, "as the war intensified in the spring and summer of 1940 the gap between the popular temper and the Communist 'line' continued to widen". (8)

In the autumn of 1940, the CP attempted to broaden their anti-war appeal when they launched a call for a "People's Convention", whose demands centred on the call for a "people's peace" and a "People's Government", as well as the defence of living standards and democratic and trade union rights. When the Convention convened on 12 January 1941, it was attended by 2,234 delegates representing, according to the official report, 1,200,000 workers from 1,304 organisations (co-operative and political organizations, Tenants' Associations, Housewives' Committees and so on). A measure of the Communist Party's industrial influence at this time can be gauged from the number of trade union delegations that attended the Convention. In all there were 665 trade union delegates, and another 471 from 239 factories and jobs, representing in total 1,004,953 workers. For a tiny Party opposing the war the delegations were far from being negligible, but how representative these delegations actually were is hard to judge. Not surprisingly, though not inevitably, the largest delegations came from those unions where the CP had a serious base, in particular the mining industry with 31 delegates representing 270,000 workers, transport with 153 delegates representing 45,450 workers, while the ETU had one of the smallest delegations with 55 delegates representing 6,500 workers. (9) The Convention seems to have been the last straw as far as Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, was concerned, for on 21 January 1941, he banned the *Daily Worker*. But the CP's fortunes were to take a rapid turn for the better as the Party did another volte-face on its war position just months after the January Convention.

It was Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union at the end of June 1941 that led to the Communist Party's complete about-turn in its attitude to the war. Now the "imperialist war", wrote leading CP intellectual Dona Torr, "merges with and is transformed on one side into a war of liberation". (10) Early in July the CP issued a manifesto headed "People's Victory over Fascism", which called for the unity of all peoples against German fascism, and said that the Communist Party would support every measure of the Government designed to secure the defeat of Hitler. The Party put forward four immediate demands:

1. A pact of alliance with the Soviet Union.

2. All friends of fascism to be cleared out of government posts.

3. "Organise production for victory, end waste and disorganisation, ensure equal distribution of food supplies, give adequate air-raid protection."

4 "Mobilise the entire people for victory through the fullest democratic activity and initiative." (11)

In practice the new political line meant that the drive to increase production conditioned the entire industrial strategy of the CP after June 1941, and, consequently, was the main concern of Party members operating in the trade unions. This new strategy, as Richard Croucher writes, placed CP members in a novel, and at times, difficult position:

"Arguing in favour of intensified work, enlisting the help of the foremen in the production drive, working against strikes and so on was not always popular on the shop-floor when local grievances had accumulated to the point where workers contemplated a stoppage. Stakhanovism did not export well to the British shop floor." (12)

The Communist Party also took the initiative in popularising the proposal first made by Ernest Bevin in December 1940 for Joint Production Committees at plant level between management and shop stewards. By June 1944, over 4,500 such Committees existed to promote efficiency and productivity in the workplace. It is no exaggeration to say that the CP was now the most enthusiastic advocate of increased production and the most virulent opponent of strikes. So much so, that at the CP's 1942 Conference Harry Pollitt (now back as leader of the Party) praised one strike-breaking docker in glowing terms: "What courage, what a sacred spirit of real class consciousness, to walk on the ship's gangway and resume his job". (13) Another example of the Party's obsession at this time with any disruption to the war effort was a mass sale pamphlet it produced in August 1942 called *Clear out Hitler's Agents*, which was aimed at the tiny and insignificant British Trotskyist

movement, which still viewed the war as an imperialist struggle and as such held a position on the industrial front which was very similar to the one the CP had held the previous year. "Honest workers" were now warned not to be fooled by "their talk of strikes and the bosses profits into sabotaging our troops and the Red Army", and were urged to "clear them out of every working class organisation and position". (14)

Without doubt the Communist Party's new pro-war position proved to be highly popular, as the rapid increase in members from an estimated 12,000 in June 1941 to 56,000 just over a year later indicates. (15) But why should the CP's productionist crusade and opposition to strikes prove to be so popular with thousands of workers? Surely the sentiments that the CP were expressing were no different from those being put forward by Churchill's Coalition Government - "Dig For Victory"? Wherein lay the difference? Certainly the Red Army's heroic struggle against the fascists and the CP's mass campaign for the opening of a Second Front made the Party both respectable and popular. As Richard Croucher puts it:

"From mid 1941, a 'red haze' began to spread across British politics, and the CP benefited greatly." (16)

But it was not just the Soviet war effort that led to the CP being the beneficiaries of a new found popularity, their popularity also reflected the ability of the Party, as James Hinton argues, "to construct an appropriate political focus for anti-capitalist sentiment":

"They sought to channel working class feeling and initiative into an offensive against managerial power - but one designed to increase rather than restrict production." (17)

Hinton's point is endorsed by Croucher: "The terrific growth of the CP during 1942...was related to their leadership of a popular anti-managerial current of some depth". (18) By attacking management red tape, inefficiency and bureaucracy and by calling for the radical re-organisation of industry, the CP line dovetailed quite neatly with a popular view that the war effort was being hindered not by the trade unions but by managerial malpractice. (19) The very success of the CP's new line, which as Hinton says was an

"ambiguous combination of class and national themes", enabled the Communist Party to lay the foundations of its post-war industrial strength in the trade unions. (20)

After 1941, then, the Communist Party's advocacy of a militant reformism and nationalism gained them a radical respectability which enabled them for the first time to penetrate the higher as well as the lower echelons of the trade union movement in some numbers. In London, for example, Ted Bramley, the CP District Secretary, could report that in 1943:

"20,000 Londoners have joined the Communist Party in 12 months. Today there are 25,000 members - 140 branches - 800 factory organisations and 400 residential organisations. This is the most momentous thing which has happened in the Labour Movement in the last 30 years...No less than 250 Trade Union Executive Committee and District Committeemen and over 2,500 Shop-Stewards - Ticket Stewards - Union representatives have joined. Over 85 per cent of the members are in the Trade Unions." (21)

In Glasgow membership rose from a few hundred to several thousand, and numerous factory branches were built. (22) Similarly in Coventry, where the Party grew from 70 members and no factory groups in 1940, to 2000-3000 members and 40 factory groups in 1943. (23) Even in Slough, as Raphael Samuel recalls, his mother was able to recruit some fifty workers to a Party branch in the aircraft factory she was working in. (24) Despite a fall in membership from the 1942 peak of 56,000, to 45,400 in 1945, a fall that Hinton attributes to the CP's inability to move from a war strategy to one that raised the sharp class issue of post-war reconstruction, and despite the onset of the Cold-War, by 1948 the Party still had a membership of 43,000, and an influence in the trade unions that owed nothing to ballot-rigging. A survey carried out by *The Times* in 1948 as part of its Cold-War effort showed how successful a trade union base the CP had built up over the war years:

"They held four general secretaryships - of the miners, electricians, foundrymen, and firemen.

They had one member on the TUC General Council....

Of the fifteen unions with a membership of more than 100,000, it was indicated, the Communists and their supporters had sufficient representation on the executives to control or dispute control of four - the Electrical Trades Union, the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Civil Service Clerical Association, and the Tailors' and Garment Workers' Union, while they had appreciable influence on six - the Transport and General Workers', the Miners', the Railwaymen's, the Distributive Workers', the Teachers', and the Post Office Workers'.

Among the smaller unions, they were said to have strong or appreciable influence in the Fire Brigades' Union, the Post Office Engineering Union, the Foundry Workers', the Cine-technicians', the Scientific Workers' and the Clerical and Administrative Workers'..."

(25)

Communist Party influence in the ETU pre-dated their wartime popularity, however, and the extent of this pre-war influence partly explains how they were able to gain control of the union during the war. Early in the 1930s, the CP gained control of the union's powerful London Area Committee. This so enraged the Executive Council that in 1937 they took the opportunity to expel the entire London Committee for supporting an unofficial strike of 100 contracting members working at Earl's Court. But in the elections for the Executive Council that same year, several of the sitting members who were primarily responsible for the expulsions were defeated and replaced by pro-Communists. From then on, as Les Cannon laments:

"...the progress of the Communists continued. The outbreak of the Second World War, and the widespread goodwill displayed towards the Soviet Union after the German attack on Russia, provided the Communists in the ETU with an

excellent opportunity to consolidate their position, and they did not miss it." (26)

A clear sign that CP influence was growing rapidly in the ETU was the decision taken by the Executive Council (by 5 votes to 4) in October 1942 to call a special rules revision conference,

"... for the purpose of dealing with the interference of the Communist Party of Great Britain into the internal affairs of the Electrical Trades Union, and to deal with a proposal from the Executive Council that members of the Communist Party be debarred from holding any office or acting as a delegate on behalf of the Union." (27)

However, because the EC decision was not unanimous, the rules of the union required that a ballot vote of the entire 100,000 strong membership had first to be taken before the conference could be convened. The ballot decided by 11,343 votes to 6,662 votes that a special conference should be held (the size of the vote against the calling of the conference is a gauge of the CP's strength in the union at this time). The special conference met on the 9-10 May 1943, at the Conway Hall, London, and by 31 votes to 19 carried a resolution stating

"That this conference is satisfied interference has taken place in the internal affairs of the Electrical Trades Union by the Communist Party of Great Britain." (28)

EW Bussey, the General Secretary of the union, then moved on behalf of the EC a further resolution that called for the debarring of CP members from holding any office or acting as a delegate on behalf of the union. But only one of the twelve speakers who took part in the debate on the resolution supported it, and following an adjournment the EC withdrew the resolution, a decision that was approved by the conference. And that was the end of the attempt to ban the CP from holding office in the union. It was not until 1963 that Communists were finally debarred from holding any office in the union, a ban that still exists to the present day.

As the war progressed so did CP influence in the ETU, and by its end they were poised to win control of the union. For by

January 1945 the CP held 4 of the 11 Executive Council seats, 9 of the 23 Area Officials' posts, and 1 of the 2 National Officers' positions. Later the same year Frank Foulkes, who had been a National Organiser for the union since 1942, and who was also a leading CP member, was elected General President. After being elected General Secretary in 1947, Walter Stevens, who had been Assistant General Secretary since 1942, promptly joined the Communist Party. That same year, Frank Haxell and Robert McLellan, both CP members, were elected to the positions of Assistant General Secretary and National Officer respectively. By 1948, then, the Communist Party had won a controlling influence in the Electrical Trades Union.

So far we have argued that the rise of the CP in the ETU has very little to do with ballot-rigging, but is to be accounted for primarily by its pre-war strength in the union, and the popularity the Party enjoyed as a result of the political and industrial shift made after June 1941. Yet, in the wake of the 1961 trial, although most critics of the Communist leadership of the ETU did not openly say that the Party had gained control of the union through ballot-rigging, nearly all agreed with Eric Wigham's inference that from 1948 onwards control of the union was "retained by rigging the ballots for union office". (29) First, let us consider an alternative explanation for the CP's continued control of the union in the post-war period.

(2) The Communist Party's post-war militancy

During the last 18 months of the war popular concerns were moving away from an interest in the prosecution of the war to the question of post-war reconstruction, a question that raised fundamental class issues. But, as James Hinton argues, instead of capitalising on these feelings, the CP found itself increasingly at odds with leftward moving opinion in the labour movement. The non-Communist left took up the question of socialist reconstruction and called for a sharpening of the strategy against the implementation of Tory policies during the last stages of the war:

"In contrast the CP...moved towards an explicit rejection of any programme involving a sharp

offensive against capitalism...In February 1945, following the Yalta Conference, the leadership decided to advocate the continuation of a National Government - including Churchill and Eden - after the post-war election." (30)

Seemingly the Party leadership had its sights set on the kind of broad coalition with Communist participation that had taken office in France and Italy, but this totally overestimated its own influence and completely underestimated the pull of radical Labourism

Not surprisingly, the CP began to lose ground in the latter period of the war and in the wake of the election of the first majority Labour Government in July 1945. They were quite simply outflanked from the left, their politics failing to meet working class aspirations for radical change, while the Atlee Government seemed willing to articulate and meet such demands. Nevertheless, in 1945 the Communist Party still had 45,000 members, the *Daily Worker* had a circulation of 100,000, and the industrial base that the Party had built up during the war period was still solid. It spent the next two years in an uneasy relationship with the Labour Government, a relationship that was finally shattered by the changing international and home situation.

On 12 March 1947, President Truman, announcing United States intervention in Greece, established what became known as the "Truman Doctrine"; in effect the US committed itself to intervene against any "revolution" believed to be "communist". This was the signal that the Cold War had begun in earnest. That same year the Communist Parties were thrown out of the Government coalitions in France and Italy and the Eastern European countries threw out the non-CP politicians. In 1948 the Berlin blockade and airlift was the occasion for the first direct (but "cold" - not a shot was fired) confrontation between what were to become the rival Russian and American military pacts.

At home, in the spring of 1948 Sir Stafford Cripps, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, told the House of Commons in his budget speech that the country could not afford any general rise in personal incomes of any sort. With a few modifications the

Government's policy of voluntary wage restraint was accepted by the TUC (5,421,000 votes to 2,032,000). According to Clegg and Adams the policy had some success in that in the two and three quarter years from January 1948 to September 1950 wage rates only rose by 6% while prices rose by 12% (although because of "wage-drift" earnings are thought to have risen in line with prices)(31). Moreover, any strike action that might be mounted in resistance to the wage controls was still illegal under war-time Order 1305, retained by the Labour Government. In fact, although there was a downward trend in strike activity between 1946 and 1952, on average some 528 strikes took place each year over this period, and on no fewer than 18 different occasions between 1945 and 1951 the Labour Government sent troops, sometimes 20,000 of them, across picket lines to take over strikers' jobs. By 1948, it has been argued, "strike-breaking had become almost second nature to the Cabinet". (32) Clearly, the CP had to respond to the dramatically changed international and home situation.

Taking their cue from Moscow, the British Communist Party rapidly moved away from its period of peaceful coexistence with the Labour Party and embarked on a new policy which characterized the Atlee Government as an active partner in the imperialist camp intent on carrying through a capitalist solution to the crisis. Not only were the right-wing of the Labour movement attacked, the ties that the Party had made with the Labour left were now also to be unceremoniously cut. This new "Two Camps - One World" policy was naturally reflected in the CP's industrial strategy. No longer was the Party to continue to support increased production - this policy had been "absolutely correct" in the past, said Harry Pollitt in December 1947, but now would "only result in trailing behind the Government's reactionary policy". (33) Now the CP was to become effectively the only organisation in the trade unions that was actively opposing the Government's wage restraint policies. Central to organising this resistance was to be the workplace, which the Party had tended to neglect over the previous two years. As Harry Pollitt told an extended Executive Committee in February 1949: "There can be no substitute for factory organisation. To underestimate the key role of the factory branch is a Social Democratic attitude." (34)

This reversal of their pro-Government position, together with onset of the Cold War, quickly produced a response from the Labour machine. In April 1948, the Labour Party expelled the so-called "crypto-communist" MPs, and in October Arthur Deaken, Bevin's successor as head of the T&GWU, launched a major attack on Communist influence in the unions. In November the TUC General Council issued a document called *Defend Democracy* in which it urged unions to consider banning Communists from holding union posts and acting as union delegates. As we have seen, the ETU Executive Council had proposed such action in their union as early as 1942. The only union to fully implement the call was the T&GWU, which in 1949 voted to ban Communists from holding office. Nine full-time officials were dismissed, including Bert Papworth, the only Communist on the TUC General Council. Though similar moves were made in other unions they did not establish complete bans on Communist office-holders, but strong anti-Communist currents emerged which limited the CP's activity. (35)

Despite the witch-hunt of the late forties the CP was able to maintain the industrial base it had built up after 1941. Membership did not decline too dramatically, and the circulation of the *Daily Worker* actually increased from 100,000 a day in 1945 to 118,000 in 1947-48. How was the CP able to maintain its industrial base in these unfavourable conditions? Largely because the CP was the only organised opposition to wage controls, and because its activists were prominent in the major strikes of the late 1940s, particularly in the docks, so they were able to build a solid reputation amongst a wide layer of trade union activists, the very people who would attend union branch meetings and vote for candidates on the basis of their industrial record first and foremost and consider their political allegiances at best a secondary issue. What is more, the CP's industrial strategy began to meet with a much wider response in the labour movement as the Government's retreat from the aspirations of 1945 became more apparent. Indicative of this move to the left was the defeat of the General Council over its continued support for wage restraint at the 1950 TUC:

"Underlying this was a growing rank-and-file resentment at the degree to which the trade union establishment had placed loyalty to the

Labour Government before the pursuit of their members' interests. Relations between organised labour and the Government were further worsened by the use of Order 1305 - which had been little employed since its introduction in 1940 - first against striking London Gasworkers, and then, in February 1951, against the leaders of the unofficial Port Workers' Committee." (36)

The only union leaders who did not seem to be putting the interests of the Labour Government before those of their own members were the Communists. After all, not only was the Government openly hostile to the Party, but they were blamed for virtually every manifestation of industrial unrest that occurred, even though this was far from being the truth. The net effect was to widen the industrial influence and respect that the Party had in the trade unions. This was especially the case in the ETU.

From the start the Executive Council of the ETU opposed Cripps' wages policy, and the union's 1948 Conference carried, with only one vote against, a resolution endorsing the EC's decision and declaring that the Government "should ensure that wages and living standards of the people shall at all times have precedence over profits". And at the 1950 TUC it was Walter Stevens, the General Secretary of the ETU, who moved the resolution that called for the abolition of wage controls, which was carried, narrowly, against the opposition of the General Council. (3,949,000 votes to 3,727,000). (37)

With regards to Order 1305, both the 1949 and 1950 policy conferences of the union carried resolutions opposing its continued retention. When one of the ten leaders of the unofficial London Gasworkers' strike of September 1950, arrested under the provisions of Order 1305, turned out to be a member of the ETU, the union came to his assistance. Although the rule book did not allow the granting of legal aid in such a case, the Executive Council issued a circular to all branches appealing for financial support. After an appeal the one month's jail sentence passed on all ten workers was reduced to a £50 fine. (38) ETU militancy should not be exaggerated of course, for the leadership were often quite cautious

in their approach to strikes. For example, in the summer of 1949 a strike over pay differentials was threatened in the power stations:

"Ironically...it was being threatened by TGWU members, while the Communist-led Electrical Trades Union was recommending its members to stay at work." (39)

Further, the wave of unofficial lightning strikes that hit the newly nationalised Electricity industry in 1949, leading in Belfast and London to the drafting in of troops, do not appear to have received any support from the Executive. In the official history of the union, published in 1953, these disputes do not even get a mention. Nonetheless, the generally militant stand of the union over this period seems to have met with membership approval. Not only did the Communist leadership carry the union conferences, but in the various union elections of the late 1940s they extended their control.

If we now turn to the early 1950s further reasons for the CP's continued control of the ETU can be offered. In industry the early 1950s were characterized by two dominant and related features. Firstly, there was the growth of workplace bargaining, especially in engineering, which produced a strong and militant layer of shop stewards who frequently used the sectional militancy that had elected them to enforce their bargaining position. One of the most striking products of workplace bargaining was the gap that developed between nationally negotiated wage rates and what the workers could obtain above and beyond this rate at factory level - "wage drift". It was this "informal" bargaining system that, according to Fox and Flanders, had led to a breakdown of the "normative" order of industrial relations in post-war Britain, and was considered by the Donovan Commission to be "the central defect in British industrial relations". (40) Secondly, as Michael Shanks wrote in his much read book on the ills of British society in the 1950s, The Stagnant Society, the growth of workplace bargaining had led to a

"growing conflict between union officials and shop stewards, and to the steadily widening gulf between the union leaders and their own members. This is undoubtedly the main cause

behind the increase in unofficial strikes, the breaking of agreements, and the disregard for procedure on the workers' side." (41)

Besides unofficial strikes, estimated to account for 95% of all strikes in the 1950s, the downward trend in official strike activity of the late 1940s was reversed in the latter part of 1953 and thereafter, and despite an isolated fall in 1956, the overall trend was firmly upwards. (42)

It is not altogether surprising that an organisation whose major orientation was now on factory and union work should make some headway in this period and that a very high proportion of Communists should be elected shop-stewards. They were not chosen for their politics by and large, but first and foremost because they were tough negotiators and best articulated the industrial concerns of the workers they represented. Although with the publication of the Party's programme, *The British Road to Socialism* - issued by the Executive Committee in February 1951, and revised and adopted by the 22nd Congress in April 1952 - the Party clearly placed itself within the same political orbit as the Bevanites in the Labour Party who were then battling it out with Atlee and the right-wing of the movement over such issues as further nationalisation and a foreign policy more independent of the USA. After the witch-hunt of the late 1940s, and the Party's own move away from the left in the Labour Party, to now be associated with a much wider left current in the labour movement could only make the work of CP activists in the unions and workplaces that much easier. Their political policies were now cutting with a strong left reformist grain in the labour movement, just as their industrial activity was cutting with the growing sectional militancy on the shop-floor.

The ETU was the centrepiece of the Communist Party's political and industrial strategy in the 1950s. Politically the union exemplified the strategy set out in the *British Road to Socialism* of pushing the Labour Party in a left direction. John Gollan, the General Secretary of the CP, put their position very clearly in 1954:

"...the outstanding new feature of the 1953 Margate Labour Party Conference was the

emergence of a powerful group of important trade unions with a vote of around one and a quarter million, including the engineers, electricians and railwaymen, in alliance with the majority of constituency parties. This alliance will grow and develop and is the key to the transformation of the situation in the Labour Party." (43)

The ability of the CP to directly place resolutions on the order paper of Labour Party conferences through the channels of the ETU delegation was central to this strategy. When the CP leadership of the ETU attempted to push this process too far, however, they suffered the rare experience of being checked by their own union conference:

"The 1952 conference refused (158:142 with 16 abstaining) to agree that any member might represent the ETU at any body to which the union was affiliated. This amounted to a claim that the union's Communist President and General Secretary should be allowed to attend the Party Conference as delegates and that Communists should be delegates to Constituency Labour Parties. This demand was rejected again by the 1953 Conference (165:151), but in later years it has been smuggled through in the guise of a call for 'the removal of bans and proscriptions' with little difficulty." (44)

After the 1953 ETU Conference Frank Foulkes told the press that "the ETU's Labour Party members will not tolerate Communists representing them at Labour conventions...". (45) This was not as problematic as it might at first seem for the ETU leadership; for they were allowed constitutionally to attend Labour Party conferences as advisors to their delegations and, more importantly, there was little divergence on industrial and economic matters between the CP and the left-wing Labour Party members who made up the bulk of the delegates at ETU conferences. Opposition was much more apparent on political matters, where the CP leadership did not always carry the delegates with them (most notably on the Soviet

invasion of Hungary in 1956). But, so long as the CP leadership did not go beyond the framework of left Labour politics, they were able to send ETU delegations to Labour Party Conferences that genuinely represented the dominant politics of ETU activists. The balance the CP leadership of the union was always trying to strike was one that brought "the ETU's policies as close to the Communist line as is compatible with remaining within the Labour Party". (46)

Industrial and economic concerns were, as we have already noted, an entirely different matter. Baldly stated, the Communist Party were able to maintain their control of the ETU in the 1950s because they articulated the general industrial concerns of the union's membership. As one study of policy formation in the post-war ETU put it:

"For the most part outright opposition within the union to policies of industrial and economic militancy was non-existent, support of the leadership being typically...unanimous and enthusiastic..." (47)

Not only did the leadership articulate the industrial concerns of the membership, they also, in the main, and unlike many other trade union leaderships, supported them when they were in dispute. As Woodrow Wyatt complained:

"The Communists have even introduced the most extraordinary strike rule in the history of the British Trade Union movement. It is that all strikes, however trivial the occasion, are automatically official in the ETU until and unless they are declared unofficial." (48)

Or, as Frank Haxell, the General Secretary of the union, put it: "In this union every strike is official until, and if, the executive council says otherwise". In 1955 alone they paid out £190,643 in strike pay out of a total income of £440,891. (49) At a time when shop-floor militancy was characterised by unofficial strikes, the ETU leadership's pronouncements cannot have failed to have had a resonance with a wide layer of ETU members, even though the vast majority of unofficial strikes were over and done with in a very short period of time, and in most cases before the Executive Council heard of them. So in one sense the leadership of the union

could afford to be magnanimous on unofficial strikes. Nonetheless, the gesture would have no doubt been well received by the majority of ETU members.

Overall, then, we would agree with Lewis Minkin when he says that

"Ballot-rigging aside, the success of the Communist leadership was based on its militant industrial policy and its harmonization with a Left-wing Labour tradition indigenous to the union." (50)

This indigenous left-wing labour tradition was in itself the product of an historical industrial militancy rooted in the type of industries that the union covered. For the core of the union's membership had always been in the electrical contracting and engineering industries, both of which had a history and tradition of militancy. With the rapid growth of both of these industries during the war period the union membership shot up from 70,065 in 1939 to 187,520 in 1949, and thereafter by 3% a year till it reached 215,596 in 1955. These industries, especially engineering, were precisely the ones where the main features of the post-war militancy we have described above were most prevalent. This provides us with a further explanation for the rise of the CP in the ETU. For as H.A. Turner has argued:

"...in general, Communists have only achieved much power in British unions where they were able to identify themselves with historical - and often local - militancies specific to particular industries...So that the recent situation of the ETU seems...explicable as being the one case in which Communists were able to exploit an association with the engineering industries' tradition of shop-steward militancy to the critical point of capturing the key union offices." (51)

Turner's line of argument was developed by R. Bean, in an article in the *Political Quarterly* in 1965, which examined ETU policy formation between 1945-1961. Bean's concern was to explain why, given that the political views of the ETU leadership were only

shared by a fraction of the membership, the union's policy conferences consistently advocated policies shared by the Communist leadership. Bean's survey of ETU conference decisions shows how year after year certain issues - international co-operation, the abolition of nuclear weapons, total opposition to wage restraint, the extension of public ownership, reciprocal trading with the USSR and China - were placed on the agenda and carried with practically no opposition from the floor. However, Bean argues that this militancy is not to be understood solely as a result of the Communist leadership of the union, but is in many ways a continuation of the ETU's militant tradition, a tradition

"Rooted in the structure of the union and the type of industries it organises, together with its history and the extensive powers conferred on its executive. In this context, then, it may be said that the Communist leaders were as much symptomatic of the union's militant policy as that they themselves were the direct cause of it." (52)

It can be argued then, that the combination of an indigenous militancy that was able to blossom in the industrial climate of the 1950s, together with a strong body of CP members who actively encouraged such militancy and made up a high proportion of the union's 7000 stewards, provides a plausible explanation for the continued support that the Communist leadership enjoyed in the ETU after 1948.

Two explanations, both concentrating on the politics and industrial strategy of the Communist Party, have now been given that attempt to account for the rise of the CP in the ETU. Both explanations implicitly reject the idea that the Communist Party gained and retained its control by manipulating the internal democracy of the union. The first, and least contentious, argues that the CP's capture of the union was the result of its general war-time popularity, which enabled it to take advantage of its already strong pre-war base in the union. The second argues that the continued post-war control of the ETU by the Communist Party can be explained essentially by the political and industrial shift

made in Party policy at the end of 1947, a shift which allowed the CP to capitalise on working class opposition to the Labour Government's wage controls and the growth of strong local, plant and sectional bargaining where militant shop-stewards frequently led short, sharp, unofficial strikes. As well as this, the Bevanite upsurge in the Labour Party in the early 1950s can be said to have tempered the cold war atmosphere in which the CP had operated in the late 1940s, making them now a part of a wider left-wing current. The CP leadership of the ETU were better placed than most to take advantage of these favourable conditions primarily because of their greater implantation in the union and because their policies cut with the grain of a traditional militancy that began to flower in the conditions of the post-war boom.

The union's democracy during this period can be seen to have been shaped by a number of social and political factors and the peculiarities of the ETU's own growth and development. Yet the still dominant explanation for the Communist Party's continued control of the post-war ETU is the one put forward by Woodrow Wyatt:

"...since the war the Communists had controlled the ETU by falsifying election returns". (53)

This explanation rejects the notion that the union's policies were democratically arrived at, and instead argues that an oligarchy of CP members controlled the ETU and thus its policies by a combination of bureaucratic manipulation and ballot-rigging. It is to this explanation that we now turn.

CHAPTER TWO

BALLOT RIGGING AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY

During the period in which the Communist Party controlled the ETU (1948-1961) all positions in the union were secured by election and re-election (see Appendix 1, diagram 1). There was a reason for this, as Gordon Schaffer explains in his official history of the union:

"In some unions...officials are elected for life, and are, therefore, far less responsive to the desires of the members.

The ETU has avoided this danger and all full-time officials, from the General Secretary downwards, come up for re-election every five years. The Executive Council is elected every two years.

Not only does this rule act as a reminder to the officials that they are the servants and not the masters of the Union, it also prevents the leaders of the moment from exercising the power of patronage which is inseparable from any organisation able to offer well-paid positions. Aspirants for office in a union in which appointments are made by elections know they have to please not the General Secretary, or the Executive Committee, but the membership as a whole." (1)

Be that as it may, what this elective principle did not guard against, it was alleged, was the manipulation of the electoral process itself by an organised minority within the union - the Communist Party.

A note on the ETU's voting procedure.

Hopefully the intricacies of the ETU's electoral process will become apparent as we examine in some detail the charges of ballot-rigging levelled at the Communist leadership of the union, but

before we proceed a brief note on how the union's voting procedure operated might help to avoid unnecessary confusion.

To avoid the deficiencies of the relative majority voting system the ETU along with several other unions employed the second ballot system. (2) This method of voting required that a successful candidate should receive an absolute majority over all other candidates. If there were three or more candidates and no one candidate received an absolute majority of the votes cast, the two leading candidates would stand again in a second ballot.

The procedure for voting was that every member who was not more than 13 weeks in arrears received a ballot paper at his or her home address. It was the branch secretary who had the responsibility of distributing the individual ballot papers to the home addresses of the members and of enclosing an official envelope for its return. Members who were unable to vote in person at the quarterly branch meeting at which the ballot was to be taken could return the sealed envelope containing their ballot paper either by post to their branch secretary or directly to the branch quarterly meeting, or in person to their branch secretary, money steward or shop steward. At the quarterly branch meeting all the ballot papers were then handed over to two previously elected rank-and-file branch scrutineers (ie other than the branch officials) who counted the votes and declared the result at the end of the meeting. The result of the ballot was recorded on a branch scrutineers' return form, signed by the scrutineers, the branch secretary and the branch president, and then posted to the Head Office of the union. To be valid the scrutineers' return form had to reach union headquarters no later than the first post on the fifth day following the quarterly meeting.

The *Daily Telegraph's* allegations

From the mid-1950s onwards a stream of press articles began to appear alleging electoral malpractice in the ETU. The first of these to appear, in the *Daily Telegraph* on 11 January 1956, contained the core of all the subsequent allegations that were to be directed against the Communist leadership of the union. Under the heading "Election Methods in a Communist-Led Union", the

unsigned article claimed that an analysis of the voting figures for the election of the union's General Secretary in March 1955, contested between the sitting Communist candidate Frank Haxell and John Byrne, and the election for the post of Assistant General Secretary in September of the same year between John Byrne and the sitting Communist candidate Robert McLennan, made "odd reading to say the least". What is more, the odd nature of the voting figures for these two elections, claimed the *Daily Telegraph*, "repeats the same curious pattern which has marked ETU national and certain regional elections since 1948". What was this "curious pattern"?

A study of the two 1955 elections in which the sitting Communist candidates had retained their posts revealed two suspicious facts, wrote the special correspondent: firstly, a high vote in those branches that either had Communist officials or a small group of CP members in the branch; and secondly, the smallness of the vote in many branches with non-Communist officers or influence. For example, in the Haxell-Byrne election, the following voting figures (expressed as a percentage of branch membership) from a number of unnamed "pro-Communist" branches were given as evidence to support the correspondent's contention:

<u>Communist</u>	<u>Non-Communist</u>
Branch "A" 76.6	.. 0.5
"B" 86.4	.. nil
"C" 73.8	.. 1.4
"D" 62.8	.. 15.8
"E" 74.9	.. 14.8
"F" 71.8	.. 3.9

In contrast, said the *Daily Telegraph*, "the voting returns from branches supporting the non-Communist are extremely low". A similar pattern was also evident, the article claimed, in the McLennan-Byrne election eight months later. Moreover, if the two elections of 1955 were compared "a number of puzzling points emerge". For instance, in branch "F" the poll dropped from a total vote of 75.7% in the Haxell-Byrne election to one of only 12.2% in the McLennan-Byrne election. Other alleged irregularities in the

ETU's electoral process going as far back as 1948 were also cited in the article. The conclusion that the *Daily Telegraph* drew from its analysis of the ETU's "curious pattern" of voting was that the "triumvirate of Communists in the union's top executive posts, a triumvirate which... directed the aggressive policy of the union throughout this period" had been able to pursue their political and industrial ends by manipulating the union's internal democracy. How had they done this?

Firstly, the article said, the voting procedure in the union lent itself to manipulation in a number of ways. For example, the branch secretary whose task it was to distribute the ballot papers amongst the membership was in a position to dispense with them in a selective manner. Woodrow Wyatt put it like this several months after the *Daily Telegraph* article appeared:

"Many rank-and-file members of the ETU do not even know or care when an election is taking place. And many Communist and fellow-travelling branch secretaries know how to take advantage of this apathy.

They do not stop at failing to urge the laggards to vote. Frequently they send out only fifty to sixty ballot papers out of several hundreds, to those members who, they have found, take an interest in trade union proceedings. They bank on the rest never hearing about the election. This makes the falsification of the returns less troublesome.

If anyone has not received a ballot paper for an election and wants to know why he has been left out the answer is pat: 'It must have been lost in the post.' or: 'It was a clerical error. I ticked you off as having been sent one.' " (3)

Secondly, the article says that the system of counting votes in ETU branches is open to abuse. Once again Woodrow Wyatt says openly what the *Daily Telegraph* article only implies:

"It is easy for an official who is a Communist or fellow traveller to fill in the votes in any

way he likes - and no questions asked - provided that he has access to the forms. Once the branch meeting has started the President and Secretary are concerned with conducting that and may not be able to watch closely the counting of the votes. Consequently not even the connivance or complaisance of all the officials concerned is required to falsify the returns." (4)

A further three articles were published in the *Daily Telegraph* on January 12, 13, and 16, 1956, all of which continued the attack on the ETU. The article on 12 January dealt with "irregularities in the election of an officer of the Communist-Led Electrical Trades Union some years ago". It reported that although an ETU committee of inquiry had found almost all the allegations proven, the Executive Council decided not to disqualify the votes of the branches concerned. Consequently "the election of Mr A.A. Wallis, now 52, a Communist, was confirmed. He still holds office". (5) And it was not just the ETU that was being attacked, as the article on 13 January used the example of the ETU to illustrate a general point about the deficiencies and flaws of those trade union voting procedures which allowed "ill-disposed people" to take advantage of the rules and secure the election of their candidates. Flaws, said the *Daily Telegraph*, that have "long been recognised by some union leaders". (6)

According to the *Daily Telegraph's* special correspondent, the article of 11 January was described by Frank Foulkes, the President of the ETU, as "all lies":

"He did not elaborate which parts were inaccurate. I asked him to examine with me the suggestions made in the article and to give explanations or replies. He declined to do so. I then asked whether he would comment in general terms on the article. He did not." (7)

But according to Frank Foulkes: "I immediately submitted a 1,500-word letter to the editor for publication which he refused to publish on the grounds that it was impossible to print a letter of such length". (8) Yet, oddly, the union did not consider it

worthwhile publishing Foulkes' refutation of the *Telegraphs's* allegations in the union's own monthly journal, *Electron*, in the EC minutes or in circular form to the branches. In their report to the ETU's Annual Delegate Conference in May 1956, the Executive Council merely said that the articles were a "distortion" and a "misrepresentation" aimed at wilfully misleading the readers of the *Daily Telegraph*. The Report said that the Executive Council could only conclude that the *Daily Telegraph's* reluctance to publish the union's reply was because to do so "would effectively dispose of the attempts made in the articles to discredit the Union. (9) But the letter was not reproduced in the Report for the information of the delegates. Eventually, early in 1957, the union published its first statement concerning the *Daily Telegraph's* allegations in a small pamphlet entitled *The Union's Reply to the Press Attacks*, and in July *Electron* mentioned the press campaign for the first time. The union did not really have much choice: with the publication in December 1956 of Woodrow Wyatt's booklet *The Peril in Our Midst*, and with the coverage the booklet received in the popular press, especially in the wake of the crushing of the Hungarian revolution by Soviet tanks, the ETU leadership had to refute the charges in some detail or by their silence condemn themselves.

The Peril in Our Midst

In September 1956, Woodrow Wyatt wrote a series of articles for the *Illustrated* magazine attacking Communist influence in British trade unions. In December of the same year they were published in booklet form under the title *The Peril in Our Midst*. One of the chapters in the book, "Faked Ballots", dealt exclusively with the ETU and was written on the basis of "masses of confidential documents" supplied to him by John Byrne, the most prominent oppositionist in the union at the time. (10) Wyatt did not mince his words:

"Once a Communist State always a Communist State. There are no further free elections. However much the people of Poland or Hungary may dislike their Communist governments, they have no democratic or constitutional means of throwing them out. As I shall show, it is the

same with the Communist officials of the Communist-controlled Electrical Trades Union.

Indeed, I go further and have no hesitation in saying that on more than one occasion the rank-and-file members of the ETU have actually voted in favour of a non-Communist for an important official position. But the Communist has been declared the 'winner' because some of the Communist-influenced branches have 'cooked' the votes....

I am convinced that the great majority of the 216,000 rank-and-file members of the ETU do not wish their union to be run by Communists. But under the present conditions they are helpless.

I will prove it." (11)

How did Woodrow Wyatt prove that the internal democracy of the ETU was open to such gross manipulation? Much of what he wrote was in fact a re-working of the *Daily Telegraph* allegations with Wyatt drawing the explicit conclusion that Communist Party members within the ETU had rigged certain ballots for high office. But besides writing about the two 1955 elections, as the *Daily Telegraph* article had done, he also reports on three other elections that took place in the late 1940s, which the *Daily Telegraph* article had only touched upon. Of the three elections, Wyatt examines two in some detail and claims that both had been rigged. The two rigged elections were for the post of Assistant General Secretary. In the first ballot in June 1948, despite it being rigged, John Byrne had received 27,587 votes and the Communist candidate, Frank Haxell, 25,000 votes, but Byrne had failed to win an overall majority over the other two candidates (Haxell and Lowden) as the rules required by just 229 votes. A second ballot was held between Byrne and Haxell in September, but this time Byrne only received 28,732 votes to Haxell's 33,399 votes. This result was achieved, says Wyatt, by 32 Communist influenced branches falsifying their voting returns:

"Take Blackpool for instance. In the election of December, 1947, for the post of General Secretary when Mr. Stevens, the Communist, did

not seem seriously threatened it recorded 4 votes for Mr.Byrne and 284 for the Communist.

In the election for Assistant General Secretary in June, 1948, after Mr.Byrne had caused a stir with his election address, it recorded only 1 vote for Mr.Byrne and 595 votes for Mr.Haxell, the Communist.

Blackpool was stepping up the pressure. Its vote had apparently increased from 40% of the membership to 84% of the membership - an unheard of thing in Trade Union elections of this type - and in six months, too. There was more to come.

When Mr Byrne headed the list of candidates in the first ballot for the Assistant General Secretaryship in June, 1948 - although as I have explained he did not get the post because his vote did not exceed the combined total of the other two candidates - the Communists were in a panic.

In September 1948 in the second vote that year for the Assistant General Secretaryship, 5 votes were recorded by Blackpool for Mr.Byrne and 695 for Mr.Haxell, the Communist.

This was an extraordinary vote for two reasons. The first is that it was 98% of the members whose names were on the books of the Blackpool branch at the time.

In other words it was the sort of vote that Stalin used to win elections by in Russia.

The second curiosity about the vote is this. You are not entitled to vote in an election of the ETU if your union contributions are in arrears of thirteen weeks.

At that moment - September, 1948 - the number of paid-up members of the Blackpool branch who were really entitled to vote was 559. Yet the branch had the effrontery to return 700 as

having voted in this important election - nearly 150 more people than were supposed to vote under Union rules.

Ten other Communist-dominated branches also returned as having voted more people than were qualified to vote." (12)

According to Woodrow Wyatt, then, John Byrne was cheated out of his election victory by 32 Communist influenced branches stepping up their vote for Frank Haxell by over 3000 votes between the first and second ballots. Moreover, 11 of these 32 branches had recorded votes for more members than were entitled to vote, claimed Wyatt. So two related charges were being levelled at the ETU leadership: firstly, that 32 Communist dominated branches of the union increased their pro-Haxell votes by unprecedented numbers between the first ballot in June and the second ballot in September; and secondly, that 11 of these branches recorded more votes than they were entitled to. The union published its reply to these charges and those contained in the *Daily Telegraph* early in 1957.

In substance *The Union's Reply to the Press Attacks* argued that the "wild allegations" made by the *Daily Telegraph* and Woodrow Wyatt were not only wrong but part and parcel of a "McCarthy-like witch hunting" campaign aimed at discrediting a militant trade union. Specifically, the pamphlet said that the irregularities the *Daily Telegraph* had pointed to concerning the high returns from certain branches were not unusual. This was because of the very nature of the electrical industry where, for instance, 80,000 ETU members worked shifts, so "there were sometimes considerable fluctuations both in ballot returns and branch attendances". Turning to Woodrow Wyatt's allegations, the pamphlet says that he uses "figures from two different sources, and, in addition relating to two different years":

"First he takes the analysis of branch voting returns in the September, 1948 election for assistant general secretary, and compares them with the financial membership of the branches at December, 1947.

The membership of the branches is compiled for various purposes in three ways:

1. The actual membership - that is the number of members of the branches irrespective of any arrears of contributions.
2. The voting membership - that is those members less than 13 weeks in arrears of contributions.
3. The financial membership - that is the number of members for whom full contributions for the year have been paid.

Wyatt, failing to appreciate these very important distinctions, uses entirely unrelated figures and alleges that three branches registered more votes than they had members!

Let us take his example of Dorking branch; Wyatt said that, 'with 206 members entitled to vote, by September, 1948, it was returning 20 votes for Mr. Byrne and 189 for the Communist.' The implication is quite clearly that Dorking branch, with 206 members, was returning 209 votes - three more votes than members!

As we told the *Daily Express*, 'the Dorking branch has a financial membership of 206, but its total membership at that date was 264.' More important still, at the time of the ballot 'the number of members entitled to vote was 242. The comparison is therefore between 209 and 242 and *not* between 209 and 206 as claimed by Wyatt. This is also the case with the Blackpool and Leyland branches who both polled fewer votes than the members entitled to vote."

(13)

The argument about the 1948 election was not to end there. In January 1958 Woodrow Wyatt published a long article in the *New Statesman* entitled "The Case against the ETU leaders" in which he repeated and expanded on the allegations he had made in *The Peril in Our Midst*, and made further allegations about the rigging of a

very recent election in the ETU. (14) For Wyatt's *New Statesman* article came at the end of a three month period in which the ETU had been subject to a vitriolic press campaign alleging once again Communist electoral malpractice in the union. The occasion for this renewed and far larger press campaign against the ETU was the result of an ETU election held in September 1957.

The Cannon - Frazer election of 1957

In September 1957 Les Cannon and Jack Frazer contested the ETU's Division 9 for a seat on the Executive Council. Frazer was the sitting member and also a member of the Communist Party. Cannon had joined the Communist Party at the age of nineteen in 1939, and in the post-war period had become one of their most prominent industrial members. Cannon's intellectual abilities were put to good use both by the Communist Party and the ETU. For the Party he wrote numerous articles on a wide range of issues, and a very good pamphlet on productivity - *Productivity - for whom?* - in September 1955. Cannon had been on the Executive Council of the ETU, which was a lay body, since 1945, and had earned his living working in the industry, but in 1954 he was offered a job at the ETU's residential college at Esher, with the condition that he did not stand for elective office while working at the college, a condition which he accepted.

When Les Cannon left the Communist Party in November 1956 in the midst of the Soviet invasion of Hungary it was a major blow to the Party and to the CP leadership of the ETU. There followed a period of intense bitterness with Cannon being virtually ostracised by the CP members of the union, and in the spring of 1957 he lost his job when the residential college was closed down. So Cannon could expect a tough fight from Frazer and the Communist leadership of the union in the September election. Especially as the election was an important test of the Party's strength in the union following the crushing of the Hungarian revolution. Already around 10,000 members had left the CP over Hungary, and at the ETU conference in May 1957 the delegates had voted against the Executive and condemned the "brutal attack of the Soviet armed forces on the Hungarian people". (15) Not only this made the

election so important, the victor also had the right to sit on the union's sub-executive of five that ran the union in between the bi-monthly meetings of the full Executive Council. If Cannon were elected the CP control of the union would be severely hampered, because the decisions of the sub-executive, at the time made up entirely of CP members, had to be unanimous, and so an experienced former EC and CP member would be a real thorn in the side of the leadership.

There were 61 branches in Division No.9 spread over a wide area of the south of England, and it was imperative that each candidate secured as many branch nominations as possible in order to make an impressive show on the ballot paper (all the nominations that the candidate received appeared under his name on the ballot paper). For Les Cannon this involved visiting as many of the branches as he could in person in a very short space of time:

"...he had to try to visit them all during the last two weeks of June, when the quarterly meetings were held - it was at these meetings that the nominations of candidates for the forthcoming election were made..

By the end of June Les succeeded in getting sufficient nominations to make a respectable showing on the ballot- paper." (16)

Frazer, on the other hand, had all the resources of the union and CP machine behind him. According to Olga Cannon and J.R.L. Anderson, as the election drew nearer the "Communists in the Division grew seriously alarmed, and they mounted a substantial campaign against Les":

"At least five Area officials - all Communists - visited branches in the Division to assist the sitting candidate. The candidate himself found Executive Council reasons for visiting the Isle of Wight twice, Reading twice, Portsmouth twice, etc - all with full delegation fees paid...Every conceivable attempt was made to blacken Les - he was accused of being in the pay of Roman Catholics,

the Economic League, and the capitalist press."

(17)

The result of the election was expected to be announced at the Executive Council meeting on 19 October 1957, but instead the General Secretary, Frank Haxell, reported that inquiries were being made "into the way in which a number of branches had conducted the ballot held at the September quarterly meetings", and that meanwhile the results could not be announced. Before the findings of the "inquiries" were published, however, Les Cannon approached Geoffrey Goodman of the *News Chronicle* and Len Jackson of the *Daily Mirror* and told them of the investigation and of his own suspicions of electoral malpractice. On Monday 21 October the *News Chronicle* ran a story by Goodman under the headline "ETU Election Row - Communist Didn't Win". Goodman's article dealt with one of the branches that was to be investigated for ballot irregularities by the ETU leadership, the Mitcham Electronic Engineers branch, which had voted by 410 votes to 35 in favour of Les Cannon. He wrote:

"Cannon and Frazer have been contesting the ETU's No. 9 Division, which covers one in ten of the 230,000 members in South-West London, Surrey, Berkshire, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight and the Channel Isles.

And despite the efforts of the ETU leaders, Cannon is believed to have have won - by more than 300 votes.

The Executive has not yet announced the result. The union chiefs met at the weekend but no statement has been issued.

If they invalidate the returns from the Mitcham Electronic Engineers, the effect could be to snatch victory from Cannon." (18)

In the event the ballot returns of 8 branches were disqualified (2 of which had cast majorities for Frazer), with three of the branches - the Mitcham Electronic Engineers, London Station Engineers No. 14, and the London Jointers branch - being investigated in some detail for ballot irregularities. The details of the disqualifications were given by Frank Haxell at a special meeting of the Executive Council held on 15 November. The Mitcham

and LSE No. 14 branches were disqualified on the grounds that more members voted than were entitled to vote, which was rather ironic in the light of the charges previously made against the Communist leadership of the union by the *Daily Telegraph* and Woodrow Wyatt. In the case of the Mitcham branch, said the EC report, they had claimed a voting membership of 1084, but 699 members were not entitled to vote because of arrears, 37 members received ballot papers when they were not entitled to them, 43 who were entitled to vote did not receive ballot papers, and 60 more votes than the maximum possible had been cast. As for the LSE No.14 branch, a voting membership of 932 had been claimed but, according to the EC's findings, only 821 were entitled to vote, 57 members received ballot papers who were not entitled to them, 72 who were entitled to them didn't receive them and 12 ballot papers were returned to Head Office unused. (19) Despite appeals made by both branches, and allegations that the appeals machinery itself was being abused by the Executive, the decision to disqualify the branches' ballot returns was upheld. The investigation into the London Jointers branch was of a lesser order: the branch vote was disqualified because the doorkeeper had started to open the scrutineers' envelopes before the meeting opened to assist the scrutineers who were late for the meeting. According to the Executive Council minutes, the other five branches were dis-enfranchised either because branch scrutineers were not appointed in accordance with the rules, or because ballot documents were not returned within the time limit laid down in the rules. (20)

The Executive Council minutes of 15 November also contain the result of the Cannon - Frazer election, although the result was not made public until 27 November:

Cannon 1451

Frazer 2023

A breakdown of the branch voting is also given, except, and this was normal practice in the ETU, for the 8 branches that were disqualified. So although the minutes showed that Frazer had a majority of 572 over Cannon, what they did not show was what the result would have been if those 8 branches had not been disqualified. In the weeks that followed it was to be these

"missing votes" that were to be at the centre of the press campaign that was waged against the ETU.

The renewed press campaign

Geoffrey Goodman's article in the *News Chronicle* in October was the signal for a torrent of further press articles which all implied, directly or indirectly, that Les Cannon had been elected to the Executive Council of the ETU by a majority of some 300 votes, and that the Communist leadership of the union were now in the process of cheating him of his victory. In the first phase of the campaign the press clamoured for the result of the election to be made known. The *Daily Mail* (Scotland) of November 23 was not untypical of the many reports that were appearing at the time:

"It is widely believed that Leslie Cannon, a former Communist, secured the position...But who knows? The reds refuse to talk..."

The union's Communist President, Mr. Frank Foulkes says 'We do not intend to make any public announcement of the results of the election. It will be made known to members in due course when they receive the minutes of the meetings of the executive'."

And again in the *Daily Mail* (Scotland) of 25 November, under the headline "ETU REDS KEEP THE IRON CURTAIN", Foulkes was reported as saying that he would

"tell members in the routine circulation of minutes of the EC meetings probably about mid-December."

In fact the minutes of the 15 November EC meeting were not circulated to the branches until mid-January 1958, by which time, as we shall see, the bulk of their contents were public knowledge. One reason for the delay could have been that branches could not challenge the result of the Cannon - Frazer election until the the EC minutes were circulated to the branches. So by the simple expedient of delaying their circulation the whole appeals machinery of the union could be held in suspension till a time when the heat surrounding the Cannon - Frazer election had died down.

A few days after Frank Foulkes had reportedly said that no public announcement of the election result would be made, *The Times* carried an article which stated that the "results of the September ballot for the executive committee of the ETU were made known yesterday...Mr. Cannon learnt that he had been declared defeated and that Mr. Frazer had been elected." (21) But as yet no details of the election had been released by the union - the findings of the investigations into the three branches and the breakdown of the voting figures. The confirmation that Cannon had been defeated only increased press interest in the affairs of the ETU, an interest that was given a further boost by the union's Special Rules Revision Conference that was to begin on 30 November, three days after Cannon's defeat had been announced in *The Times*.

The main rule changes proposed at the conference were concerned with increasing membership contributions so that benefits could be increased and the financial plight of the union alleviated. But Frank Foulkes' Presidential address to the delegates, and the press coverage of the conference, made it quite clear that the financial troubles of the union were at best a secondary issue, and that the real issue was the union's internal democracy and the continuing attack on the Communist leadership of the union. Frank Foulkes held aloft a recent copy of the *Daily Telegraph*, which carried a report on the financial condition of the union that could not have been written without access to the conference agenda, and said to the delegates that "every member sitting here at this conference is suspect of handing this document to our enemies". (22) And certainly the "enemies" of the ETU in the press thought there were far more sinister things taking place behind the doors of the Agricultural Hall, Knightsbridge, than the raising of membership contributions. The day before the conference opened the *Daily Mail* ran an article under the headline, "THE RED FRANKS OF THE ETU GIVE THE SHACKLES A FINAL TWIST". On the closing day of the conference the same paper's frontpage headline was: "RED GRIP CLOSES ON ETU". (23) Other, more restrained newspapers, such as *The Times*, carried reports asserting that Communist control of the ETU had been strengthened by the decisions of the Special Rules Revision Conference.

There were a number of rule changes that directly affected the internal democracy of the union. For example, branches would now be attached to an Area Committee, thus ensuring that every branch was represented at Area level. It was also decided that all charges relating to major offences would now be dealt with by the Area Committee and not by the branch. What infuriated the press though, was the change in the composition of the 5 man sub-executive of the union which ran the union in between the meetings of the full Executive Council. As we have already seen, if Les Cannon had won his election against Frazer he would have been entitled to a place on the sub-executive, since it was made up of three full time officers (Foulkes, Haxell, and McLellan, the Assistant General Secretary, all CP members), and two other EC members from the most conveniently situated Divisions to Head Office. Under the new arrangements the two EC members could be chosen from any Division. The press claimed that this would allow the CP to retain its control of the sub-executive if the two home Divisions of the union were to go anti-Communist, for they could now choose CP or pro-CP EC members from any of the union's 10 Divisions.

The ETU's response

The press furore surrounding the Cannon - Frazer election and the Special Rules Revision Conference reached its peak following the release on 3 December 1957 of the union's first public statement concerning the press allegations of the previous months. The press release was the start of an offensive by the ETU leadership that lasted several months. The ETU's response to their critics was essentially twofold. Firstly, they attempted to refute the specific allegations levelled at the union. Secondly, they explained the "anti-ETU stunt" in terms of a generalised attack on the whole trade union movement, arguing that the press's alleged concern with democracy in the ETU was merely a cover for a political assault on a trade union whose political stance and industrial record were an open affront to everything that the "capitalist press" held dear. Let them get away with attacking the ETU, they argued, and every trade union would be under threat.

(1) The union's response to specific allegations of malpractice

Two major points were made by the ETU leadership here: (a) that all the branch votes that had been disqualified had been done so constitutionally under the rules of the union; and (b) that even if the votes of the 8 disqualified branches had been allowed Frazer would still have been the victor. In their 3 December statement the union said that the investigation into the Mitcham and LSE branches had revealed a whole number of breaches of rules, and that in the face of such evidence they had no alternative but to reject those branch returns. Since at this time the relevant EC Minutes had not been published, a detailed refutation of the EC's findings was not possible anyway. In the end, however, the Mitcham and LSE branch committees accepted the EC's findings, although Les Cannon and some individual branch members refused to accept them. (24) Moreover, the constitutional complexities of the ETU rule book were such that the leadership could quite legitimately find a technical infringement of the rules in virtually any of the 61 branches that were involved in the Cannon - Frazer election. What Patrick Wintour wrote of the present day leadership of the EETPU is also true of the Communist leadership of the ETU in the 1950s: "...the appearance is of a union leadership able to make the jack of spades jump out of a rule-book and squirt cider in almost anyone's ear." (25) By virtue of its control of the union machinery the leadership can, in most instances, interpret the rules to its own advantage. Or as Max Weber put it, control of the bureaucratic structure "goes hand in hand with the concentration of the material means of management in the hands of the master." (26) But in this instance the weight of evidence did seem to justify the disqualification of the returns of the Mitcham and LSE branches. The other 6 branches accepted the Executive Council decision to disqualify their returns.

In order to challenge the result of the Cannon - Frazer election a branch appeal would have to have had the support of 10% of the membership. If it gained this support the question of a re-election could have been put to a ballot of the entire membership or a conference of the union. Of course, the appeals of the Mitcham and LSE branches never got this far, but even if they had it seems

most unlikely that they would have secured the support of 10% of the membership. The reason being that the ETU leadership had repeatedly suggested that even if the disqualified branch votes had been included (and remember that two of the disqualified branches returned majority votes for Frazer) the result of the election would have been no different - Frazer would still have been the victor. This repeated assertion completely undermined the press's case that Les Cannon had been cheated of his victory. On top of this, some of the media coverage of the ETU served to rally support for the Communist leadership rather than undermine it. A *Panorama* programme presented by Woodrow Wyatt on December 9, 1957 was a case in point.

Woodrow Wyatt tells us that the *Panorama* programme was "a devastating exposure of how the Communists had just defrauded Les Cannon...of his victory". Wyatt interviewed a number of ETU members with their faces hidden from the cameras:

"The fear in their voices made the more convincing their description of how they had watched Communist officials falsifying the election returns and disqualifying votes for Les Cannon." (27)

Wyatt exaggerates, since the ETU members on the programme were not that specific. One interview went like this:

Q. How long have you been a member of the Union?

A. Twenty three years.

Q. Do you think that the Executive Council has behaved correctly over the business of the election of Cannon and Frazer?

A. I don't think so. They seem to have put bias in favour of Frazer. They don't seem to want Cannon there for some reason or other, and I think under the circumstances and the whole way the ballot has been conducted they should have called a fresh ballot and given the members the right to vote. It has been done in the past, why not this time? (28)

No specific details of ballot-rigging were given, just general assertions that it was a standard practice employed by the ETU leadership:

Q. How long have you been a branch officer?

A. Four years.

Q. And how many people usually vote in your branch?

A. Well it will be something like fifty out of a thousand.

Q. Do you think that is the average for most ETU branches where the votes aren't fiddled?

A. I should say, knowing what I do about apathy, it is just about the correct percentage.

Q. Do you think the members of the union want to have a Communist-controlled Executive?

A. Oh, no. They certainly don't want to have a Communist-controlled Executive Council at all.

Q. Well, why do they have it now?

A. Well, as I said before, it is just general apathy, that is all. They won't vote.

Q. But what is the guarantee that their votes will be honestly dealt with when they have recorded them

A. Well I couldn't give any guarantee where that is concerned at all. But I would say that if the majority of the members did vote it would be useless to even try to fiddle it."

(29)

Ballot-rigging, apathy and fear of Communist union officials were the reasons for the continuing domination of the Communist Party in the ETU, according to the ETU members interviewed by Woodrow Wyatt. Wyatt informs us that his piece on the union "was a national sensation", but Les Cannon's biographers tell us that the over-dramatization "offended a good many non-Communist members of the Union, who felt the Union's affairs were just being 'blown up' to make a good TV show (and) antagonized a number of people who might otherwise have been on Les's side". (30)

The ETU immediately demanded an apology from the BBC. In a widely publicised letter to Sir Ian Jacob, the BBC Director General, Frank Foulkes said that the BBC was lending itself to a campaign of "vilification...designed to horrify the British public into believing lies and innuendoes about this union". The letter goes on to deny any irregularities in the union's electoral procedure and concludes:

"Whatever figures other people may have, in this office we have the actual voting returns from each of the 61 branches and we repeat that if every branch mentioned in the broadcast and by the press as having their votes disqualified were to be included then it would make no difference to the result." (31)

This was the union leadership's trump card. They had first stated it in their 3 December statement which also received extensive press coverage:

"It is not without interest to note that had all the votes of the branches mentioned been accepted, it would not have made any difference to the result of the ballot." (32)

However, Olga Cannon claims that the union's trump card was in actual fact the product of a deft sleight of hand by the ETU leadership:

"We suffered...from an unhappy error in the Press reporting. For some reason only seven of the *eight* branches invalidated after Les's election were mentioned in the newspapers and on radio...it became a serious embarrassment to us, for it enabled Haxell to circulate a statement that if all the invalidated branches *mentioned in the Press and on Radio and television* were included, the result of the ballot would not have been affected. If, however the *eighth* invalidated branch (Walton and Hersham, which had voted heavily in Les's favour) had been included, the result would have been vitally different - Les would

undeniably have won. The Communists exploited this omission to the full." (33)

Two things need to be said about this statement of Olga Cannon's. Firstly, when interviewed on ITV's *This Week* programme on December 14, 1957, Frank Foulkes was reported by the *Daily Worker* as saying that

"even if all the votes which had been invalidated in the election had been counted, Mr.Cannon would still not have won the election." (34)

So in this instance there was no mention of the rider, as *mentioned in the press and on radio and television*. With or without the rider the public statements confirmed ETU members in the belief that Cannon would have lost anyway. Secondly, why wasn't this sleight of hand, if that was what it was, exposed by the Cannon camp? They could have done this quite simply by publishing the voting figures for the eight disqualified branches. The simple answer seems to be that they did not have the voting figures for the 8 branches, and if that was the case why were they so certain that Les Cannon had been cheated of his victory by some 300 votes? This view is confirmed by the fact that in neither of the two unofficial circulars sent to all 675 branches of the union by Les Cannon, nor in the numerous press articles, especially by Woodrow Wyatt in the *New Statesman*, were the voting figures of the 8 branches ever disclosed. (35) So where did the figure of 300 come from? Presumably from information given to Cannon by his supporters in the 8 branches.

However, in a letter to the *New Statesman* on 22 February 1958, Woodrow Wyatt revised the scope of Les Cannon's lost victory:

"It has not been denied that if all the votes had been counted in the election in Division No.9 for a seat on the Executive Council, Mr Cannon, the non-Communist, would have won by 35 votes. As the result of the disqualification of six branches that voted in favour of Cannon and, with reluctance, of only two which voted in favour of the Communist, the Communist candidate was declared elected." (36)

Of course, it had been continually denied by the ETU leadership that if all the returns had been allowed Cannon would have been the victor. That was one of the main planks of their case. And the ETU leadership were quick to pick up on the new majority by which Cannon had supposedly won: "a somewhat modest claim compared with the national daily which asserted on October 7 last that the majority was 300 votes!" (37) What is so puzzling about Wyatt's letter is the impression that it gives of a detailed knowledge of the disqualified branches' voting figures without revealing the obvious - a breakdown of the voting returns of the 8 branches. The very fact that such ardent opponents of the ETU leadership could not produce convincing evidence of their claim only served, as Olga Cannon recalls,

"to convince a lot of ETU members that the Press really was making a fuss about nothing, and that the anti-Communist campaign was precisely as alleged - a smear campaign designed to injure a militant trade union."

(38)

At no time did the ETU reveal the voting figures for the 8 branches, even though Foulkes had said on the *This Week* programme that they would be published in full. It was not until the 1961 ballot-rigging trial that it was revealed that if all the votes from the 8 disqualified branches had been allowed then Cannon *would have beaten Frazer by 34 votes*. (39) The CP leadership of the union had been lying, but the Cannon camp had been unable to prove it conclusively. However, it did not follow that the Cannon - Frazer election had been rigged, for the branch disqualifications had been constitutional and eventually accepted by the two branches that appealed against them. What the Cannon - Frazer episode illustrates quite well is the bureaucratic methods that the leadership employed to defeat their opponents. Their actions, as we have already noted, were always justified by recourse to the rules of the union, a practice that would not have surprised Max Weber:

"...the continued exercise of every domination...always has the strongest need of self-justification through appealing to the principles of legitimation..."

The "validity" of a power of command may be expressed...in a system of consciously made *rational* rules (which may be either agreed upon or imposed from above)..." (40)

Rational rules are however very often open to a flexible interpretation. Take the case of two of the branches that voted in the Cannon - Frazer election:

"One, known as Reading Branch, had returned 50 votes for Les as against 12 for the Communist. This branch was disqualified, the General Secretary observing in a letter to the branch: "though your difficulties are appreciated, your branch return cannot be accepted". The other, known as Reading Supply Branch, had returned 80 votes for Les against 137 for his opponent. Although this branch had sent in its election returns two days late, its breach of rule was dismissed with a mild reprimand: "Your ballot returns will be accepted on this occasion but they must be returned in accordance with rule in future." (41)

Criticism of the way the ETU handled the Cannon - Frazer election came also from the left as well as the right. For example, Peter Fryer, correspondent for the *Daily Worker*, who resigned from the paper and was subsequently expelled from the CP following the suppression of his dispatches from Hungary in 1956, wrote an article in the Trotskyite *Newsletter* on 14 December 1957 critical of the bureaucratic manoeuvres of the ETU leadership. Fryer's article, which was to be issued in pamphlet form in January 1958 under the title, *Defend the ETU! - Against Fleet Street and King Street*, stated that it was "common knowledge in the trade union movement that there is less democracy inside the ETU now than there was before the stalinists took control ten years ago". In their fight against Cannon, said Fryer, the ETU leadership had abandoned their socialist principles. Instead of fighting the right-wing in the union openly and politically, "Haxell and Foulkes fought with the weapon of *procedure*". A genuine communist or socialist leadership, he continued, "would not have hesitated to

hold a fresh election instead of skulking behind the rule book". Fryer suggested that a national committee of inquiry, democratically elected by the rank-and-file of the ETU, should be set up to investigate the entire machinery of the union and all the allegations of malpractice. (42) As we shall see, the ETU did set up a Committee of Inquiry in 1959, but it was far from being the type of national committee that Fryer was advocating.

(2) "An attack on the whole trade union movement."

The ETU leadership argued that Les Cannon and his followers, aided and abetted by the "capitalist press", were bent on causing dissension in the ETU at a time when maximum unity was needed in the movement to repel the attacks being made by the Tory Government. Frank Foulkes put it like this at the union's Special Rules Revision Conference in November:

"...certain members of this Union have been sitting down with the enemies of the working-class and inventing lies and innuendoes in order to weaken this Union and sow discord amongst the membership, and weaken the Union's fighting strength on this, the eve of the Government's promised onslaught on the living standards of the whole of the working-class of this country...

Anyone within our movement guilty of creating division within the movement at this important time is doing an unforgivable dis-service to the working-class, and is sacrificing his family by assisting the Tory Government to make good the threats they have made." (43)

J.S.Coleman has dubbed the type of approach employed here by Foulkes as the "here-come-the-saboteurs" strategy, which attempts to forge a link between political opposition in a trade union and the interests of the employers or Government. (44) At a time of battle with the employers or the Government, so the argument goes, the abuse of union democracy by a discontented minority is tantamount to collaboration with the class enemy. Calls for unity,

then, can be used merely as means to neutralise or marginalise opposition groupings in a trade union. And this was precisely the line the ETU leadership were taking, with some success, against Les Cannon's opposition grouping. They also argued that the attack on the ETU's internal democracy was just a cover for a wholesale political attack, not only on the Communist Party, but on the whole trade union movement. This was clearly expressed in a major article on the press campaign in the union's journal, *Electron*, in January 1958:

"Using allegations that there was 'corruption', 'the whiff of fear' in the Union and election 'rigging' they all claimed to be staunch defenders of democracy. But they did not waste any words on abusing this organisation before they came to the point. It was the whole trade union movement which was the target." (45)

How true was the ETU's claim?

A Gallup Poll in the spring of 1955 revealed that a large majority of people felt that the Government had been too soft in dealing with the trade unions over the issue of strikes, and this was true of Labour supporters as well. Henry Pelling tells us that there was no shortage of advice to be found in the newspapers on how the Government should have dealt with the strikes of 1955:

"Some thought that there should be legal provision for a ballot of union members before any strike took place. This, of course, would not prevent unofficial strikes, but there were those also who thought that unofficial strikes should be declared illegal...Another not unrelated suggestion was that there should be a system of compulsory arbitration for all disputes. Finally, there were the more cautious critics who urged the appointment of a commission of inquiry into the trade unions." (46)

But the industrial relations "problem" continued to get worse. In each of the years 1955-8 the annual number of stoppages due to strikes or lockouts was higher than before 1955, and with one

exception the annual number of working days "lost" as a result was higher than in any year since 1944. (47) In the year of the Cannon-Frazer debacle, 1957, there were 8,412,000 days "lost" through strikes, compared with 2,083,000 the year before. Most of the days had been "lost" early in 1957 due to the strikes in engineering and shipbuilding, strikes that had forced substantial wage increases from the employers and finally scuppered any hopes that the Government might have about a period of voluntary wage restraint. This demonstration of the unions' latent power, writes James Cronin,

"impressed the rank-and-file of the unions as much as the employers, for while the bosses had long ago sensed the altered balance of power, the workers had not been so sure...

With the gradual fading of the old, cautious leadership and the awakening of workers to their new-found bargaining leverage and to higher expectations, prospects for industrial peace dimmed. When the dimensions of the change were fully revealed in 1957, the outcome was a major upsurge of strikes and a massive increase in local, shop steward organization." (48)

And, of course, the Communist Party was depicted as being behind much of the industrial trouble, which was seen as part and parcel of their overall strategy that aimed "at the complete capture of the British trade union movement". (49) So even before the Cannon-Frazer furore broke trade unions were in the midst of an extremely hostile political climate. The allegations of ballot-rigging in the ETU (and the AEU) only added fuel to the fire, and following the release of the ETU's 3 December statement on the press allegations fresh demands for the Government to investigate not only the ETU but also the way in which all trade unions conducted their affairs were raised daily in the press.

Early in December 1957, F.W.Farey-Jones, Conservative MP for Watford, asked the Prime Minister if he would move for the appointment of a tribunal under the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921, into the recent conduct of the affairs of the ETU. Harold MacMillan replied that there would not be an investigation into the

affairs of the ETU at this stage. The *Spectator* of 6 December complained that the whole tone of the ETU's statement was defiant, and concluded that there was "no chance of the Union reforming itself in the immediate future" and therefore there was "no alternative...to intervention by Parliament". The *Spectator* agreed with Farey-Jones that a investigating tribunal into the affairs of the ETU was sensible, but argued that immediate change in the law should take place that would compel all trade unions to have their elections conducted by the Registrar of Friendly Societies. A similar proposal was echoed in *The Recorder* of December 7:

"The ETU affair is at long last leading responsible opinion towards the conviction that if what trade unions do affects the rest of the community, the community has the right through the Government to regulate the way in which trade unions are to be conducted...All that is required is a simple law making it obligatory for every organization with more than, say, 500 subscribing members, to have its chief officers and officials elected by secret ballot under the control of an independent Returning Officer."

The *Economist* of December 7 was concerned not just with question of trade union electoral reform, but with "the whole question of trade union law and privilege, not simply the case of the ETU". And the *New Statesman* of the same date warned:

"there are already signs, both in parliament and the press, that 'boss-rule' can provide the Tories with an excuse for legislation which would gravely damage the trade union movement."

Thirty years later, after eight years of trade union "reform" under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government, the arguments and proposals of the late 1950s are more than familiar. But, of course, there is a major difference between the debate on trade union reform in the 1950s and the 1980s; in the latter period the Conservative Government did introduce legislation that gravely damaged the unions, while in the 1950s MacMillan's Government did not. For in the 1950s the "post-war consensus" between the trade

unions and government had, despite the industrial battles, not yet broken down, and was not to do so, according to Hugh Clegg until 1971. (50) On the trade union side the consensus meant above all else a continuation of what Alan Flanders has termed "The Tradition of Voluntarism" - essentially the non-interference of the State in the collective-bargaining process and the internal affairs of the unions. (51) Even after the influential Inns of Court Conservative and Unionist Society published *A Giant's Strength* in the wake of the 1958 bus strike, in which they argued that the unions had become "over-mighty subjects" and that legal measures should be taken against them, the Government still refused to act. (52)

We can see then, that there was a great deal of truth in the ETU's claim that the attack on them was also an attack on the whole trade union movement. Taken with the ETU leadership's constant assertions that Cannon would not have won the election even had the invalidated branch votes been counted, it is not altogether surprising that many rank-and-file members of the union considered the press campaign as a smear campaign and supported their leaders.

Victory for the ETU leadership?

By spring of 1958 the whole unfortunate affair surrounding the ETU seemed to be over. If not quite a victory for the ETU leadership, they could feel satisfied that they had at least limited the damage to their reputation, and that a substantial number of trade unionists both inside and outside of the union accepted their case. Before the spring calm however, there was a final flurry of press interest in the union prompted by, as we have already mentioned, a long article by Woodrow Wyatt in the *New Statesman* in January. Wyatt's article, entitled "The Case Against the ETU Leaders", was, according to John Freeman, the future editor of the *New Statesman*, "the effective brief to which many others subsequently worked." (53) As we have said, there was nothing new in Wyatt's article, it was merely a re-working of the material contained in *The Peril in Our Midst* and a reiteration of the allegations of malpractice surrounding the Cannon- Frazer election. Its significance lay in the fact that it brought together the major part of the evidence against the ETU leadership since 1947 in compact form and at a time

when the union was under intense pressure from many quarters. However, according to Wyatt, there was a "new dimension" to the ETU affair that the article brought out:

"It was becoming increasingly obvious that the fraudulent take-over of the ETU was not the work of a few wayward communists acting on their own initiative, as the Communist Party was later to pretend. It was a conspiracy organized from the headquarters of the Communist Party..." (54)

And, indeed, as we shall see, the 1961 trial was the first occasion that the law of conspiracy was applied to a trade union election.

The *New Statesman* article and a subsequent letter by Wyatt drew a response from the ETU in the form of a pamphlet - *The ETU Replies to the New Statesman*. They had been forced to publish their reply in pamphlet form, said the ETU, because the editor of the *New Statesman* refused to print their 4,500 word reply (the same length as Wyatt's article) on the grounds that he was only prepared to allocate the union space for a 1,200 word reply, which they refused. Like Wyatt's article the union's reply was a re-working of their previous pamphlet, *The Union's Reply to the Press Attacks*, and the statements they had made concerning the Cannon - Frazer election. At the same time the union published another pamphlet, *The Facts about the Press Campaign*, which was concerned largely with defending their actions in the Cannon - Frazer election, arguing that the actions they had taken were in complete accordance with the rules of the union. By the time these two pamphlets were published the press interest in the ETU had begun to subside and by March the furore surrounding the ETU seemed to be over. Les Cannon attempted to resuscitate the campaign inside the union by issuing another unofficial circular under the title "The Skeletons are Rattling in the Cupboard", but with little success. However, an interest in the affairs of the ETU was to be rekindled by two events that took place later on in the year.

The 1958 TUC

The first event that put the ETU back under the glare of publicity concerned Les Cannon. In the summer of 1958 Les Cannon was charged with "bringing discredit on a member of the union", as a result of which he was not issued with his delegate's credentials for the September TUC, to which he had been elected. A further charge of making "unauthorized press statements and radio and television interviews" was also levelled at Cannon after he had "gone public" on the eve of the TUC Congress.

Early in 1958 Les Cannon stood for the post of London Area Official, and he also stood in the election to choose the union's delegates for the September TUC. Both ballots were taken at the same time, at the March quarterly meeting, and the results were published in the Executive Council minutes in June:

Full-Time Official, Area No.27.

Cannon, L	2,856
Nash, E.A.	608
Symms, T.J.A	3,951

1958 TUC

Cannon, L	9,286 (national ballot) (55)
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Cannon did very well in both elections. In the London election he was up against the EC and CP backed candidate, while in the TUC ballot he polled the eighth highest vote in the rank-and-file section out of 43 candidates (9 of which made up the rank-and-file delegation, the other part of the delegation was made up of full-time officials). On the night of the ballot Cannon attended the meeting of the London Electronic Engineers No.2 branch:

"As he sat watching the scrutineers open the envelopes handed to them by individual members, it struck him how few people there were, considering the high number of votes usually recorded by that particular branch. Then, in

the middle of the count, the branch secretary, a Communist Party member, came across with a hold-all bag, so filled with ballot envelopes that he had difficulty in getting them out as he undid the zip fastener of the bag. Eventually he piled a heap of envelopes on the table, and Les noticed that comparatively few of them bore a postmark. There and then he decided to challenge the secretary. He got up, quoted the rules, formally 'cast suspicion' on whether the votes were honestly cast, and said that he was going to report the facts to Head Office and insist on an investigation similar to that carried out at the Mitcham branch...

Needless to say the Communist branch secretary was acquitted, and he then proceeded to charge Les with bringing discredit on a member of the Union." (56)

Les Cannon was informed that the charge against him would be heard by the Area sub-committee on 15 July. However Cannon was unable to attend because of domestic difficulties and asked for a postponement. But on 28 August he received a letter informing him that the Area sub-committee had found him guilty of the charge and as a result he should, pending an appeal, be disqualified from holding office for five years and fined five pounds. (57) The next day a letter arrived at Cannon's home address from Frank Haxell informing him that because of his conviction he would no longer be entitled to attend the TUC as a delegate of the union, but to avoid this letter Cannon had already left for the TUC in Bournemouth.

On the eve of the TUC Congress Cannon held a major press conference where he read out a prepared statement. In the statement Cannon said that the "vicious penalty" imposed on him was the culmination of eighteen months of "consistent provocation" by the Communist Party inside the ETU to discredit him. Moreover, said Cannon, the decision to penalise him would not have been initiated by the CP inside the union without the approval of the National ETU Advisory Committee of the Communist Party, which in turn would have received the approval of the Political Committee of the Communist

Party. (58) In other words, Cannon was saying that the internal democracy of the union was being overridden, and that the decision whether or not to penalise him was decided not by rank-and-file ETU members but by CP members inside the union advised by the Communist Party nationally. At the 1961 trial the very existence of a National ETU Advisory Committee made up of leading CP members both inside and outside of the union was denied repeatedly by the ETU leadership.

As well as losing his appeal against the Area sub-committee decision, Cannon was now also charged and proven guilty of making unauthorised press statements and radio and television interviews. (59) Yet the extensive press coverage, not to mention the radio and television interviews, that his dramatic eve of Congress press conference received served once again to put the internal affairs of the ETU back in the spotlight. (60) The second event to rekindle interest in the affairs of the ETU was what became known as the "Jarrow affair".

The "Jarrow Affair"

In the same month as the TUC Congress was being held in Bournemouth, elections for the position of Area President were taking place in all twenty-nine of the union's Areas bar one. When the results were published in the November Executive Council minutes the result of the Area No.5 election was missing. The explanation given was that

"as a result of alleged breaches of rule, enquiries were being made into the way in which Jarrow Branch had conducted the ballot for Area President..." (61)

It transpired that the Jarrow branch scrutineers thought it suspicious that of the 63 ballot papers returned by post, 61 of the envelopes bore exactly the same type of stamp and cancellation mark - namely, an Empire Games 3d stamp bearing the cancellation mark "10am 22.9.58. Jarrow". Further, all the 61 suspect ballot papers were cast in favour of one candidate, R.S Carr. Carr turned out to be not only the Jarrow branch secretary, so all the ballot papers

from Head Office would have passed through his hands, but also a member of the Communist Party.

As part of its inquiry the Executive Council sent out a questionnaire to the 279 members of the Jarrow branch who were entitled to vote in the election. From the 257 questionnaires that were returned only 6 had returned their ballot papers through the post. When the EC met in December they had no alternative but to disqualify the Jarrow Branch returns. A special sub-committee was then appointed to investigate the circumstances of the Jarrow ballot. (62) In the meantime the result of the Area No.5 election was declared with Carr coming bottom of the poll with only 20 votes. Even if the 61 fraudulent ballot papers had been accepted, he would have still be far short of the new Area President's vote of 329. (63)

It was not until October 1959 that the sub-committee submitted its report. The report admitted that the

"total number of ballot papers forwarded to members was 274, out of which 201 state they did not vote. The maximum possible vote, therefore, was 73. The number of ballot papers received by the scrutineers and recorded on the Scrutineers Return Form was 137, that is, 64 more than the maximum possible vote."

What about R.S. Carr's involvement?

"The Committee have to report that it has not been possible, however, to establish whether or not the 61 ballot papers received by post (which gave rise to the Inquiry) had been posted by individual members, or whether a member or members had obtained ballot papers or collected ballot papers from other members, marked them and forwarded them to the Branch Secretary." (64)

And that was the end of the matter until the 1961 trial - well, almost the end. One of the Jarrow Branch scrutineers, R. Fenwick, was charged with making an unauthorised press statement. The offending statement appeared in *The Times* in September 1958, and Fenwick was on several occasions advised by the General

Secretary that in his own interest he should endeavour to seek a withdrawal and an apology from *The Times*. Fenwick refused. The article in *The Times* was very brief (two short paragraphs) and was buried at the bottom of page 10. It simply referred to the 61 suspect envelopes and quoted Fenwick as saying:

"A full scale investigation is taking place into certain aspects of the ballot. I have sent a detailed report to my Head Office in London."

(65)

That was it! This nitpicking over the smallest infringement of union rules could hardly be in starker contrast to the "whitewash" surrounding the dubious activities of the branch secretary of the Jarrow branch. However, the "Jarrow Affair" seems to have been the straw that broke the camel's back as far as the TUC were concerned, for in December 1958 the TUC began to press the ETU to give a better account of itself in the face of renewed press criticisms.

The ETU and the TUC

What was to turn out to be a voluminous correspondence between the ETU and the TUC began in December 1958 and continued until the union was expelled from the TUC in 1961. (66) The first letter the General Council of the TUC sent to the ETU asked the union to comment on "the observations made publicly about the conduct of the Union's affairs" and in particular the "public allegations of the manipulation of elections and of the influence of the Communist Party". (67) These allegations had been made, as we have seen, by Les Cannon and taken up by the press. Similar accusations had also been made by ETU member Mark Young, who had been expelled from the Communist Party in July 1958 for "political activity incompatible with party membership". Young had written a long letter to the *New Statesman* in August 1958 which claimed amongst other things that the "controlling CP group rigs elections" and that the "Communist Party maintains its control of the union through factions called 'advisory committees at the national and local level'. (68) The ETU replied to the TUC that it was the "press propaganda" that made "it appear that there is widespread public concern about elections in this Union", and that the union had already made available "the

whole of the facts in connection with the allegations". Concerning the second allegation the union said that it was "not controlled by the Communist Party or any political party or by any outside body". (69) The TUC's next move was to push for a more detailed rebuttal of the allegations being made against the union by ex-Communists such as Les Cannon and Mark Young, and in particular they pressed the ETU to instigate legal proceedings against those journals and newspapers that the union claimed had smeared them. Under increasing pressure the Executive Council decided in April to appoint a Committee of Inquiry to look in detail at the allegations levelled at them, and this, they hoped, would satisfy the TUC.

The Committee was made up of two EC members and a National Officer, all of whom were members of the Labour Party. The Committee's terms of reference were to "inquire into all the allegations and to report and, if necessary, to make recommendations". (70) It delivered its report to the Executive Council on the 9 June 1959. Nothing new came out of the report: it unequivocally supported the actions of the Executive Council. Les Cannon and Mark Young, it said, had "abused their democratic rights" and the Executive Council had been "excessively lenient in connection with the continued activities of these members". Addressing the main charge of Communist control of the union the report stated:

"No evidence has been produced to show that the Communist Party has interfered in the affairs of the Union; nor was there any evidence to show that even if there had been such interference, it would or could have affected the democratic processes by which our Union elects its officers and officials and carries out its business, including the important matter of conducting appeals." (71)

Not suprisingly Les Cannon and his followers were not exactly enamoured with the report. In an unofficial circular to all branches of the union he said: "Never before has Britain witnessed the accused appointing the accused to inquire into the accusers." (72) Nor were the TUC General Council satisfied with the union's findings. They received the report on the 26 August, just before

the start of the 1959 TUC Congress, and informed the Congress that the ETU had still not dealt adequately with the two points first made by the General Council - that the ETU should consider instituting legal proceedings against those newspapers and journals that had accused the union of malpractice, and the need for a precise denial that the union's principal officers were associated with Communist Party Advisory Committees. *Electron* complained that the impression was being given that the whole trade union movement was meeting in Blackpool for the 1959 TUC for the sole purpose of discussing the affairs of the ETU. (73)

By December the press campaign had escalated to such an extent that *Electron* was now claiming that the "techniques of the late unlamented Dr. Goebbels and Senator McCarthy" were being used against the union. (74) The increasing pressure on the union was caused by the General Council sending out a circular to all affiliated unions which said that they had decided not to engage in any further discussions with the present ETU leadership. This they said was because the union had consistently evaded dealing with the charges made against them, and that this could only be because "there is much substance in these charges" and they are "unable specifically and unequivocally to deny them". (75) As it turned out only three months were to pass before the TUC were yet again in correspondence with the ETU. The reason for the re-opening of the dialogue was yet another controversy concerning the conduct of an election in the union that had taken place near the end of 1959.

Two important elections were held in the ETU in the last quarter of 1959. The first was between Frank Foulkes and Bill Blairford for the position of President. Frank Chapple recalls:

"The Reform Group fielded Bill Blairford, a Scottish ex-Communist who had left the Party over Hungary but, despite the hard work we put in, Foulkes got back with a majority of nearly 3000. We were sure it was another fraud, but we couldn't prove how it was done..." (76)

Olga Cannon, however, says it was "an honest ballot", but

"It shook the ETU leadership to find that their most popular man, opposed by a virtual unknown, came so close to losing. They knew what to

expect in the forthcoming election for the
General Secretary, and prepared for it." (77)

It was the conduct of this election, between Frank Haxell and John Byrne, that was to cause two members of the ETU to issue writs against their own union alleging fraud and ballot-rigging. This was the beginning of a series of events that were eventually to lead to Divorce Court Four at the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand and the famous 1961 "ballot-rigging trial".

CHAPTER THREE

THE TRIAL AND ITS AFTERMATH

The Byrne - Haxell election December 1959

On 6 February 1960, the result of the Byrne - Haxell election for the position of General Secretary was announced to the Executive Council of the union by the Assistant General Secretary, Robert McLennan.

John Byrne	18,577.
Frank Haxell	19,611.
Majority	1,034.

Jack Frazer then moved "that the scrutineers' return be accepted and that Bro.F.L.Haxell be declared elected General Secretary for a period of five years." Frank Foulkes, the union's President, said, "all those in favour? against?", and the motion was carried by 8 votes to 3. There was some argument about the number of disqualified branches, but this was quickly dealt with. Frank Foulkes then moved next business and that, it was thought, was the end of the matter. (1) In fact the returns of 109 branches had been disqualified, of which 106, it was later to transpire, had voted for John Byrne. As the news of "irregularities" in the Byrne - Haxell election began to filter out, the press once again descended on the union.

Public interest in the affairs of the Electricians' union was further heightened when dissident members of the union appeared on a *Panorama* programme on 15 February, where they complained about irregularities in recent elections in the union. (2) The following week Frank Foulkes appeared on the programme to put the leadership's case. John Freeman, the deputy editor of the *New Statesman*, who conducted the *Panorama* interview, suggested to Frank Foulkes that 100 branches had had their returns disqualified, but Foulkes refused to give a straight answer. A year later, during the course of the "ballot-rigging" trial, Foulkes insisted that on the evening of the *Panorama* programme he did not know how many

branches had been disqualified. It hardly seems credible that the President of the union did not know how many branches had been disqualified, especially as this was the central question the press and the opposition were asking. (3) The ETU responded to the *Panorama* interview in an editorial in the March edition of *Electron*, headed "Trial by BBC". But the editorial evaded the substantive issues that the programme raised, and instead concentrated on the McCarthyite "process of character assassination" employed by the BBC. (4) While this was a fair point, it did nothing to alleviate the suspicion that the leadership were involved in a cover up.

Ironically, some press articles put up a better defence case for the ETU leadership than they themselves did. For example, an article that appeared in the *Financial Times* on the very day that Foulkes was to appear on the *Panorama* programme argued that, "from the industrial point of view...the only surprising feature of Mr. Haxell's re-election is that his declared majority was as small as 1,034 votes". In terms of improving their members' wages and conditions, said the *Financial Times*, the ETU leadership "are clearly successful", and this was why "there is no evidence of widespread discontent in the union over the allegedly infamous conduct of its Communist hierarchy". (5) Most of the press, however, was not so magnanimous. Just five days after Foulkes' *Panorama* appearance, the *New Statesman* summarized the case of "the opponents of the present leadership":

"The election, they claim, was rigged in two principal ways: first, the votes of an unprecedented number of branches were disallowed on the ground that they were dispatched to union headquarters after the latest date permissible under the rules; and it is asserted that the great majority of these disallowed votes were for Mr. Byrne. Secondly, they claim, some Communists in individual branches have exploited the known apathy of many of their fellow unionists (the total vote in this crucial election was only 16 per cent)

by faking or forging postal votes in their name." (6)

The smouldering scandal surrounding the Byrne - Haxell election prompted the General Council of the TUC to resume its correspondence with the ETU leadership. In a letter dated 24 February 1960, the General Council informed the ETU that they intended to resume their examination of the allegations made against the union, and that they intended to proceed by investigating the union under Rule 13 of Congress Rules and Standing Orders. Rule 13 empowers the General Council to investigate the conduct of an affiliated organisation whose activities "may be detrimental to the interests of the trade union movement" (the same Rule that has been invoked against the present day leadership of the EETPU). There followed, on 14 March, a meeting between Frank Haxell and Frank Foulkes and the General Council's Finance and General Purposes Committee (F&GPC), at which it seemed to be understood by both parties that the ETU should either:

- (1) Institute legal proceedings against one or other of those who had accused the union of malpractices or,
- (2) co-operate with the General Council in a throughgoing inquiry into allegations made against the union and its officers provided that such an inquiry was conducted "within the Movement". (7)

However, on 11 April the ETU informed the TUC that because Les Cannon had instigated legal proceedings against the union (in relation to the 1958 decision that barred him from office) they had been "advised not to proceed with the alternatives" pending the outcome of the proceedings. (8) Not surprisingly, the GC could not see why the Cannon writ prevented the ETU from arriving at a decision on the two alternatives offered to them. On April 27 the General Council sent the ETU an ultimatum:

"...unless you inform the General Council by *May 18 next* of the decision of your Executive Council on the alternatives set out...the

Electrical Trades Union will be suspended from membership of the Trades Union Congress." (9)

In reply the ETU said they were prepared to accept the suggestion of an inquiry, but that they could not agree to it taking place while the union was facing legal proceedings. The legal proceedings now referred to, however, were not those instigated by Les Cannon, but those being pressed by John Byrne and Frank Chapple in connection with the disputed election for the General Secretaryship. In view of the changed circumstances, the TUC agreed that any further consideration of the ETU's affairs must be held over until the result of the legal action.

On 9 May 1960, John Byrne and Frank Chapple issued the following statement:

"We have decided to institute proceedings in an attempt to redress the very serious grievances of the members of the union. We are mindful of the difficulties of the General Council of the TUC in the protracted exchanges with the ETU and appreciate that in the light of the lack of cooperation from the leaders of the ETU they might have no alternative but to suspend the union, leading to disaffiliation from the TUC in September.

Unfortunately, this would deprive our members of the prestige and privileges of affiliation to Congress and would still leave all questions unresolved. We are proceeding at this stage because we believe that the very considerable and important issues involved can only be resolved in the High Court. We feel that the membership will understand that we are left with no alternative but to act in this way."

(10)

The General Secretary of the union informed the Executive Council on May 14, 1960 that a writ had been served on the ETU and sixteen of its members. The writ against the ETU was as follows:

(a) The Plaintiffs claim against all the Defendants:

(1) A Declaration that the purported election in December 1959 of the Defendant Haxell as the General Secretary of the Defendants Electrical Trades Union was and is contrary to the Rules of the said Union, ultra vires, illegal and void.

(2) A Declaration that at the said election the Plaintiff Byrne was validly elected General Secretary of the Defendants Electrical Trades Union.

(3) Alternatively to the Declaration claimed under head (2) a Declaration that the Defendants Electrical Trades Union are bound forthwith to hold an election for the office of General Secretary under the control and supervision of members of other than the personal Defendants and/or on such terms and subject to such provisions as the Court may think fit to declare.

(4) Costs.

(5) Such further or other reliefs as to this Honorable High Court may seem just.

(b) The Plaintiff Byrne also claims against all the personal Defendants:

(1) Damages for conspiracy, by breaches of the Rules of the Defendants Electrical Trades Union and by unlawful and fraudulent practices and devices, to prevent non-Communist members of the said Union being elected or appointed to offices or representative positions in the said Union and to procure the election and appointment of Communist members or other candidates favoured by them thereto.

(2) Damages for breaches of contract contained in the Rules of the Defendants Electrical Trades Union. (11)

The stage was now set for the "ballot-rigging" trial.

The Trial

The trial began on 17 April 1961, and within five minutes of its opening there was an unexpected occurrence. Neil Lawson, the counsel for the Defendants (the ETU), announced that they "did not now seek to uphold the validity of the election, and agreed that a new election must be held". The reasons given for this startling pronouncement were twofold:

"...first of all, that owing to mistakes made by the branch secretaries in their returns to the Head Office of the number of members entitled to vote, a large number of papers were issued by branch secretaries to persons who were not entitled to vote, and secondly that a substantial number of members who were entitled to vote were not issued with ballot papers at all."

Furthermore, continued Lawson, in the course of the election scrutiny "irregularities occurred which make it impossible for the Defendants to contend that the Rules were observed." (12) It seems clear that the Communist leadership of the union hoped that a new election would be ordered by the trial judge, Mr Justice Winn, and that that would defuse the whole situation. The Plaintiffs (Byrne and Chapple) counsel Gerald Gardiner would have none of this though:

"What matters very much more, my Lord, is the purpose for which the action has been brought, namely that after due investigation in open Court it may be decided whether or not the elections in this Union have for some time been rigged." (13)

Gerald Gardiner then proceeded to present the Plaintiffs' case, which centred on three accusations:

(1) That the Defendants had conspired together, by breaches of union Rules and by various frauds, to prevent non-Communists from being elected to any union office and to procure the election of Communists.

(2) The Defendants all belonged to Committees of the Communist Party made up of members of the ETU.

(3) They had rigged certain elections. (14)

How had they "rigged certain elections"? According to Gardiner, the conspiracy (and this was the first time that the law of conspiracy had been applied to a trade union election) involved 7 methods:

(1) By arranging that there should never be more than one candidate offering himself for election in any given position;

(2) By arranging who that candidate was to be;

(3) By ensuring that the candidate was proposed by as many branches as possible;

(4) By sending "national officers" (employees of the union) to branch meetings just before an election, ostensibly on some official business, but really to canvass for the Communist candidate;

(5) By making trivial charges against prominent non-Communists, so that they could be disqualified from union office for a period of years;

(6) By "disqualifying" non-Communist branches, using the impossibly complicated Rules as a source of reported irregularities in election procedure, and condoning the same irregularities at Communist ones;

(7) When all else failed, by altering the returns of voting sent in by branches. (15)

In the 1959 election for the General Secretaryship this "racket was carried just too far", said Gardiner. (16) The case that oppositionists in the union were pressing then, was that the rigging of the 1959 election was merely one example of a widespread practice. Prove that the 1959 election had been rigged, they reasoned, then it could be taken that other elections had also been rigged.

The trial had two central themes, then: firstly, the actual methods by which the alleged conspiracy was carried out in the Byrne - Haxell election of December 1959; and, secondly, the coordination of the alleged conspiracy by the Communist Party.

(1) How the 1959 election was rigged

Three main methods were said to have been employed: (a) the printing of "surplus" ballot papers; (b) the falsification and alteration of branch returns; and (c) the disqualification of branch returns.

(a) The printing of "surplus" ballot papers

So that they could complete the job on time, the Manchester printers had always asked the ETU for an advanced estimate of how many ballot papers they would require for any particular election. Once the printers received the exact order from the ETU Head Office, which was based on the actual number of members entitled to vote as calculated by the branch secretaries, they would print more ballot papers if required, and then dispatch the exact number of ballot papers needed directly to the union's branch secretaries. Any surplus ballot papers stayed at the print works and were destroyed. The system had always been open to abuse, of course. Head Office could, for example, quite easily inflate the number of ballot papers needed for a particular branch, so that a sympathetic branch secretary received "surplus" papers. For the Byrne - Haxell election the process was the same, but with one very significant modification.

Early in November 1959, the ETU's Office Manager, Robert Oliver, visited the head of Express Printing, Manchester, Mr Swift, to see about the printing of additional ballot papers for the Byrne - Haxell election in December (although James Humphrey, a Communist Party member, and the newly appointed Office Manager was in charge of the conduct of the Byrne - Haxell election). Nothing odd in that. What was odd though, was that subsequently Oliver asked Swift to send the additional ballot papers, not directly to the branches that required them, nor directly to the union's Head Office, but to

St Pancras station, and that they should be marked "to be called for". It was to transpire that the difference between the Head Office estimate and the actual number of ballot papers required for the election was 26,833, but instead of the printer destroying them, Robert Oliver had arranged to have them dispatched to St Pancras - "to be called for". They were called for later in November by James Humphrey, who took them to the union's Head Office at Hayes and locked them away in a small office, the key of which was held by him alone. (17)

That parcels of ballot papers had been sent to St Pancras station was not denied by the ETU's defence counsel. Neil Lawson actually gave the dates in November when the various parcels were dispatched to St Pancras. (18) The question was, what were these "surplus" ballot papers used for? As far as the prosecution was concerned it was self evident: the ballot papers (which were all marked with a branch code-mark) were to be sent to Communist members of the union and if required used for fraudulent voting. Humphrey's evidence did little to counter that strong suspicion. Asked why he had ordered 26,833 ballot papers too many, he replied that he could not give an adequate explanation. As for the reason why the "surplus" ballot papers were sent to St Pancras station, Humphrey explained that it was all to do with secrecy and security. He wanted as few people as possible to know that there were so many extra ballot papers at the union's Head Office for fear that they might have fallen into the wrong hands and been used fraudulently, and this was why they were not left at the printers' premises in Manchester. (19)

It was not a very plausible defence, and the judge's verdict reflected that fact:

"My judgement in this matter expressed in full appreciation that it involves a grave finding against Mr. Humphrey is that he deliberately ordered excess quantities of ballots for branches where he expected that fraudulent votes could be registered, if need be for Mr. Haxell, intending that the excess quantities would be sent to Head Office or could be caused earlier to be sent to branches."

With regards to Frank Haxell's insistence when cross-examined that he knew nothing of the "surplus" ballot papers the judge said:

"It is impossible for me to suppose that such a scheme could be operated without the knowledge and concurrence of Mr.Haxell...I am wholly convinced that Mr.Haxell not only knew that surplus ballots had been brought to Head Office but caused them to be there intending that fraudulent use be made of them." (20)

What evidence was there to show that the "surplus" ballot papers had been used fraudulently during the election?

Eric Storrer, branch secretary of the Southampton Central branch of the ETU, was sent the exact number of ballot papers that he had asked for, and he had posted them off to members at 10.30am. on Saturday 12 December 1959. On Monday 14 December, shortly after noon when he arrived home from work, five ballot papers had already been returned by post - four of them postmarked 6.45pm December 13, and one postmarked 12 December. Suspicious of this quick return, Storrer contacted the GPO. They told him that none of his outgoing envelopes could have been delivered before Monday the 14 December, so that it was impossible to have them returned by the Monday. It was revealed at the trial that the number of ballot papers printed for the branch was 387, of which 306 were sent direct by the printers to Eric Storrer, thus leaving a "surplus" of 81. Two other branches, Woolston and Hythe, also experienced the "arrival before departure" mystery, and each had a "surplus" of 21 and 24 ballot papers respectively. In each case the extra votes were cast in favour of Frank Haxell. Justice Winn's verdict was,

"...that a supporter of Mr.Haxell intended by their use to increase his vote in each of these branches but had acted prematurely in posting what might well have been only the first batch of forged ballots. Further I find that those ballots were obtained from Head Office." (21)

Five branches of the union were also thought to have suspiciously high postal votes. Belfast Central illustrates the suspicion. At its September meeting this branch nominated Byrne in preference to Haxell, but only by a majority of two votes. In the

December election the voting was 41 votes for Byrne and 127 for Haxell. James Fulton, the branch secretary, said in his evidence that he could not remember another occasion on which the branch had failed to support its own nominee by a majority vote. On previous occasions Byrne had been opposed by Haxell, Foulkes and McLennan, but they had never received more than 32 votes. Fulton said that the usual postal vote ranged up to 25 or 30 but agreed that there was a keen interest in the Byrne - Haxell election. On this occasion about 90 votes were received by post. Of those, according to Fulton, 48 were brought to his attention during the scrutiny because they all bore an identical postmark and date-stamp. The judge considered

"... the overwhelming extent of change in this branch's position as between September and December...together with the peculiar bunching of 48 postal votes are sufficient to establish beyond any real doubt that a substantial number of fraudulent ballot papers were included, probably a number of the order of 90...this case is, in my judgement, one of fraudulent rigging..." (22)

Similar judgements were passed on the four other branches whose postal votes were thought to be suspiciously high. (23)

(b) The falsification and alteration of branch returns

Only one blatant case of falsification was revealed at the trial, that of the Preston branch. Francis Clarkson, who was Chairman of the branch meeting on 30 December, testified that the result read out at the meeting was Byrne 52, Haxell 101. Clarkson signed the minutes of the previous branch meeting, which included the voting figures for the Byrne - Haxell election, as correct. Some months later, when the breakdown of the voting figures were circulated in the union's minutes, the result was recorded as Byrne 52 and Haxell 191. The judge found:

"... that the true voting was Byrne 52, Haxell 101. The return when received at Head Office showed 191. I find after hearing several

witnesses from this branch, that the secretary fraudulently altered on the return form 101 to 191, wrote 191 in his minute book but when he had read the minutes at the next meeting of the branch, read out 101." (24)

(c) The disqualification of branch returns

The substitution of envelopes

By 24 December 1959, it was known at the ETU's Head Office that John Byrne had received 12,060 votes to Frank Haxell's 10,803 (this is assuming that all possible grounds for disqualification were ignored). So at this stage Byrne had a lead over Frank Haxell of 1,247 votes. By 28 December, the votes that had then come in totalled for Byrne 20,363 and for Haxell 19,385. Byrne still led, but his lead had been reduced to 978 votes. (25) It looked very likely, then, that Byrne would defeat Haxell. To avoid this eventuality, alleged the Counsel for the Plaintiffs, the Communist leadership of the union organised at this critical stage of the election the substitute envelope operation.

The Rules of the ETU stipulated that after an election the branch scrutineers must open the envelopes, count the votes, fill in the scrutineers' return form showing how the voting went, and ensure that it reached the Head Office not later than the first post on the fifth day after the branch quarterly meeting at which the voting took place. The Rules also stated that the date when the scrutineers' return forms were posted to Head Office would be governed by the postmark shown on the envelope containing the forms.

Counsel for Byrne and Chapple alleged that the envelopes in which 55 branches sent in their returns were destroyed or switched to other returns. In each of the 55 cases either an empty envelope, or an envelope into which the original returns had been transferred, was newly posted from the area from which the original returns had been sent. When the substitute envelopes arrived "late" at the ETU's Head Office they were disqualified for breach of the Rules. So even though witnesses from 40 of the 55 disqualified

branches gave evidence that they had definitely posted the branch returns in ample time, the ETU were able to produce envelopes in Court with postmarks that showed the returns had been posted late. But the activities of one William Cobbett seemed to swing the evidence in favour of the the branch secretaries and others who all said they had posted their returns on time.

Cobbett's "Rural Rides"

In October 1960, Olga Cannon recalls, their lawyers obtained from the ETU the envelopes which had contained the ballot papers rejected for late posting:

"Les had sorted the envelopes in geographical order, and in studying the postmarks an extraordinary thing struck him - they had been posted in geographical order! He made lists of the disqualified branches, with the dates on which the branch officials said they had posted their returns. Here is one of them:

Peterborough	December 23
Boston	.. 24
Spilsby	.. 19
Brigg	.. 20
Doncaster	.. 23
Barnsley	.. 26
Huddersfield	.. 18
Whitby	.. 21
Darlington	.. 23
Bishop Auckland	.. 24

This is a random scatter of dates, as one would expect, and all the dates were within the proper time for posting off the ballot returns. But here is the same list with dates of postmarks on the envelopes which the ETU produced.

Peterborough	December 30
Boston	.. 30
Spilsby	.. 30
Brigg	.. 30
Doncaster	.. 30
Barnsley	.. 31
Huddersfield	.. 31
Whitby	.. 31
Darlington	.. 31
Bishop Auckland	.. 31

All, as alleged by the ETU, had arrived out of time, and so were disqualified. *It seemed inconceivable that such a pattern of posting could have come about by chance.* Les was convinced that it had not come about by chance; he reckoned that someone in the conspiracy, to ensure the defeat of Byrne, had set off with a bundle of fresh ballot envelopes and posted them from town to town. This would have produced the necessary postmarks as evidence of late posting." (26)

To test the theory Cannon's solicitor, Ben Hooberman, employed a private enquiry agent, William Cobbett, to travel around Britain on a series of long car journeys and put into practice Cannon's hunch. The three "rural rides" that Cobbett made did seem to show that at least it was physically possible to have re-posted the envelopes in the way Cannon had said. However, Neil Lawson, the ETU's Counsel, pointed out that if the object of the exercise was to produce a result favouring Haxell, it would have been far easier to visit fewer places but ones where the voting differential was much higher.

"In other words, an itinerary which involved somebody fooling around with envelopes which produced a differential of under twenty is rather a stupid sort of itinerary, when by going to one place on the same route you could produce a differential of something like a

hundred and fifty or two hundred. In other words, it's a little too elaborate. It's rather like the thirteenth stroke of the clock: that is to say, it casts a certain amount of doubt on the validity of what has gone before." (27)

Justice Winn thought that Cobbett had produced evidence which had "some corroborative significance". Of the 40 cases of alleged substitution into which the Court inquired the judge found that

"27 were established to my complete satisfaction and beyond any doubt that I can regard as reasonable; a further four cases seem on balance of probability to be made out...It is to be noted that in every case the majority of votes...was for Byrne.

It is not possible to determine who must for certain have known contemporaneously of the plan to post substitute envelopes...I am prepared to believe that neither Mr.Foulkes nor Mr.McLennan participated in that...It has in my judgement all the hall-marks of Mr.Haxell and Mr.Frazer...agents must have been used whom it is impossible to identify.." (28)

The December 1959 scrutiny

Besides disqualifying pro-Byrne branch returns for supposedly arriving late at the union's Head Office, it was alleged that the 1959 scrutiny also showed a very selective process of disqualification for other breaches of the Rules. The responsibility of deciding whether or not a branch had conformed to the Rules lay with two National Scrutineers. The scrutineers had a record of all the past infringements of the branches, a record that was prepared not by the scrutineers themselves but by the Head Office staff. Notes were attached to the returns of infringing branches showing the nature of the infringements, and it was on the basis of this information that the National Scrutineers acted. The time taken for the scrutiny was short - about 1½ hours. It seems the scrutineers accepted without question the information supplied

to them concerning a particular branch's infringement record. By manipulating the information presented to the scrutineers, it was alleged that leading members of the ETU arranged it so that pro-Byrne and pro-Haxell votes were selectively disqualified to the advantage of Frank Haxell.

So late returns were allowed from 217 branches (out of a total of 700). The effect of allowing the votes from all these branches was to Haxell's advantage to the extent of 927 votes. The effect of allowing the votes from 148 branches which had earlier infringements of one kind or another was to Haxell's favour to the extent of 1,231 votes. However, if the votes from the 69 branches with first infringements had been allowed (which was the usual practice) and only those with earlier infringements disqualified, that would have been to Byrne's advantage to the amount of 304 votes. (29) In other words:

"The substantial point emerges that whether regard be had to all types of previous infringements or solely to prior defaults by lateness, the number of pro-Byrne previous offenders who were excused was very slightly greater than the number of pro-Haxell previous offenders, but the voting advantage for Haxell resulting from the acceptance was considerable, indeed, sufficient to determine the election in his favour..." (30)

Of the 109 branches which had their returns disqualified, as we have already noted, 106 had produced majorities for John Byrne, and the remaining three together only gave Haxell a majority of 3. And 148 pro-Haxell branches had had their infringement records "doctored" so that they would not be disqualified by the scrutineers. Therefore, the judge declared,

"it is established, in my judgement, beyond the possibility of reasonable doubt, that the Scrutineers were caused by devices which can only have been fraudulent, including some forged votes, to make their return in favour of Haxell...But for them, Byrne would in my judgement, have had a majority of at least

1,150, but probably of the order of 1,500."

(31)

The ETU's defence Counsel, as we have seen, conceded that the 1959 election was not a valid election. They conceded that the votes for Haxell were not validly returned by the scrutineers, but they also argued that neither were the votes cast for Byrne validly returned. That being the case, a new election should be held. Despite the irregularities in the election, Neil Lawson insisted that there were plausible, if not rather mundane explanations for these irregularities. The ordering of "surplus" ballot papers was simply an error committed by an electrician not used to business management (so much for Michels' theory of the "technical indispensability of leadership"), Cobbett's "rural-rides" didn't make sense if the object was to increase Haxell's vote, and the sheer complication of the ETU Rules could fox any individual and make it appear as though the Rules were being manipulated. It has to be said that the defence Counsel's case appeared very weak in comparison to the case pressed by Gardiner for Byrne and Chapple. Neil Lawson was on stronger ground though, it seemed, in rejecting the idea that these infringements of the Rules were part of a Communist conspiracy organised by an ETU National Advisory Committee.

(2) A Communist Party conspiracy?

One of the major disputes at the trial was whether or not there existed a National Advisory Committee of the ETU organised by the Communist Party. When questioned Frank Haxell agreed that such Committees existed for some industries, for the building industry for instance, where its function was to advise and assist in the preparation of pamphlets on building and housing and so on. But, said Haxell, it was not true that he was a member of any National Advisory Committee of the Communist Party "consisting of Communist members of the ETU". There wasn't such a committee for the ETU, he said. (32) Several ex-Communists still active in the union gave contrary evidence. For example, Tom Vetterlein, a member of the Communist Party from 1924 until he resigned in 1958, and a member of the ETU Executive Council from 1949 to 1957, told the Court that

after the war a London Advisory of the ETU, a National Advisory which met in King Street and, around 1948, four Divisional Advisories were set up. Moreover, Vetterlein repudiated the Defendant's line of argument that such meetings were merely informal gatherings and as such could not be considered Advisory Committees. He said the business of the National Advisory Committee was to determine how best to advance the cause of the members of the ETU together with that of the Communist Party in the light of general policy about wages and conditions. (33) Why Haxell should want to deny the existence of a committee with such aims at first seems perplexing. The reason was, of course, that the Counsel for Byrne and Chapple were attempting to establish that such a Communist controlled committee not only directed the policy of the ETU, but also conspired to prevent non-Communist members of the union from being elected or appointed. It was this accusation of conspiracy that Neil Lawson for the ETU was intent on demolishing.

Lawson argued that it did not really matter whether or not you called a thing officially a committee or not, what really mattered was what these bodies did. There was nothing wrong in such committees discussing how best to advance the politics of the Communist Party in the ETU, he said, "as long as, when you do come to the question of elections, nobody encourages the exercise by individuals concerned of fraudulent practices." Lawson continued:

"No one would desire to import into the concept of liability for wrongful acts any kind of theory of guilt by association...In relation to each of the defendants the relevant enquiry is this... what evidence is there of some specific act of participation, by the Defendant concerned, in the matters of complaint on the December 1959 ballot? (34)

In other words, the existence or non-existence of a National Advisory Committee that controlled the ETU was a secondary issue, the real issue was whether or not it could be proved that any of the Defendants had conspired at these alleged meetings to rig the 1959 ballot. From the evidence given by ex-Communists at the trial there was no such collective conspiracy.

In his judgement, Justice Winn said:

"...in 1959 the Communist Party of the United Kingdom controlled the ETU...the main significance...of the dispute in this trial about the application of the name "Advisory" to certain meetings or groups described in the evidence, is that only bodies officially appointed by the Communist Party are properly so termed and qualify for the distinction conferred in Party circles by that title." (35)

The Communist Party controlled the ETU, according to Winn, by virtue of its dominant position on the leading bodies of the union. Whether or not meetings between Communist members of the ETU and representatives of the Communist Party of Great Britain were formally referred to as "Advisory Committees", as Haxell denied, was not really the point:

"The substance of the matter, which he (Haxell) was endeavouring to conceal, is that a committee of Communist members of the ETU met, often with him in the chair, to consult with an appointed representative of the Communist Party and with one another to foster Communism and Communist objects in and by means of ETU activities." (36)

On the important issue of whether or not the ETU Advisory Committee was involved in a collective conspiracy to rig the 1959 election, however, the judge made no comment. And at no place in his verdict does Justice Winn even suggest that there was an organized conspiracy directed from King Street to rig elections in the ETU. What the judge did say in his final verdict on 28 June was that

"the Defendants Foulkes, Haxell, McLennan, Frazer, and Humphrey acted between September 1959 and February 1960 in their several capacities as officers or servants of the Defendant Union, and on its behalf, in breach of the Rules of the Union; also that they conspired together to prevent by fraudulent and unlawful devices the election of the

Plaintiff Byrne in the place of the Defendant Haxell as General Secretary of the Defendant Union." (37)

As to the pre-1959 allegations of ballot-rigging that were raised at the trial:

"In general my considered judgement upon all these topics is that when fully examined as they have been in at least adequate detail, they do not amount to or establish any fraudulent practice by any of the defendants."
(38)

The aftermath

On 3 July 1961, Justice Winn declared John Byrne General Secretary of the ETU. Although Byrne and Chapple had achieved most of what they intended by the legal action, they, and the other oppositionists in the union, were still facing a major problem that had been left untouched by the Court judgement - the power of the Communist Party in the union. John Byrne might have been declared General Secretary, but the the majority of Executive Council seats and the national apparatus of the union was still controlled by the Communist Party. The opposition in the union hoped they could reverse this situation at the forthcoming EC elections in September, but they feared that they would be severely hindered by the CP's determination in the wake of the trial to hold on come what may to their positions. But it was not just the CP's control of the apparatus that was the problem: the leadership still seemed to have the support of the majority of the rank-and-file activists in the union, support that seems to have been undiminished by the trial.

Just a few weeks after the judge's final verdict was announced, the ETU held its policy conference at Portsmouth. With the exception of Haxell, the other four members of the EC who had been found guilty of conspiracy at the trial were on the platform. There was no condemnation or criticism of the ETU leadership from the floor, and on most issues the EC position was carried by the conference. The conference rallied behind the President's slogan of

"Don't Retreat - Mobilise" and his calls for unity to heal the suspicions and hatreds that had been engendered by the trial. While John Byrne, the "victor", had to suffer the indignity of being relegated to speak on youth training and apprenticeships. (39) This could be explained, of course, by the fact that the delegates were elected before the Court's final verdict was known and as such were likely to be pro-leadership. Even so, this did not mean that they were uncritical supporters of the CP leadership, and if they had believed the Court judgement they would have certainly voiced their opinions. But did they believe the accusations that had been levelled against their union's leadership? - this was the point. There is good reason to believe that they didn't. One reason for this was that when a popular figure in the union such as Foulkes stood up at the conference and declared that "I am completely innocent of the charges that have been made against me", it carried conviction. (40) In contrast the dubious alliance of a number of ex-Communists and Mr. Justice Winn could not have been all that appealing to union activists. On top of this the ETU was appealing against the verdict, so there was a possibility that the leadership would still be exonerated. However, these were the activists, and what the larger minority of ETU members who bothered to vote in elections thought about the whole affair would be known when the results of the September elections were announced in November. The TUC's intervention in the post-trial autopsy, however, changed the climate dramatically.

The expulsion of the ETU from the TUC

The full Executive Council of the ETU met the F&GPC of the TUC on 24 July 1961. The five hour meeting was an attempt by the TUC to elicit from the ETU what exactly they intended to do in the light of the Court judgement. To this end the meeting was unsuccessful. The ETU did little more than repeat that the union had given an undertaking to the judge that the September elections would be supervised by a firm of chartered accountants under the existing voting system. Frank Foulkes did reveal that the union was appealing against "every decision of the Court" and in particular against the declaration that Byrne was elected General Secretary.

The meeting ended with an understanding that the members of the union's EC should hold themselves in readiness for a further meeting later on in the week. In fact the meeting was held the following day. At this meeting the F&GPC informed the EC of the ETU that since they were not prepared to make any suggestions for dealing with the matters revealed in the Court judgement then they themselves must declare what in their view was the minimum required to be done by the ETU. The F&GPC formulated the following directions which, subject to any comments the ETU might make, they said they would recommend to the General Council:

- (a) direct the Executive Council of the Electrical Trades Union to take within ten days such action as will satisfy the General Council that Messrs. Haxell, McLennan, Frazer, Humphrey and Hendy are effectively debarred for a minimum period of five years from taking any part in the administration of the Union in the capacity of an elected officer or as an appointed member of the Union's staff;
- (b) invite Mr. Foulkes to allow the membership of the ETU to show the extent to which he still retains their confidence by resigning his position as President of the Union and standing for re-election by ballot; and
- (c) direct the Executive Council of the ETU to rescind at its next meeting the resolutions of its meeting held on July 10-11 appointing sub-committees for ballots, litigation, establishments and publications and cancelling the General Secretary's appointments and suspension of members of the Union's staff.

(41)

These recommendations were adopted by the General Council on 26 July. A reply was received from the ETU on 2 August:

"The Executive Council having considered the demands of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress rejects them as wholly

unacceptable and an unwarranted interference in the affairs of the Electrical Trades Union.

It reminds the Trades Union Congress that an appeal against the decision of the High Court has now been entered and any action by the Trades Union Congress would prejudice the issues involved.

It informs the Trades Union Congress that the powers of the Executive Council of the Electrical Trades Union are determined by its rules and have been endorsed by a policy Conference. It regards the suggestions that many of the present leaders should be excluded or resign, together with the demand that the Executive Council should delegate full powers to a new General Secretary, as evidence that the Trades Union Congress is more interested in changing the policy and leadership of the Union than ensuring the efficient continuation of its administration." (42)

A fortnight later, on 16 August, the TUC received a letter from the union's solicitors threatening them with legal action should they take "any action adverse to the union" at their next meeting. This letter, and a circular that had been issued by the ETU to all its Area full-time officials, branch secretaries and shop stewards on 18 August declaring the Defendants' innocence and reiterating the substance of the correspondence between the union and the TUC, were considered by the GC on 24 August. (43) Taking all this into account, the GC decided, as they had done in December 1959, that there was nothing further to be gained from continuing a correspondence with the union, but this time they decided to recommend to the September TUC Congress that they

(a) expel the Electrical Trades Union forthwith; and

(b) authorise the General Council to take such steps as seem to them to be necessary in order to make it possible for the Electrical Trades Union to be reaffiliated to Congress. (44)

At the Portsmouth TUC in September the expulsion debate lasted 2 hours 10 minutes, 45 minutes of which was taken up by George Woodcock, the General Secretary of the TUC, putting the GC's case for the expulsion of the union. Woodcock went through once more the tedious history of the relations between the TUC and the ETU over the previous years. He said the General Council would have been quite prepared to defend the ETU at anytime "if the ETU had given us anything to fight with - which they never have". Implicit in Woodcock's speech was an acceptance of the High Court's judgement, which, given the ETU's stonewalling since the trial, was not altogether surprising. Concluding his speech he said that the issue to be voted on was not Communism but fraud: "Fraud is the question, fraud is the issue". (45)

Replying to Woodcock, Frank Foulkes reiterated the main points of the ETU's position as it had been presented in the correspondence with the General Council. Specifically on the trial, all Foulkes said was that the members of the Executive Council that had been found guilty had all declared their innocence and were appealing against the judgement. Given that there was an appeal pending, he asked if it was right for Congress to expel the union:

"In a murder case, the logical simile would be that the appellant should be hanged first and his appeal dealt with afterwards." (46)

That the Congress could contemplate such an action before the appeal took place (and the way the vote was to go was almost a foregone conclusion even before the Congress began) is an indication of the increasing exasperation felt with the ETU by many active rank-and-file trade unionists. Even the Communist Party, as we shall see, tacitly admitted that the judgement was correct, and this was the month before Frank Foulkes' appeal took place in January 1962 (Foulkes' was the only appeal that reached Court). Foulkes' rhetoric about the "capitalist press" and the forces of reaction that were arrayed against the ETU, as true as this was, sounded hollow as he avoided the substantive issue of ballot-rigging under the cover of the forthcoming appeal.

In the debate that followed Foulkes' speech, delegates from the Boilermakers, the Draughtman's union, and the ACTT spoke

against the expulsion of the ETU. The general drift of their contributions was that expulsion would create more problems than it solved, and that expulsion would only gladden the hearts of the "leader writers of the Press, the Tories, and the general rag-bag of individuals and organisations who hate the guts of the trade union movement". (47) What is more, as Dan McGarvey of the Boilermakers argued, the TUC directives sent to the ETU on 25 July rode roughshod over the democratic constitution of the Electricians' union. When the card vote was taken, however, it was more than apparent that the delegates had not been swayed by the words of Frank Foulkes or Dan McGarvey, they voted by 7,320,000 votes to 730,000 votes (with about a quarter million abstentions), a majority of 6,585,000, to expel the ETU from Congress. As *Electron* solemnly reported:

"At exactly 4.47 pm. on the afternoon of Monday, September 4, 1961, the Electrical Trades Union's 59 years old affiliated membership of the TUC - unbroken since January, 1902 - was brought to an end...

The last word spoken in Congress by an ETU delegate - the well reported "Au Revoir. Ted" [Ted Hill the Congress President - NS] from President Bro. Frank Foulkes - could not be heard on the stage. They were lost in the hubbub of conversation that welled-up in the great conference hall; a murmur of voices pierced only by a single boo and one cheer from a far flung corner.

With dignity, the ETU delegation left the Guildhall through the nearest door.

And with them went 242,000 members." (48)

The September issue of *Electron* was also of interest because it contained the first editorial by John Byrne, who, with that month's Executive Council elections evidently in mind, urged the membership to attend "more diligently to the affairs of the union". Byrne needn't have feared, the elections brought a victory for the oppositionists inside the union. They turned a hitherto 8-3 CP/

"fellow-traveller" majority on the Executive Council into a 9-2 majority for the right-wing. But it was not as sweeping a victory as might have been expected in the circumstances, for the CP and "fellow-traveller" candidates secured almost 15,000 of the 49,000 or so record votes cast (in the EC elections in 1959 only 33,000 voted). Although the 5 CP members on the EC all lost their seats, two "fellow-travellers" retained their seats, Foulkes was still President and the majority of National Officers were Communist Party members. So for both sides the fight was far from being over: the next round was to begin on 1 January 1962 when the new Executive Council took charge of the union.

One further important event took place before the new EC took over the union. At the beginning of October, on the eve of the Labour Party Conference in Blackpool, the National Executive Committee decided to disaffiliate the ETU on the grounds that the union was a Communist controlled organisation and therefore could not accept the programme, principles and policy of the Labour Party which it was obliged to do as a condition of membership. Even before the Conference had begun, then, the ETU delegation were deprived of their credentials. Instead they were issued with visitors' tickets and sat out the conference in the public gallery. However, Sam Goldberg for the ETU EC, (a position he was to lose when the September election results were announced) was allowed 20 minutes to address the delegates when Standing Orders were suspended so that the NEC's decision could be debated. Goldberg in his 12 minute speech said little, other than that the disaffiliation was an unprecedented and a dangerous move for the Labour Party to make, and a device to interfere with the election of the new ETU EC. Following a brief debate, a card vote was taken and the ETU were expelled from the Labour Party by 5,337,000 votes to 642,000 votes. (49)

So far we have outlined the ETU leadership's response to the trial judgement, which essentially was to proclaim their innocence, to suspend any detailed refutation of the judgement till after the appeal - a position they asked the labour and trade union movement to follow - and to point to the reactionary and anti-trade union forces that were attacking the ETU and as a consequence the whole trade union movement. And, as we have seen, the leadership's pleas

were falling on deaf ears. They had been expelled from the TUC and the Labour Party, and the CP's seemingly impregnable position on the EC had been almost destroyed. How did the Communist Party nationally react to the whole affair? Was their reaction substantially different from that of the Communist leadership of the ETU?

The response of the Communist Party

Throughout the trial the *Daily Worker* carried factual reports of the day to day proceedings. The paper said that they would not make any comment on the proceedings until the trial was over, which was not surprising given the law of sub judice. On 30 June 1961, two days after the major part of Justice Winn's judgement had been delivered, the Communist Party issued its first major statement about the trial. Under a front page headline in the *Daily Worker* - COMMUNISTS AND UNIONS - there appeared a long statement by the Political Committee of the Party. Once again they declined to make any direct comment on the outcome of the trial because they said, correctly, that the final judgement of the Court would not be known until 3 July. However, the statement does make some general comments about the relationship between the CP and the trade unions and the trial itself:

"Throughout its history the Communist Party has been the most consistent opponent of all undemocratic practices, all ballot-rigging, all bans and proscriptions, all suppressions of minorities which have operated in the trade unions...Not the winning of official positions, but the winning of the support of the workers for a progressive policy is their basic trade union aim...the Communist Party is opposed to all attempts, from what ever quarter they come, to control the trade unions from the outside or to induce them to accept policies which do not correspond to the will of the membership...This has been and is our position regarding the ETU....

At no time during the proceedings in the ETU case was it alleged that any meetings of Communists discussed or decided on ballot-rigging or any other illegal practices as far as the union was concerned. Nor was any instance given where Communists had sought to get the union to operate any specific policy which was not approved by the union members in policy-making conferences and elsewhere...Any attempt of Communists to secure a monopoly of union posts at any level would be entirely opposed to Communist policy, which is based on the need to create an alliance of all progressive union members to increase the power, the unity and political clarity of the members and leaders of the union...The Communist Party does not deny that it endeavours to influence the policy of the trade unions...But it seeks to influence the unions in a democratic way..." (50)

Whatever is made of this statement, and in its essentials it was formally correct, there is one sentence that is glaringly inconsistent with the situation in the ETU: "Any attempt of Communists to secure a monopoly of union posts at any level would be entirely opposed to Communist policy". Clearly by any standards a Party which had members in such leading positions in a trade union as President, General Secretary, Assistant General Secretary, as well as 5 members on the Executive Council and 17 National Officers, not to mention the Office Manager, left itself open to the charge that it had a monopoly of leading posts in that union. And, of course, this was the position in the ETU at the time of the trial (in 1956, as we saw in chapter one, the CP held more leading positions than in 1959).

After Justice Winn's final judgement on 3 July, it might have been expected that the Communist Party would have made a fuller statement concerning the outcome of the trial, and indeed they had intimated as much in their statement of June 30. It was not to be.

On 4 July an editorial in the *Daily Worker* informed its readers that

"The ETU leaders are appealing against the judgement, and comments on the nature of the case should not be made at this stage." (51)

Six days later though, the *Daily Worker* reported that the "Executive Committee of the Communist Party at the weekend considered the ETU case". (52) The article goes on to say that the EC of the CP had adopted a statement on the position of the CP and the trade unions, which would be printed in full as a leaflet for wide distribution. Extracts from the statement were then quoted at length in the paper. Disappointingly, the full text of the statement contained in the leaflet added nothing new to the statement that the Party made on 30 June, and the *Daily Worker* editorial of July 4. The Communist Party's position then, not surprisingly, was virtually the same as the ETU's:

"The ETU leaders have declared their innocence of the charges and are appealing against the judgement. Further consideration of the case by the Executive, therefore, was postponed until after the appeal." (53)

The appeals of 4 of the 5 Communist Party ETU leaders who were found guilty of ballot-rigging were never to take place, ostensibly because they were denied legal aid. Frank Foulkes though, the fifth member of the leadership to be found guilty, was determined to appeal against the verdict although he too was denied legal aid. Because Foulkes was, as Olga Cannon says, "exceedingly popular" and may have been unaware "of some of the things that went on under Haxell's administration" the union decided to pay for his appeal. (54) Foulkes made his unsuccessful appeal in January 1962. Lord Justice Sellers upheld the June 1961 verdict and concluded as Justice Winn had, "that the appellant played his part in the rigging of this election". (55) Before Foulkes' appeal was heard, however, the Executive Committee of the Communist Party issued a major statement on the ETU affair. The full text of "THE COMMUNIST PARTY STATEMENT ON THE ETU" appeared in the *Daily Worker* of December 4. It reiterated much of the two previous public

statements the Party had made, but then got down to the real business:

"In our opinion actions were taken at the Head Office of the Union which amounted to distorting the real position for the scrutineers. It appears to be reasonably certain from the material produced in the trial that Branch returns whose validity had been subject to query at earlier stages, were never put before the scrutineers for close examination as they should, but were put into an "all right" file and were counted as valid. A majority of these votes were for Haxell...

We have asked those Party members most concerned how such a result could have been obtained if everything had been fair and above board, and have not been able to get any satisfactory explanation...

On the question of how exactly these things came about, there is a difference of opinion. Most of the leading Communists in the ETU whom we have consulted, agree that while mistakes occurred, these cannot account for the situation, and see no other explanation than acts which amount to rigging of the ballot, though they are by no means unanimous as to how this was done or by whom, and each individual concerned declares his innocence...

There was no possibility, in our opinion, of outside interference with the votes after they had been delivered to the office. The switching of Branch returns must have taken place within the office.

The leading official in charge of the administration of the Head Office was the General Secretary, Frank Haxell, and he must accept responsibility for a situation which has brought discredit on the union and its

Executive, including members against whom the Court could find no vestige of a case. Comrade Haxell, therefore, has offered to resign from the Communist Party...we accept Frank Haxell's resignation..." (56)

There followed in the months ahead a number of expulsions of Communists not only from the ETU but from the Communist Party as well. Frank Haxell, Robert McLennan, former Assistant General Secretary, James Humphrey, the Office Manager of "surplus" ballots fame, and Jack Frazer who had contested Les Cannon in the 1957 EC election, were all expelled from the ETU in April 1962 for "bringing discredit" on the union. Frank Foulkes was expelled from the union in July still proclaiming his innocence, although he now admitted that "a fraud had been planned and carried out" in the Head Office of the union. His request that the membership should decide in a ballot (conducted by a firm of chartered accountants) whether or not he was innocent or guilty of ballot-rigging was turned down by the Executive Council. (57) Two other prominent Communist members of the union, R.Sell and J.Feathers, both former EC members who lost their seats in the September 1961 elections, were also disciplined at the same time that Foulkes was expelled from the union. Sell was disqualified from holding office in the union for 5 years, and Feathers for 3 years. And Patrick O'Neil, a leading Communist Party activist and branch secretary of the South-West London branch of the ETU, was expelled for being involved in a fraudulent ballot. (58) Patrick O'Neil, together with Harold Woolf, Chairman of O'Neil's South-West London branch, and Jack Frazer were all expelled from the Communist Party in June, in what the press referred to as the second stage of a "cleaning-up operation". All three were in fact expelled for campaigning in the Party, with some success, for the reinstatement of Frank Haxell, who they said was being used as a scapegoat for the Party's guilt and responsibility in the ETU matter.

They were right, in that the responsibility could not just be laid at Frank Haxell's doorstep. The Communist Party had constantly tried to explain the ballot-rigging by recourse to the actions of individuals in the union. Who had done it? How had he/they done it? What was missing from their musings was a political explanation for

the actions of certain individuals in the union. That certain prominent CP members in the ETU might have taken the actions they did because of the politics of the Party itself never seems to have been considered.

Ballot-rigging and politics

In chapter one we argued that the rise of the CP in the ETU was a result not of ballot-rigging, but of the general political and industrial strategy pursued by the CP in the post-war period. With the publication of *The British Road to Socialism* in 1951 this strategy was laid out in some detail. The essence of the Communist Party's line was that Socialism could be achieved in Britain through parliamentary means, and it was "slandorous" to suggest, said Harry Pollitt, leader of the CP, that the Party believed in creating Soviets in Britain. (59) The strategic aim of the Party was to get a "people's government" elected through the support of a united working class and a popular alliance of all democratic forces. This truly representative government, the CP said, would be able to effect socialist nationalisation of the monopolies, develop a planned economy and by democratic reforms break capitalist political domination. Should the capitalist class refuse to abide by the will of the "people's government" and attempt to use force to maintain their privileges, the people and their government would not hesitate to act decisively. (60)

At the core of the popular alliance, or anti-monopoly alliance, the CP envisaged a Communist-Labour alliance that once united would be the prime mover in shifting power away from capital to the people, and would thus constitute the major element in any future people's government. So through the institutions of the labour movement - the Communist Party, the Labour Party, the trade unions and the cooperatives - the Party hoped to gradually shift the movement leftwards. The key to this strategy was the gaining of positions of authority in the trade union movement, which in turn would enable the Communist Party to influence the direction of the Labour Party at their annual conference. The strategy was, as Bill Warren comments on a later edition of the *British Road to Socialism*, "in essence an approach to the masses from above and

indirectly through the instrumentality of bureaucratic institutions, structurally adapted to operating through the normal channels of capitalism". (61) While this was true, it leaves out of the picture the rank-and-file activity in the labour movement that the Communist Party encouraged. In a sense the CP operated at two levels in the movement. At one level (and Warren is right - this was the main strategic arena), the CP sought to operate through the bureaucratic institutions of the labour movement albeit to reform them; at another level, Party activists were heavily involved in the day to day bread and butter issues that were raised on the shopfloor.

The centre-piece of the Party's strategy at this time was, of course, the Electrical Trades Union. Here was a union dominated by a Communist-Labour alliance whose delegate conferences throughout the 1950s repeatedly supported the majority of motions tabled by the union's leadership, and as a consequence the leadership were able to directly influence TUC and Labour Party policy in a leftwards direction. For example, out of twenty-three motions moved by the ETU at the TUC from 1945 to 1960 one half had originally been moved at the ETU's own conferences by the Executive Council. And on no occasion in this period did a motion find its way to the TUC which had been carried at the union's conference yet opposed by the EC. (62) One of the rare occasions when the leadership were defeated, as we described in chapter one, was on the issue of whether or not the Communist leaders of the union should be allowed to represent the union at Labour Party Conferences. But the delegations that did attend (including CP members as advisors) represented the views of the ETU conference, which was of course largely dominated by the politics of the Communist Party. Not having Frank Haxell or Frank Foulkes speak for the union in an official capacity at Labour Party conferences was really only a minor inconvenience, as the politics of the CP were carried by the ETU delegation.

The strategy outlined in *The British Road to Socialism* seemed to be meeting with some success in the early 1950s, at least with the activists in the labour movement (sales of the pamphlet reached 150,000 in six weeks). A militant reformism wrapped in a radical nationalist package must have appealed to those activists who were

on the Bevanite-wing of the Labour Party and many more besides. Industrially the Party's activity could not fail to attract the attention of those industrial workers who were frequently involved in shop-floor disputes with management. So although marginalised electorally, hundreds of thousands of workers who would never have voted Communist or read the *Daily Worker* willingly accepted the leadership of Communist shop-stewards and union officials. The irony was that the largely de-politicised industrial militancy of the 1950s provided the CP with their passport into the national political arena of Labour Party politics. If the Party lost the leading trade union positions that it held, the strategy contained in *The British Road to Socialism* would suffer an enormous setback.

After 1956 this position of influence in industry and the trade unions did seem threatened. Khrushchev's attack on Stalin in his "secret speech" in February 1956 caused turmoil in the Party, and in the wake of the crushing of the Hungarian revolution the Party lost some 10,000 members, many of them prominent trade unionists, including leading CP members in the NUM, FBU and of course the ETU, and also some of its leading industrial militants. (63) Nor were all those leaving the Party moving to the right as the leadership claimed. Some did of course (Cannon in the ETU was the prime example), but many moved to the left. A substantial number identified with what became known as the "New Left" centred round the *New Reasoner* magazine set up by E.P. Thompson and John Saville, and around 200, mainly workers, joined the Trotskyist Socialist Labour League. Needless to say, such defections could not have improved the Party's political and industrial influence, but there seems to be little evidence that the CP's industrial and trade union base was shattered (damaged certainly), as a result of the upheaval of 1956. The composition of the delegates to the Party's Annual Congress was left untouched at least. Over the period 1944 to 1963 on average 43% of all Congress delegates were workers in engineering, building, mining and transport and railways. (64) In some areas in the years after 1956, however, the CP seems to have strengthened its industrial base - in the motor industry and the Yorkshire coalfield in particular. (65) And by 1963 the Party had made good the losses of 1956.

Yet it seems reasonable to assume that the confidence of the CP leadership was shaken by the events of 1956. They could not afford to lose leading trade unionists such as Lawrence Daly of the NUM and John Horner of the FBU if they were to retain their influence in the labour movement. The severe jolt the Party's credibility suffered in many unions was exacerbated in the ETU by the press allegations of electoral malpractice that began in earnest with the publication of Wyatt's *The Peril In Our Midst* in December 1956, allegations that were substantiated by leading ETU members who had just left the CP. As we have seen, the ETU leadership's response to the allegations did very little to alleviate the suspicions of many who were far from being enemies of the ETU and the CP. Nonetheless, the ETU rank-and-file activists still seemed to support the Communist leadership of the union, on industrial matters at least. On the question of Hungary, the delegates to the union's 1957 Conference rebuffed the leadership and sent a message of fraternal support to the workers of Hungary in the shape of a number of resolutions. But if the branch activists still by and large supported the Communist leadership, how true was this of the "active voters" in the union, for these were the members that kept the CP in power?

The first real sign that the "active voters" were becoming disenchanted with the leadership was in 1959, when Foulkes stood for re-election as President of the union. Until then, both in the EC elections late in 1957 and in the elections for Area Presidents in 1958, there was little indication of a falling away of electoral support for the Communist officials in the union. Foulkes was first elected President in 1945, re-elected in 1950 (beating John Byrne), returned unopposed in 1954, and defeated William Blairford (who left the CP over Hungary) in September 1959 to retain his position. However, considering Foulkes' record and his popularity in the union, and the fact that Blairford was little known outside Scotland, the election result was close (Foulkes 18,100, Blairford 15,311). For the first time in a decade or so, then, the leadership could not fail to be aware that their support in the union was waning. The spectre of the CP losing control of the union must have loomed large in the minds of people such as Haxell and Frazer. The spectre, not just of losing control of the ETU, but of the

industrial centre-piece of *The British Road to Socialism*. The Party's entire strategy of gaining union posts and political influence would have been badly damaged by such a loss. In these circumstances, and as the returns for the Byrne - Haxell election began to come in, certain members of the Communist Party in the union, acting they believed in the best interests of the Party, rigged the election returns. Their motives were entirely political, personal considerations being, in our view, completely absent.

Ballot-rigging was, of course, not a normal Communist practice in the ETU, or any other union for that matter. It was an aberration, but one which can be explained not simply in terms of the deviant behaviour of a number of individuals, nor by a Michelian approach with its abstract references to the power of oligarchies. Of course, the ETU ballot-rigging episode offers ample evidence that can be used in support of Michels' thesis. But the episode also offers evidence that amends and counters Michels' assertions. For example, the root cause of oligarchy according to Michels was the technical indispensability of leadership, which was itself a product of the division of labour. Control of the ETU, however, was in the hands of lay officers (with the exception of the 3 leading positions) and these were far from being technocrats. So we could amend Michels by saying that the primary cause of oligarchy in the ETU at this time was not the technical indispensability of the leaders but rather the control which these leaders had over the ETU's bureaucratic structure. Control of the apparatus was the key, a control that allowed them to manipulate the union's procedures.

However, it was because they abused this control and acted undemocratically that they were toppled. True it involved a High Court action, but the action would never have taken place if there had not been pressure from the press, the internal opposition, and the TUC for the union leadership to act democratically. This tends to confirm J.R.Coleman's thesis that there are compulsive pressures on union leaders to act democratically, pressures which are unique to trade unions. (66) Or, as Gouldner argued, there cannot be an "iron law of oligarchy" unless there is an "iron law of democracy". (67) In the wake of the trial the "iron law of democracy" was in full ascendancy. The new right-wing Executive Council were able to

take control and consolidate their position in the union only by harnessing rank-and-file demands for an extension of democracy, and even more significantly, as we shall see in the next chapter, they were stopped by the rank-and-file from pressing through "reforms" which were considered undemocratic. Michels, by concentrating on the organizational factors which inhibit democracy and strengthen oligarchy, tends to miss those factors which have an opposite effect.

Without an historical and political understanding of the CP and the ETU in the 1950s, it is hard to explain at all why the CP should have had such influence in the union, or why certain individuals acted in the way that they did. Seen from this point of view, both the genuine strength and support the CP had in the ETU and the ballot-rigging affair are explicable in terms of the industrial relations climate of the 1950s, the ETU's militant tradition and the politics of the CP. In the first instance, as we argued in chapter one, the Party's strategy dovetailed with the industrial and, to a lesser extent, the political concerns of the ETU membership. Whereas the ballot-rigging was a product of a period when the Party's strategy was under pressure, a pressure that in the ETU at least threatened to shatter 15 years' work. Michels' theory is not entirely refuted, but in the end, and contrary to Michels, it was the demand for democracy in the ETU that defeated the CP leadership.

PART TWO THE NEW MODEL UNION

CHAPTER FOUR

THE REMODELLING OF THE UNION

The new right-wing Executive Council of the ETU held its first session at the union's Head Office on 2 January 1962. In the editorial of that month's *Electron* - DEMOCRACY IN YOUR HANDS - the newly appointed General Secretary, John Byrne, said that he regarded the election of the EC as

"a mandate to build a more powerful and truly democratic Union in which more and more members play an ever-increasing part in determining the Union's affairs...No political group or undemocratic leadership will ever again control the Union if we work together...Instead of the Union's energy being sapped in the pursuit of obscure political prejudice, the Union will be used for the purpose for which it was founded and the whole of its industrial strength applied to secure improvements in the wages and conditions of our members." (1)

Mandate or no mandate, the left in the union still controlled the influential Area Committees and a sizeable number of the branches, and as such were likely to be able to dominate the rules and policy conferences of the union and thereby retain their influence. In order to by-pass the activists in the union the leadership employed a procedure that was to be used frequently in the years to come - a ballot of the entire membership on specific issues of union democracy. It was hoped that this "democracy by referendum" would mobilize the "active voters" in the union in support of the Executive's plans for remodelling the union, a remodelling that was intended to erode the power of rank-and-file activists by placing more and more power in the hands of the Executive Council.

Firstly, the EC asked the approval of the membership to hold a Special Rules Revision Conference (SRRC) to which each of the

union's 650 odd branches could send a delegate (previously there had been one delegate for every 600 members, about 400 in total, so many branches did not have their own delegate). Such an extension of democracy in the union was supported overwhelmingly by 26,458 votes to 6,206 votes. The specially convened Rules Revision Conference that met at Margate on 8 October 1962, then, was the largest gathering of delegates in the union's history. The leadership had been working hard in the run-up to the SRRC to press for the implementation of a number of key recommendations that were to be the first phase in the wholesale restructuring of the union:

- (1) A system of balloting which would ensure fair and honest elections.
- (2) A full-time Executive Council.
- (3) The introduction of industrial conferences in order to establish direct lines of communication down to the members in the separate industries.
- (4) Rules revision conferences which would meet more than twice as often as were then provided for.
- (5) A final Appeals Court where members subject to the disciplinary procedure could seek redress. (2)

The recommendations listed here in the September edition of *Electron* under the heading GUARD OUR UNION DEMOCRACY, were also coupled with warnings about the "unscrupulous methods" that the "Communist Party and the Trotskyists were resorting to" in order, they claimed, to oppose the EC's reforms. Unofficial circulars and a meeting of CP delegates to the SRRC were cited as evidence of such methods. It seems clear that the EC still feared the power of the CP in the union. They hoped that the proposed reform of the balloting system would be the decisive blow that would "put an end to machine politics in the ETU" and "sound the death-knell of the Communist Party's organisation within the Union". (3)

All but one of the EC's five major reforms were carried by the delegates at Margate. The old branch voting system was replaced by a postal balloting system under a single transferable vote, all to be administered by the Electoral Reform Society. This was obviously

the main achievement of the SRRC as far as the EC were concerned, with most of the SRRC report in the December issue of *Electron* being taken up by the new Rule 21 governing elections. A Biennial Delegate Conference (BDC) was introduced which incorporated a Rules Revision Conference every four years. Previously policy conferences were held annually, but as much as ten years could elapse before a Rules Revision Conference was held; however, this was not the case in the period that the CP controlled the union (RRCs were held in 1947, 1948, 1951, 1952, and 1957). The referendum that decided that conference representation should be on the basis of one delegate per branch was confirmed. The new Rule also made it clear that

"no delegate shall be mandated in advance as to how he shall or should vote on any matter coming before the conference." (4)

For the first time conference was given the power to vote on a motion referring back any section of the Executive Council's report. (5) However, the Rules still vested the "general management and control of the Union" in the hands of the EC, although the clause that specified that conference decisions were merely recommendations to the EC was removed. (6) Nonetheless, conference decisions were still not binding on the EC as they were in most other trade unions. The highest decision making body in the union was still the Executive Council, and not the union's conference. On this point at least, the new EC were no more willing to challenge the ETU's tradition of Executive authority than were the CP leadership of the union. Industrial Conferences of shop-stewards from the various sections of industry that the union covered - electrical contracting, supply, shipbuilding and engineering - were to be convened between BDCs. The setting up of a Final Appeals Committee (FAC) made up of 11 rank-and-file members elected at the BDC where the revision of rules was on the agenda (every 4 years) was also endorsed by the delegates at Margate. The FAC had the power to reverse the decisions of the EC on matters concerned with discipline and its decisions were final and binding. But the Executive Council's attempt to extend the term of office of the lay EC from 2 to 5 years was rejected by the SRRC, and so the EC withdrew proposals to make membership of the EC a full-time job.

The paradox of the 1962 SRRC was that under the leadership of a right-wing EC the union shifted to the left. Or, more precisely, the EC had to move left in order to keep ahead of the wave of anger that swept through the union in the wake of the ballot-rigging trial. So although the new leadership had instigated the democratic reforms, they were supported whole-heartedly by the rank-and-file activists in the union who made up the bulk of the SRRC delegates and who were still, on the whole, well to the left politically of Byrne and his associates:

"There was no sudden shift in the political position of the union conference. It contained a strong Left-wing representation and the tone of the floor speeches in 1963 was little different from those of the late 1950s." (7)

And if there was no clear sign yet that the new leadership were ready to depart from the left Labour tradition of the union, John Byrne's statement that the whole of the union's industrial strength would be applied to secure improvements in the wages and conditions of ETU members, seemed to make it clear that there would be no departure from the union's traditional militancy either. (8) At this early stage then, it must have been difficult for many rank-and-file activists to view the Byrne leadership as "right-wing". After all, it was they who introduced the democratic reforms that extended rank-and-file control, reforms that had not been introduced by the CP in its 15 year reign (a "real advance in democracy" was how the CP in the ETU later described the reforms of 1962). (9) The CP was of course to become the main opposition force in the union as the reforms of 1962 were whittled away during the 1960s, but the irony is that their failure to further democratise the union in the 1950s paved the way for the right-wing to act as the champions of rank-and-file democracy and thereby tighten its grip on the union.

Margate was exceptional however. The right-wing leadership was still not firmly entrenched and the CP was still in some disarray following the trial. They both responded to the pressure from below which culminated in what Patrick Wintour has described as an "orgy of democracy" at the 1962 SRRC. (10) The crucial difference that was to emerge between the right-wing and the left-wing in the union

over the 1962 reforms was, that the left saw the reforms as valuable additions to the already existing democratic structure of the union, while the right saw some of the reforms as temporary concessions to the rank-and-file that could be taken back as the overall remodelling of the union's internal structure got under way. Ironically, in the coming years it was to be the Communist dominated opposition grouping, *Flashlight*, that defended the reforms of 1962 against the right-wing leadership that had introduced them. The task the *Reform Committee* (as the *Reform Group* now called themselves) centred around Les Cannon (elected President in 1963), Frank Chapple (elected Assistant General Secretary 1963) and National Organizer Mark Young set themselves at this stage, was to prepare the ground for the 1965 Rules Revision Conference (RRC) where they hoped their restructuring proposals would be accepted by the delegates. Olga Cannon, presumably aware of the historical parallels that could be drawn, says that the far reaching reforms of 1965 created effectively a "New Model" union. She also recalls that Les Cannon "prepared the way very carefully".⁽¹¹⁾ Indeed Cannon was without doubt the prime mover and major ideologue behind the transformation of the ETU into a "New Model" union. However, the type of union that Les Cannon wished to build had very little to do with the "New Model" unions of the 1850s in Britain, and a lot to do with the business trade unions of the 1950s in the USA. We shall come back to this point later in the chapter

The Reform Committee's strategy

Cannon and the *Reform Committees's* (RC) strategy in the run up to the 1965 RRC can be conveniently divided into two parts: (a) their campaign to get their restructuring proposals accepted; and (b) their campaign to neutralise the organized opposition in the union - the Communist Party.

(a) The first shot in the RC's campaign was to circulate in 1963 a document produced by Cannon entitled the *Internal Structure of the Union*. Cannon argued that the rules and internal structure of the union reflected the needs of the ETU of the 1890s and not the

1960s. He said that if every member of the union was to have "administrative service facilities at the level of the best...a radical reorganisation of the branch structure of the union along with the corresponding alterations at area and national level" was urgently required. (12) The proposed new structure of the union involved the abolition of the powerful Area Committees, the amalgamation of most of the geographical branches based in the cities and towns into large industrial branches, and the replacement of the lay Executive Council by a full-time body. If we examine Diagrams 2 and 3 in the Appendix, we can see that what Cannon was proposing was a scrapping of the structure that emerged after the "orgy of democracy" at the 1962 SRRC, and its replacement by an industrial based structure. What cannot be seen from a perusal of Diagram 3, and what did not become clear until much later on, was how the new structure was designed to centralise power in the union in the hands of the EC. In his document, Cannon argues largely for restructuring in terms of cost and efficiency, and only indirectly in terms of making the ETU more democratic.

There is a compelling and familiar logic governing Cannon's proposals: an efficient, cost-conscious, centralised union organisation geared to the complex world of the 1960s, would be much better placed to provide a good service for its members than the archaic Victorian union organisation that had lumbered on hitherto. Many in the union must have seen the similarities between Cannon's vision of a revitalized "New Model" ETU and Harold Wilson's vision of a "New Britain" shorn of the incompetence and out of date attitudes represented so plainly by the aristocratic leader of the Conservative Party, Sir Alec Douglas-Home. If Wilson's aim was to revitalise the "fitful and sluggish" British economy in order to compete more successfully in the international market place, then Cannon's aim was to revitalize the sluggish ETU so that the union could compete more successfully within that regenerated British economy. From this point on we see the emergence of a distinct new ETU philosophy whose recurring themes are efficiency, competence, professionalism, rationalisation and modernization. Democracy begins to be subordinated to these aims, and at best is seen largely in terms of better communication between officials, shop-stewards and the ordinary members. In

short, we see the beginnings of a business-like approach to trade unionism in the ETU, an approach quite alien not only to the traditions of the ETU but also the British trade union movement as a whole.

However at this stage, 1963, the RC were still very unsure whether or not they could carry their proposals with the bulk of the membership let alone transform the ETU into a business union. Their comments on the *Internal Structure of the Union* to the Donovan Commission in 1966 give an indication of this unease:

"...there then ensued two years of intensive education and persuasion in order to bring the proposed changes to the notice and understanding of the rank-and-file members...In the event, a long period of discussion, education and persuasion turned out to have been most necessary since, despite all this great effort, the proposals were only narrowly passed at the Conference." (13)

During the "two years of intensive education and persuasion" the EC's case was put across at hundreds of branch, district and area meetings, in the pages of *Electron*, and at special pre-Conference classes held at the union's Esher College. Despite this massive campaign the result was very much in the balance, especially as the organizational skills of Communist members in the union were being used to oppose the EC's proposals. From the very start of the campaign the RC set out not only to counter the CP's opposition but in the words of Chapple, "to smash them once and for all". (14)

(b) Ever since the new EC took control of the union in January 1962, the editorials in *Electron* had been given over regularly to attacking Communist "interference" in the union and warning of the threat that they posed to the union's democracy. By "interference" was meant unofficial circulars, factional organization, and frequent blistering attacks on the EC in the columns of the *Daily Worker*. Precisely the forms of "interference" that Cannon and his group were involved in when the CP were in control of the union, in fact. During the course of 1963, however, the veiled warnings of membership retribution that had hitherto been directed against the

CP in the union began to take a more definite form. In a letter in the June edition of *Electron* a member from Swindon, A.J. Davies, advocated "barring all Communists from office":

"Some members will probably dismiss this by saying 'witch hunt'. But I believe very sincerely in democracy, and to my way of thinking democracy means that no discrimination should be taken against anyone purely on the grounds that he or she belongs to any political party or holds certain political, economic or religious beliefs. In short, every member should stand on equal terms with every other member for any office becoming vacant within the Union.

But when it can be proven, as was done in the High Court, that the Communist Party managed and controlled the Union, then surely this must be seen as a direct threat to our democracy."

(15)

Similar sentiments were expressed by W.G. Crowe in the August issue of *Electron*, but Crowe went further and suggested that

"In view of the decisive mandate given to the EC to remove the perpetrators of fraud (which must include those who wittingly or unwittingly support the return to power of those who owe allegiance to the same creed), I would deem it imperative to institute a ballot to ascertain if the membership concur with this course of action, to restore sanity and unity to our organization." (16)

With the election of Cannon as President in September 1963 with the highest vote for office in the union's history (34,978 votes, an overall majority of 14,502 over his two rivals), and the return of the right-wing leadership in the Executive Council elections of the same time, the *Reform Committee* must have felt increasingly confident of their position. Now if ever, they must have reasoned, was the time to move against the CP. But they needed an excuse. This came in 1964, in the run up to the all important

1965 RRC. The CP dominated opposition in the union circulated a document entitled *Amendments to Rule*, which listed a number of amendments that they were pushing for at the 1965 RRC. When the 243 "official" amendments reached Head Office from the branches, it was claimed that 90 were either worded precisely as in the CP document, or as near enough as to make no difference. (17) In view of this, the EC decided in October that

"there has been outside interference by the Communist Party in the internal affairs of the Electrical Trades Union, calculated to determine a substantial part of the agenda of the Rules Revision Conference." (18)

W.G. Crowe's suggestion was then taken up and a special ballot of the members was held on whether or not Communist Party members should be allowed to hold any official positions in the union. The ban on CP members holding office in the union was carried by 42,187 votes to 13,932 (the ban still holds to the present day; the only other union to ban Communists from office, the T&GWU, reversed their 1949 ban in 1968). (19) Communist Party members who already held office in the union were then given three months in which to either give up that office or resign from the Party. There was no persecution, Olga Cannon tells us, "rather the whole matter was handled in keeping with the British tradition of fair play and of gentlemen's agreements". (20) For its part the CP instructed its members who held office in the union to resign, but then found that only one official, Bert Atwood, would do so. Initially two other full-time officials in the London Area decided to resign their posts, but by January 1965 they had changed their minds, and the election to replace them was called off. In all, twenty leading Communists resigned from the Party rather than give up their official positions in the union. (21) This was, of course, a body blow to the morale of the CP members in the union, not to mention the strategy of the *British Road to Socialism* which saw these very same left-wing officials as the key element in moving the labour movement leftwards. So as the crucial 1965 RRC approached, the organized opposition in the union had suffered a setback, while the leadership seemed to be going from strength to strength. Be that as it may, the CP were far from defeated, and they were far from being

the only people in the union opposed to the restructuring proposals. There were many rank-and-file members, especially amongst the activists, just as opposed to the proposals as the CP were. The leadership knew this, and so were still unsure of which way the Conference would swing.

The 1965 Rules Revision Conference

One sign of the leadership's unease about the possibility of defeat was the venue chosen for the 1965 RRC - the Isle of Man. For a cost-conscious leadership it seemed like an odd choice, but it had the advantage of dissuading rank-and-file activists from making the journey to lobby the delegates. Another sign was the ominous tone of Cannon's Presidential address:

"The task before the Rules Revision Conference is very great indeed. We now have probably a once and for all chance to reform the internal structure of the Union. If we fail in this task, we fail to consummate all the great possibilities before us. We will for a time stagnate in organisational mediocrity waiting at a later date to be rescued by some other Union which has been able to grasp hold of history and move along with it."

Besides dwelling on the gravity of the decisions that were to be made by the delegates, Cannon associated the momentous changes that were needed in the ETU with the Wilsonian vision of a "New Britain" forged in the "white heat of the technological revolution":

"We live at a time when every thinking person in the country is anxious to see Britain modernised as quickly as possible...But for Britain to be modernised, it means not only our economy but our ideas and our institutions, including the Trade Union Movement...So many people are all for modernisation except when it affects themselves. However, I am confident that in this crucial moment in the history of our Union, this Conference will show that when

it speaks of the new, modern Britain it recognises the need for a new, modern electrical workers' Union." (22)

The message was clear: Harold Wilson's "New Britain" that was to be built "on the basis of expanding output, expanding investment and rising productivity" demanded a new, modernised trade union movement fit for the technological age. (23) The ETU could either spearhead that change or fall by the wayside and later be swallowed up by some other union that had grasped hold of history and moved along with it. The immediate task, however, was an organisational reshaping of the structure of the union in order to equip it for the tasks that lay ahead. To this end the Executive Council proposed three principal rule changes: firstly, the abolition of the Area Committees and their replacement by Area Industrial Conferences; secondly, the abolition of the lay Executive Council which was elected every 2 years and its replacement by a full-time EC elected every 5 years; and, thirdly, the amalgamation of the geographical branches into large industrial branches under a full-time appointed branch officer. The EC's thinking was straightforward enough at one level. The old structure of the union had to be virtually scrapped and replaced by an industrial structure that corresponded more closely with the collective bargaining machinery operating in the various industries covered by the union (see Diagram 3, Appendix). And this also ruled out combinations of the old and the new structures, such as had come into existence after the 1962 SRRC (see Diagram 2, Appendix)

But Cannon's Wilsonian vision of a streamlined and efficient union for the new age was not really the main issue of contention at the RRC. No doubt the majority of the delegates had welcomed the return of a Labour Government after "thirteen years of Tory misrule", and no doubt the majority of them shared the Wilsonian vision of a better future, and no doubt they could appreciate that this would mean the "modernising" of the union along industrial lines. But the proposed rules changes were to do with much more than modernisation: they were to do with democracy in the ETU. What was being proposed by the EC was a centralisation of power, an extension of the Executive authority which had always been checked by the powerful Area Committees, by branch autonomy, and by the

fact that EC members still had to work alongside the people who had elected them. Behind all the arguments about efficiency and modernisation, which were genuine enough, lay the real issue of where power should reside in the union. How the proposed new industrial structure would affect the union's democracy, then, was the central focus of the debate at Douglas.

(1) Abolition of the Area Committees

W.B. Blairford for the EC led off the lengthy debate on the abolition of the Area Committees (ACs). He argued that the ACs were not only costly and inefficient and rapidly becoming an impediment in a period of technological change, but they were no longer necessary as it was the EC's intention to extend the National Industrial Conferences (NICs) set up in 1962 to Area level. Delegates who spoke in favour of the EC's move focused their criticisms, in the main, like Blairford, on the cost and poor service of the ACs, or on personal experiences that had sullied their respect for the Committees. But the major criticism levelled against the ACs was that the branch delegates who attended them had scant knowledge of the particular industries or workplaces that they were expected to make decisions about, a problem that would not arise in Area Industrial Conferences (AICs) where the delegates would be drawn from the same industry and many from the same workplaces. Cannon linked this criticism directly to the issue of union democracy. Democracy requires two things, he said:

"The first is that there shall be opportunity for people to discuss and take part in deciding matters which affect their interest. That is democracy as far as the Trade Unionist is concerned. It requires that, and requires one other thing, which our Union did not have sufficient of over many years: it requires a critical frame of mind so that people can take advantage of those opportunities...

Let me now look at the functions of the middle committee organisation in the light of that conception of democracy...

Just how do you explain, in the light of democracy, an Area Committee on which there might be no Electricity Supply Delegates in these days when a complicated agreement has to be interpreted, a part of which provides for the introduction of new patterns of working depending upon District agreement. That means that the Area Official, I suppose, would consult the Area Committee...I say here and now...they are not competent to decide. They should not decide whether these staggers should be worked. The people the Area Officials should consult - and no one else - are the Shop Stewards and the Works Committee members of the Electrical Trades Union in the Electricity Supply Industry. Is there an Electricity Supply man here who will come and say he wants to forego the opportunity to decide whether he will go on one of these staggers, leaving the decision to other members of the Union in other industries?" (24)

Cannon's point was well made. The proposed new AICs would be far more democratic than the ACs, he was saying, because workers in particular sectors of the electrical industry would have delegates discussing subjects of which they had an intimate knowledge and which directly affected their own livelihoods.

The EC's case against the Area Committees was essentially twofold then. Firstly they argued that the ACs were inefficient not only in terms of cost to the union but also as local negotiating bodies. Secondly, they said that the ACs were undemocratic because of the cross-industry basis of their composition, which often precluded delegates from particular industries having a say in the decisions that directly affected them. Even on those ACs that did have representatives from all the industries covered by the union, the EC argued that only those with an intimate knowledge of the relevant industry in question were competent to make decisions relating to that industry. It was not a matter of broader

representation, then, but of first hand knowledge and experience gained from working in the industries concerned. The proposed new AICs, made up entirely of delegates from one industry would, it was argued, be far more efficient and far more democratic than the ACs. How did the opposition to the EC's proposals counter these and other arguments in the course of the debate?

The argument hitherto expounded by the EC and many of the pro-EC delegates at the Conference concerning the high cost of the ACs compared to the proposed new, cost-conscious AICs was disposed of from a rather unexpected quarter - Les Cannon:

"I think what you can say is that with the optimum attendance at Area Industrial Conferences, the new arrangements would probably work out at the same cost." (25)

As to the main charge that the ACs were undemocratic, the oppositionists argued that if it was the case that the ACs' composition precluded certain sections of the electrical industry, then the answer was not to abolish them, but to extend their functions and representation. It was admitted that errors of judgement could be made because delegates might not possess an intimate knowledge of a particular industry or factory, but, as one delegate put it:

"How often did our Area Committee delegates arrive at a decision which was contrary to the views of the shop stewards and members employed in any particular industry? On the contrary, the decision to eliminate the Area Committees by the Executive Council may well arise from the support given by these Committees to our members engaged in local disputes and because of oppositional viewpoints expressed by them in relation to national issues." (26)

Another delegate pointed out that lack of intimate knowledge of a particular industry or workplace was not a problem faced by the ACs alone. Surely, he said, the EC had a greater problem in this respect?

If Cannon's two requirements for union democracy were to be taken seriously, it would seem that the ACs went a long way in

meeting those requirements. For the ACs were not just talking shops, they possessed real power at local level, and thus provided an arena where a genuine participatory democracy could develop. Many delegates made the point that the ACs were the training grounds for members with the potential to become officials and forums where rank-and-file members could gain an intimate knowledge of industries other than their own. As a delegate from Govan in Glasgow explained:

"I believe that the Area Committee is important as a proving ground. I have worked in the Shipbuilding and Contracting industries and I am now in the Miscellaneous section. I have learned a lot about Supply, although I have never worked there, primarily because I have listened to the problems of Supply delegates at these Area Committee meetings." (27)

This echoed another complaint about the proposed new AICs: that they would lead to sectionalism, cutting members off from the broad affairs of the union. Cannon took note of this concern and suggested that the problem could be alleviated by the development of *Electron* into a monthly newspaper whose front and back pages would be "white" twenty-four hours before publication, so that news could reach the members rapidly. Cannon also reminded the Conference that there was also provision under the Rules for any member to visit any branch of the union and speak on any subject on the agenda.

But the real issue was not communication or lack of it. The real issue was the power and autonomy that the ACs had, a power and autonomy that went completely against the centralisation that was at the heart of Cannon's plan to remodel the union. Surprisingly, this crucial issue was skirted both by the EC and the organized opposition at the Conference - the Communist Party. Although it underlay the arguments of both sides, it was only mentioned once directly by a delegate from Luton:

"There is a place in this organisation for Area Committees. Why are they not allowed to function? This is because the Executive Council

are either afraid or do not want to delegate powers to the Area Committee..." (28)

The reason why the EC avoided the issue of power and instead concentrated on cost, efficiency and democracy is not hard to fathom. If they had concentrated on the powers of the ACs compared to the "powers" of the proposed AICs they might well have badly damaged their case. For the ACs of the ETU, like the District Committees of the AEU on which they were based, had not only widespread powers to appoint delegates to the various local Joint Industrial Councils and trade union bodies, to convene meetings of shop-stewards and to discipline members, but they also had the power to

"deal with and regulate the rates of wage, hours of labour, terms of overtime and general conditions affecting the interests of the members of the Union in the area." (29)

What is more, all the decisions of the ACs were binding on the members in the Area. Thus the ACs were powerful autonomous bodies, although they were still subject to the overall control of the Executive Council.

In contrast the powers of the proposed AICs would be restricted to electing delegates to the union's annual National Industrial Conferences and local Joint Industrial Councils and trade union bodies "by such number and in such a manner as determined by the Executive Council". (30) The local negotiating powers of the ACs would be virtually abolished and replaced by four AICs per year covering, initially, electrical contracting, electrical supply, ship building and ship repair and engineering and they would merely act as consultative bodies - they would have no binding powers. Later Area Industrial Committees would replace the quarterly AICs, which would then meet annually, but their powers, or lack of them, would be the same, restricted to assisting the local full-time official. The AICs would be exactly what Cannon said they would be in his speech about the two requirements of democracy, places where members of the same section of the electrical industry could discuss openly and critically common problems. What was not said, however, was that no matter how much a particular problem was discussed the final decision to implement a

particular negotiating strategy (for example, a rise in overtime payments at a factory backed up by an overtime ban) rested with the full-time official and not the Area Industrial Conferences or the Area Industrial Committees. Cannon's conception of democracy was all to do with discussion and very little to do with power - rank-and-file members actually having a direct controlling interest in the matters that affected their day to day existence.

What is puzzling is why the organized opposition in the ETU (the CP and their supporters) should concentrate their fire on the issues raised by the Executive (the cost and composition of the ACs and so forth), as important as these were, and not demonstrate that the real intent behind the EC's proposals had little to do with cost and democracy and everything to do with the centralisation of power in the union - in other words, a massive reduction in democracy. Presumably, they thought they could win the argument within the confines of the agenda set by the Executive Council. But to stray outside this agenda had dangers for both sides. For the EC the argument about cost and democracy conveniently avoided the particulars about the power shift that would take place if their proposals were implemented. For the organized opposition, to press this point might have caused the EC to resort to its familiar tactic of claiming that the ACs were controlled by a minority of Communist Party members and "fellow-travellers". This, only months after the ballot that banned CP members from holding any official positions in the union, was obviously an area that the CP wanted to avoid. It was also an area that the EC wanted to avoid as well. The ACs were popular despite the disproportionate influence of the CP in them. To portray them as tools of the CP in front of a Conference of activists would hardly have gone down too well. So the crucial issue of power was not tackled head on by either side in the debate, only indirectly.

In the end the vote in favour of the EC position was close - 325 votes for the Amendment and 292 votes against.

With hindsight what can be made of the Executive Council's claim that the abolition of the ACs served the best interests of ETU members by providing them with a more efficient and democratic structure? If by efficient they meant a streamlined industrial

structure that corresponded more closely with the contours of the collective bargaining machinery in the electrical industry, then the EC had a strong case. Of course it was more efficient and made more sense for members in particular industries to come together in local and national Industrial Conferences to hammer out issues and discuss wages and conditions in their area of work. Not surprisingly then the National Industrial Conferences were welcomed by union activists at the 1962 SRRC, as even the CP admitted. They were welcomed because they were seen as complimenting the existing structure of the union (at this time there was no talk of the abolition of the ACs) and were thus seen as extending democracy in the union, and because, as we have said, the logic of the Industrial Conference, calling delegates from one industry together, seemed sound to most ETU members. However, the EC's decision to get rid of the ACs and replace them by AICs changed the situation entirely. Now what was proposed was not a compliment to the existing system but a replacement. And if the EC could argue with some justice that the new industrial structure was more efficient, the argument that it was more democratic holds little water.

With all their shortcomings the ACs were nothing if not democratic. They were made up of delegates elected every two years from every branch of the union in a particular area. The Area President was elected by the newly elected members and the Area Secretary (a full-time position) by the entire membership of the area. And as we have seen, the cornerstone of their democracy was the power they had over local negotiating policy, the power to translate decisions into local policy, whether on over-time working, discipline, or support for strikes. Democracy was thus not just about discussion, but about action also. So in stark contrast to the AICs, in the Area Committees there was no divorce between negotiating policy and democracy - they were the two sides of the same coin.

Why then were such democratic bodies rejected by the delegates at the 1965 Conference? Partly for the reasons outlined above, and partly because it seems that the actual powers that the AICs would have were not altogether clear to the delegates. Most delegates, presumably, envisaged the AICs having more powers than they were in

fact to have, although the rule change presented to the delegates made it quite clear that important functions of the ACs (such as regulating wages and hours) would not be transferred to the new bodies. Given this uncertainty, those who voted against the Executive Council were probably in favour of Area Industrial Conferences but not at the expense of ACs. Put another way, they held to the 1962 position - a mixture of the old and new structures. Those who voted for the rule change more than likely did so in the belief that the new AICs would carry more weight than in fact they were to do. However this is speculation. What is clear with hindsight though, is the role that Cannon saw for the "middle Committee organisation" of the union - the Area Industrial Conferences.

B.C. Roberts observed that unions which have District or Area Committees can be divided into two main categories,

"those which empower the Committees to conduct an important part of the union's business, and those which use them merely for consultative, advisory and propaganda purposes." (31)

Area Committees fell into the former category, Area Industrial Conferences (and National Industrial Conferences) firmly into the latter. Questioned by Hugh Clegg during the course of the ETU's oral evidence to the Donovan Commission in November 1966 as to whether the Industrial Conferences had the power to make decisions or were merely consultative, Cannon replied:

"They take decisions on general lines of policy...It is not possible to take a decision which will direct each stage of negotiations. At the industrial conferences they are dealing with the report of negotiations which have taken place, or they might be dealing with some interim report of negotiations which are proceeding. They will give a general view of what they think about the direction in which the negotiations are going, and the negotiators are thus guided. If they feel that the negotiations are going in a totally wrong direction they make that perfectly clear to us

and we would have to take heed of it. It is not so much a question of having power to decide what should be done; "consultative" is probably the proper word..." (32)

If Cannon had been so honest at the 1965 Conference it is doubtful whether the rule change would have been carried. The Industrial Conferences were to be powerless, providing no mechanism for rank-and-file members to sit on negotiating committees, let alone allowing ratification of agreements before they were signed.

The destruction of the semi-autonomous centres of power in the union - the ACs - was a major achievement for the leadership. The immediate gain as far as the Executive Council were concerned was to isolate the local activists, especially those belonging to the CP, from their strongholds in the ACs. It also set the process in motion of moving the union away from the old geographical branch and Area organisation towards an "American-style industry-based system, with area industrial committees and national industrial conferences which have no binding influence on industrial officers". (33)

(2) Abolition of the rank-and-file Executive Council

The leadership's recommendation to abolish the lay Executive Council of the union and replace it with a full-time one elected every 5 years instead of every two years, was argued for largely on the need for technical expertise and cost saving. A rank-and-file EC was fine in the early days of the ETU, argued E. Hadley on behalf of the Executive Council, but with the rapid growth and industrial diversity of the union what was now demanded was the specialized skills of a full-time EC:

"...it is not so easy now for the part-time Executive Council members to understand the working conditions of all our members in these diverse industries, primarily because in all probability they have no working experience in most of the industries from which our members are drawn..."

The Executive Council has the responsibility to examine and ratify every agreement negotiated by the Union at both national and local levels. For this reason alone, the part-time Executive Council member inevitably tends to become the servant of the officials who have the time and facilities at their disposal to master all and every detail of every section of every trade...We agree with the early founders of our Union, that the Executive Council must have the final authority in the Union. We also believe that they have to a very large extent lost that authority because they have not had the time to master their job...At the same time, this part-time Executive Council lacks even the virtue of economy...it is costing this Union on an average £1,240 per Executive Council member per year for the Executive Council as it exists at present." (34)

The need for a professional Executive Council as opposed to a costly and fumbling part-time one were the main reasons given by Hadley in support of the EC's recommendation. Hadley also put the argument that EC authority was being undermined by the power of the full-time officials. So that those in the union who saw the lay EC as a cornerstone of the union's democracy could not see that this very democracy was being undermined by the technical expertise that the elected full-time officials were able to acquire and upon which the lay EC members were dependent. The implication was clear: the lay EC were in grave danger of becoming the mere puppets of the full-time officials and the only way to rectify this position was to raise the technical level of the EC members by making them full-timers.

Opposition delegates took on this argument directly. They argued that the greater industrial diversity of the union was no reason to make the EC a full-time body, but a good reason to elect more full-time officials. As for the cost, one delegate reckoned that the cost of six new full-time officials, as opposed to the cost of eleven full-time EC members, would save the union £10,000

per year. (35)) But the main thrust of the opposition case was to do with the role of the EC and full-timers and the relationship between the two. Far from the lay EC members becoming servants of the full-time officials, they argued it was precisely their function to keep a check on the officials and make sure they carried out the general policy of the union. The primary function of the EC members was not therefore to have a detailed knowledge of all the agreements negotiated by the union at local and national level or even in one particular section of the electrical industry, rather their function was policy implementation and direction of the full-timers. They would naturally be acquainted with many agreements in great detail, but their main task was to ratify agreements in consultation with the officials and the membership in the various sections of the industry. A contribution from a delegate from Edinburgh summed up the general position of the oppositionists:

"Bro. Hadley gave us a wonderfully correct answer to the problems we are faced with but the answer was given to a very wrong question. The question that should have been asked by the Executive Council is, "What is the purpose of the Executive Council?" The lay members of the Executive Council are the safeguard and the watchdog of the membership of the trade union. When he said to us that the part-time Executive Council become the slaves of the full-time officials, he also led us to believe that if we elect a purely full-time Executive Council then the membership becomes the slave of the full-time officials...a lay membership of the Executive Council is our stop button for anything that we feel might be wrong with the organisation of the trade union." (36)

Once again then union democracy was at the heart of the restructuring debate. Both the EC and the opposition argued for and against the rule change by reference to safeguarding the union's democracy. For the EC the efficiency of the union organization would be vastly improved by a full-time EC that was also capable of

controlling what they referred to in their evidence to Donovan as the "full-time professional bureaucracy" of the union. (37) For the opposition the efficiency of the union's organization would be improved by the election of more full-time officials and the retention of a rank-and-file EC as the best means of controlling and directing the full-timers. Moreover, in this debate (unlike in the debate over the ACs) the implications of the leadership's attempts to centralize the union's structure came fully to the fore. Fred Gore a leading oppositionist in the union explained it like this:

"The Executive Council are calling for a full-time Executive Council. This will mean that we will be electing the supreme policy-making body in the union for five years instead of two years at present. Not only will the Executive Council decide policy, but they will implement it and conduct all important negotiations. The individual Executive Councillor by virtue of that office will become the senior official controlling Area Officials in a Regional Office. By judiciously recruiting branches and installing a full-time branch secretary, this Executive Council devised structure, including their proposal to eliminate Area Committees, will ensure complete domination from the top on all policy questions, and national and district wage negotiations." (38)

This was, indeed, the shape of things to come.

The debate ended with a card vote and a victory for the leadership. The EC's amendment to the rules was carried by 321 votes to 297, with one invalid vote. But as the debate and the close vote showed, the centralizing principle pursued by the leadership, although it was presented in terms of efficiency, cost-saving and union democracy, kept on running up against the established tradition of rank-and-file control which was based upon the decentralising principle of the separation of powers. Indeed, Cannon specifically mentioned the American political system as the model that some delegates seemed to think appropriate to the ETU

and begged them to introduce a little more realism into the debate. Ironically it was this "American system" with its separation of powers that the Cannon leadership saw as the main obstacle to transforming the ETU into an American style business union, while the Communists and other oppositionists in the union were busy defending the "American way".

It was in many ways a classical debate, with both sides unwittingly employing arguments that were used by both the Webbs and Michels. The Webbs had pinpointed what they considered to be the major dilemma of late 19th Century trade union democracy:

"...the problem of uniting efficient administration with popular control." (39)

They argued that the growth and complexity of trade union affairs had put popular control (by this they meant direct democracy) outside the reach of the average trade unionist who was "unversed in the technicalities of administration." (40) The solution to this democratic dilemma was, according to the Webbs, the acceptance of representative institutions such as existed in the cotton spinning union (which had an EC made up of seven working spinners and six full-time officials). However, the Webbs did not deny (indeed they welcomed) the fact that the "representative solution" that these unions had found necessarily entailed the creation of "two classes of members, salaried officials...and representative wage earners, and that the paramount necessity of efficient administration produced "a progressive differentiation of an official governing class, more and more marked off by character, training and duties from the bulk of the members". (41) Nonetheless they believed that "popular control" could be exerted on "this civil service of the trade union world" by union "parliaments" (conferences) where the rank-and-file had their say and elected their leaders, and by the working spinners on the Executive checking the powers of its full-time members.

Similar problems are raised in discussing the ETU. Both the leadership and the opposition admitted the power of the officials, and both wanted to add to that power. The leadership by making the EC full-time, the opposition by creating more full-time officials. But there was a difference. The opposition believed that because the majority of full-timers were elected at local level they were

strongly constrained in their actions, and the rank-and-file EC members acted as a double check on these officials as well as the nationally elected officials such as Cannon and Chapple. And of course, the officials elected at local level could also act as a check on the lay EC. For despite the fact that they were still "on the tools", and therefore in theory open to direct pressure from their workmates to act democratically, it was common knowledge that EC members worked for the union, as Hadley put it, "on a temporary full-time basis" anyway. (42) These checks would disappear once the ACs and the rank-and-file EC were abolished (and it must also be remembered that ETU conference decisions were not binding on the leadership). True the officials were still to be elected (until 1969 that is), but the checks and balances that were inherent in a democracy that separated power between national and local officials and the EC were to be lost. So already the "popular power" enjoyed by ETU members did not seem to fare very well with that enjoyed by the cotton-spinners at the end of the last century.

Hadley's argument that lack of expertise made it possible for the full-time official to manipulate the lay EC member, missed the point that the delegate from Edinburgh had made: if the lay EC were the slaves of the full-timers would that not mean that the membership would be the slaves of a full-time Executive Council? On the one hand, Hadley seemed to be agreeing with Michels' theory that "the principal cause of oligarchy...is to be found in the technical indispensability of leadership". (43) On the other hand, he was proposing a solution to this problem that would increase the "technical indispensability of leadership" while at the same time removing the existing checks on the abuse of that power. Looked at either from the Webbs' or Michels' position, the leadership's reasoning that a full-time EC would curb the power of the officials appears very flimsy.

(3) Branch amalgamations

In his opening address to the Conference Cannon outlined the proposals for phasing out most of the geographical branches of the union and amalgamating them into large industrial branches made up

of members from the same section of the electrical industry and administered by a full-time branch secretary/treasurer:

"Our proposals will permit, on the basis of sound economics, the possibility of full-time administrative officers in branches of 1,400 and upwards. This means that not only the major cities - such as London, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and Birmingham with a membership of 10,000 and above, not only Sheffield, Edinburgh, Leeds and Bristol with a membership around the 3000 - but also smaller cities and large towns...In total, it might be possible, even in the beginning, to think in terms of 50 full-time administrative officers covering our membership in the cities and large towns and involving as much as 40 per cent of our total membership. Even in this transitional stage, we shall not lose sight of the ultimate objective of trying to get quickly to industrial branches." (44)

Cannon's projection was that the existing 600 odd branches of the ETU and their lay branch secretaries should in the not too distant future be incorporated into a streamlined industrial structure that reduced the number of branches to about 100, each headed by a full-time officer. So in the major cities and towns all the contracting members would be in one branch and all the supply workers in another, and so on. It was agreed that not all branches would fit neatly into this new industrial structure, especially in country areas, consequently many of the old geographical branches would continue to exist as before. But once again what seemed on the surface to be a debate about how best to make the union more efficient and business-like, turned out to be an argument about union democracy, about the centralization of power in the union and the rights of the rank-and-file.

The result of the debate was almost a foregone conclusion, since the rule changes abolishing the ACs and the rank-and-file EC had already been carried by the Conference. The debate then did not centre on the rights and wrongs of the new industrial structure as

such (that argument seemed already to be lost) but rather on the implications of the proposed rule changes. Moreover, and this is a point worth stressing in the light of the subsequent forced amalgamation of some branches of the union and the appointment of some full-time branch secretaries against the wishes of the branches concerned, the rule changes under debate only referred to the election and not the appointment of full-time branch secretaries, and to the amalgamation of branches only after consultation with the various branch committees:

"Where the Executive Council consider it necessary, the branch shall elect a full-time officer who shall perform the duties of secretary/treasurer.."

"The Executive Council in consultation with the appropriate branches shall from time to time determine the limits of each branch." (45)

The points made in the debate about efficiency and democracy are thus very revealing, given the storms that were to take place in the union in the 1970s over the appointment of branch officers and the closure and amalgamation of branches without consultation.

The case the EC and their supporters presented in the debate was quite straightforward, and all the more compelling because of that. They simply argued that full-time branch officers were obviously in a better position to provide the membership with a far more efficient service than were the overworked lay branch secretaries who had to earn a living as well as carry the burdens of their local branch. That lay branch officials, as dedicated as they were, could not hope to hold down a regular job and then put in as much as 28 hours a week in branch work and at the same time maintain an efficient service for the members seemed incontrovertible. (46) As to the fears voiced by some delegates about the way the new proposals would be implemented, Cannon assured them that the EC could "not successfully reconstruct branches without consultation, without good will...we will proceed with the greatest caution with the maximum consultation". (47)

If the EC's arguments rested once again on the need to construct a modern, efficient union structure in order to provide a

better service for the membership, then once again the opposition pointed to the danger that centralisation posed to the union's internal democracy. As a delegate from the Watford branch of the union argued:

"The proposal to have full-time branch officials is not, in my opinion, a simple move to strengthen the efficiency of this union, although I would agree that in certain circumstances it might be useful and possibly desirable. I feel it is a move that will give the Executive Council the powers to make one of the most drastic changes ever in the construction of our union. It will open the flood gates, giving the Executive Council the supreme power to change the absolute construction of the union...Branches, as they are now constituted, are the focal point of our organisation where every individual member can join in the administration, debate policy, discuss the work of the Executive Council and put forward his suggestions...If we pass this amendment, we will give the Executive Council the powers to herd our members into huge industrial branches. This will decrease membership participation in our union and be one more step towards putting our union firmly in the hands of full-time officials." (48)

Other issues and questions were raised by the opposition delegates. How would the amalgamation of branches affect ETU representation on local bodies such as Trades Councils and Labour Party committees? How much would the full-time branch secretaries be paid? How big would the branches become - 15,000 strong? But the main concern was loss of rank-and-file control and the augmentation of Executive power. However, on a show of hands the rule change was declared to be carried. There were cries for a card vote but Cannon refused.

As we have seen then, at the 1965 RRC (probably the most important in the union's history), the EC's proposals for remodelling the union on the lines put forward by Cannon in his 1963 paper the *Internal Structure of the Union* were all narrowly carried by the delegates. The "New Model" union envisaged by Cannon was now about to take shape. However, the leadership had not quite finished reshaping the internal structure and thus the internal democracy of the union to their complete satisfaction in 1965. But by the time of the union's 1969 Conference they felt confident and secure enough not only to finish the job, but to discard some of the democratic reforms that they themselves had introduced during the "orgy of democracy" at the 1962 SRRC, and also to jettison one of the cornerstones of ETU democracy.

There were three major rule changes proposed by the Executive Council at the 1969 Conference: firstly, the abolition of the Rank-and-File Appeals Committee established at the 1962 Conference; secondly, the abolition of elections for full-time officials; and, thirdly, the abolition of the elected rank-and-file trustees of the union. All these measures were rejected by the delegates. The EC then by-passed the decisions of the Conference and successfully balloted the entire membership of the union on the rule changes. The most important consequence of the ballot victory as far as the EC were concerned was that they could now appoint all 150 full-time officials of the union. Far from the EC being the servants of the officials, as Hadley had argued for the leadership in the 1965 debate on the abolition of the lay EC, the full-timers were now the servants of the Executive, or, more precisely the National Officers of the union - Cannon, Chapple, Young and their close associates. The separation of powers that gave elected officials a large degree of independence from the central apparatus grouped around Cannon, as well as giving the membership a real choice of candidates, was now to all intents and purposes destroyed.

In the space of seven years then the internal democratic structure of the Electricians' Union had changed out of all recognition. The semi-autonomous centres of power in the union - the Area Committees - had disappeared, the branches were in the process of being closed down and amalgamated, and there were now only 14 elected positions in the entire union as opposed to over

160 before 1969. The new industrial structure was arguably more "efficient" and practical, in that it corresponded more closely with the contours of the collective bargaining process and brought together ETU members in the same sector of the electrical industry. But despite claims to the contrary by the leadership, the "New Model" was no where near as democratic as the the structure that emerged after the 1962 Conference. For neither the National or Area Industrial Conferences were endowed with any binding powers, the independence of the branches was to be checked by amalgamation and in many cases the appointment of full-time branch secretaries, the main organized opposition in the union - the CP - was banned from holding any office, and the referendum was used to by-pass any unfavourable conference decisions (although it will be remembered that the leadership did not have to resort to this expedient as conference decisions had never been binding on the the EC in the ETU).

The overall aim of the changes was, as we have argued, to centralise power in the union and isolate the active and organized elements from their bases in the branches and ACs. However, the leadership recognized that centralisation could only go so far in any trade union; and this itself was a problem for the leadership, as their comments on the function of the shop steward to the Donovan Commission indicate:

"The ETU recognises that the function and activity of the shop steward is necessary as the most direct and positive link with their rank and file membership...At the same time it is recognised that the position is not without its dangers to the official structure and could have a disruptive effect upon trade union discipline since by its very nature the steward/member relationship cannot be rigidly controlled." (49)

What was true of the shop-steward was also true of the activists in the union. No matter how far power had been centralized in the union, it was impossible for the leadership to rigidly control the activists in the union. They would always be an unpredictable force liable to upset the best laid plans of the EC.

In fact the strength of the opposition had been growing since 1965, as the rejection of the EC's proposals at the 1969 Conference shows. One of the main reasons for this was that it had become increasingly clear that the remodelling of the union undertaken by Cannon was part and parcel of a dramatic shift in the political and industrial strategy of the union. The rising internal opposition in the late 1960s was a reflection of this fact. With hindsight, however, we can see that underlying the dissatisfaction felt by a large section of the membership with the policies pursued by the leadership was a more fundamental, and as yet unrecognized, shift in the orientation of the union, a shift that entailed a move away from the traditional British model of trade unionism towards an American type model. It was this model that had inspired the changes that Cannon had championed.

Britain's first business union?

In its evidence to the Donovan Commission the ETU claimed that a "new attitude" was developing in British trade unions. This "new attitude" they said was "in line with the conception of trade unionism held by men such as Walter Reuther in America". (50) Before examining the particular attraction that the leader of the United Auto Workers (UAW), Walter Reuther, held for the ETU, we will look firstly, and more generally, at the allurements of American business or market unionism as it developed in the 1950s. For without doubt the American-model of the 1950s provided Cannon not only with a structural model to follow, but also with a philosophy that dovetailed quite easily with the politics of right-wing Labourism that guided the actions of the EC throughout Harold Wilson's first term of office. And it has been this marriage of American business unionism and right-wing Labourism, consummated in the 1960s, which has prevailed and developed in the union until the present day.

If we first look at the general "philosophy" of American business unionism as it developed during the 1950s, what is striking are the similarities between this philosophy and that developed by the ETU in the 1960s. Daniel Bell has captured quite well the shift in American trade union policy and attitudes in the

1950s. In his The End of Ideology, Bell argues that historically American trade unionism must be seen as existing in two contexts, as a social movement and an economic force (market unionism), playing a different role in each. As a social movement organized labour can be seen as part of an historical trend that challenges the established order:

"Market unionism, on the other hand, is an economic conception, a delimiting role and function, imposed by the realities of the special industrial environment in which the union operates." (51)

Bell makes clear, however, that the distinction between social movement and market unionism is not a distinction between political and collective bargaining unionism, for all trade unions are directly or indirectly forced into politics. What sort of politics came to the fore, those that challenged the established order or those that remained firmly within the confines of that order, was dependent on the particular circumstances prevailing at the time. Dividing the history of the American labour movement from 1860 to 1955 into four periods, Bell shows how in each period it was either the ideas of a social movement or market unionism that dominated the labour and trade union movement. In his fourth periodization - 1940-1955 - he argues that the social movement, the "ideological flavour" that had dominated the labour movement in previous periods (1860-1880, 1933-1940), and had existed in conflict with market unionism between 1880-1920 (the 1920s being a period of stagnation according to Bell), was abandoned and instead the trade unions concentrated on market unionism. Whatever may be said of Bell's all too neat schema, it seems clear that in post-war America there was indeed a sharp move away from any ideology rooted in the unions that challenged the established order and a dramatic shift towards the ideology of market unionism.

A report by the International Labour Organization, who sent a mission to study the trade union situation in the USA in 1959, provides a vivid picture of the shift Bell was writing about. The ILO delegation

"...was struck in its discussions with union leaders by the almost total absence of any

questioning of the bases of the American economic and social system. Unlike many labour movements in Europe and elsewhere, the trade unions in the United States do not appear to even consider, still less advocate, any major changes in the system in which they operate, in spite of the many bitter battles that have occurred between unions and capital." (52)

According to Bell, in practice this meant that there was a growing awareness amongst trade union leaders that wage and welfare increases could only be obtained above and beyond the cost of living if they were linked to increases in productivity. This resulted in a major shift in the collective bargaining strategy of American trade unions in the 1950s, one that not only eschewed any form of challenge to the priorities of the market economy, but one that consciously formulated its bargaining strategy on the basis of the competitive needs of the particular company or industry. Of course this did not mean there was total harmony between capital and labour as the ILO's comments make clear. And Bell himself noted that

"the logic of market-unionism leads to a limited, uneasy partnership of union and company, or union and industry; uneasy because in many cases employers would still prefer to exercise sole power, although the more sophisticated employers know the value of such powerful allies as the union in safeguarding their interests; uneasy, too, because there is still the historic tendency of labour, acting as a social movement, to oppose the employers as a class." (53)

Nonetheless, the shift was real enough, and can be compared to the similar shift that has taken place in the British labour movement in the last ten years or so - from the militancy of the 1970s to the "new realism" of the 1980s.

Overall, though, it is not hard to see why the ETU leadership should be attracted to the American attitude towards industrial relations and why they saw signs of this "new attitude" developing

in the mid-1960s under the Labour Government of Harold Wilson. For the "Joint Statement of Intent on Productivity, Prices and Incomes", signed in 1964 by the TUC, the Labour Government and employers' organizations, premised as it was on the sound market reasoning that social benefits and increases in wages could only come as a result of an expanding economy, left unquestioned the bases of the economic and social system that the ILO had noted in their discussions with American trade union leaders. However, the panacea of economic growth continued to escape the Wilson Government, and in its increasingly desperate search for the conditions in which that growth could occur, the Government turned on the trade unions, imposing wage restraint, fostering productivity deals, and eventually attempting to introduce anti-union legislation modelled partly on the notorious American Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 - "In Place of Strife". (54) But even when the most moderate of trade unions deserted the Labour Government in the wake of the November 1967 devaluation of the pound, the ETU continued to the end to give the Wilson administration support, albeit at times critical. Cannon told the 1969 ETU Conference that most *industrialists* admitted that the Labour Government was making the right decisions within the limits of the nation's resources, and went on to say:

"All the measures, most of them unpopular, which this Government has taken over the past five years along with considerable improvement in industrial management at all levels during the same period will, I believe, soon begin to pay off...It will be a tragedy if as a result of this unpopular, but praiseworthy effort, a sound economy is handed over once again to the Tories.." (55)

As with the American trade union leaders that the ILO interviewed, Cannon's speech and his entire philosophy left unquestioned the bases of the economic and social system that most other trade union leaders at least questioned and, at times, rebelled against.

That the ETU should mention Walter Reuther in their evidence to Donovan is, again, not at all surprising considering the history of his union. For if American trade union attitudes in general

served as an example for the Cannon leadership during the 1960s, then the post-war history of the UAW under the leadership of Reuther served as a close model to be admired and emulated. Just in the description alone that Bell gives of Reuther as the "Jansenist confronting the 'whiskey priests' " we can see a self-image that Cannon admired and that Chapple (and Eric Hammond) were to cultivate. Reuther was also a virulent anti-Communist, (although he was still considered to be a "radical") and was at the centre of the anti-Communist crusade that began in earnest in the trade unions, as elsewhere, in 1947.

On 23 June 1947, the Taft-Hartley Act which contained a battery of anti-union provisions and clauses was passed. One of the provisions of the Act required that each principal union officer had every year to file an affidavit that he was not a member of the Communist Party. This was directly aimed at the Committee of Industrial Organisation (CIO), one of the two main trade union federations, where it was variously estimated that 30 to 40 percent of the membership were in unions controlled by the CP. Strangely enough, the main bastion of the CP at this time was, as in Britain, the Electricians' Union - the United Electrical Workers (UEW) - an organization with some 500,000 members. At the 1949 CIO Convention, that followed in the wake of the general capitulation of the labour movement to the Taft-Hartley Act, the UEW and the Farm Equipment Workers were expelled, and the following year another ten Communist dominated unions were thrown out of the CIO. In the case of the UEW a new CIO anti-Communist union was formed, the International Union of Electrical Workers, and by 1955 it had a membership of 300,000, while the expelled UEW had shrunk to 30,000. One of the CIO unions with a strong Communist influence was the UAW.

For years the UAW had been involved in a bitter struggle for control between the pro-Communist tendency led by the secretary-treasurer, George Addes, and the anti-Communist tendency led by Vice-President Walter Reuther. The President, R.G. Thomas, tried to bridge the gap between the two groups without much success. But in 1946 Reuther just succeeded in ousting Thomas from the Presidency, although his faction did not secure a majority on the Executive Bureau. However the following year at the UAW Convention, Reuther was not only re-elected President but also gained an overwhelming

majority on the Executive. Having defeated the Communist opposition in the union Reuther, like Cannon in the early 1960s, was determined to press home his victory and rout the CP in the UAW. Cannon and the leadership of the ETU were helped in their task by the ballot-rigging trial of 1961, while Reuther was helped in his by an unforeseen event. In May 1948 Reuther was shot by a gunman. One of his closest supporters, August Schole, President of the Michigan CIO, made a statement blaming "the communists". At the UAW Convention in July 1949, Reuther was able to capitalise on the shooting and the rising cold-war hysteria and push through rule changes that would enable him to neutralise his opponents, Communists or otherwise. For example, the right of UAW locals to discipline their own members was removed and transferred to the Executive Bureau. Reuther could now penalise or expel any member of the UAW for such misdemeanours as "unworthy conduct", whereas before CP control of a local could protect an activist from the wrath of the leadership. Applying this new rule straight away, the Convention voted for the expulsion of two of the leaders of the pro-Communist faction. (56) So in his style, rhetoric and virulent anti-Communism, Reuther was bound to appeal to the Cannon leadership, who themselves had waged a bitter battle against the CP in the ETU, and who, like Reuther, had waged it successfully.

But the parallels do not end there. Having dealt with the CP opposition in the UAW, Reuther went on to transform the UAW, just as Cannon went on to remodel the Electricians' Union. The description given by one American industrial relations commentator of the transformation that the UAW underwent in the 1950s could almost serve as a description of the metamorphosis that the ETU went through in the 1960s. The UAW, he writes, was transformed from a

"social reform union with a militant grassroots potential to a centrally administered business union husbanding its own power and satisfied with the creation of a private welfare state."

(57)

This shift was not just forced on the UAW by the conservative political climate of the 1950s as Bell's analysis might lead us to believe. Quite the contrary, Reuther was actively involved in

building the American post-war "industrial relations settlement". Nelson Lichtenstein argues that the UAW's active involvement reflected the

"dynamic relationship that existed between the social ideology of the union's leadership, the collective bargaining strategy it pursued, and the character of shop-floor struggle in the auto industry's core firms." (58)

We can illustrate this "dynamic relationship" by looking briefly at one of the long-term contracts that the UAW were pursuing as a central feature of their bargaining strategy - the "Treaty of Detroit". In 1950 the UAW signed the so called "Treaty of Detroit" with General Motors. In return for higher wages and improved welfare benefits the UAW signed an unprecedented five-year contract which would make General Motors' labour costs wholly predictable throughout the company's massive expansion programme of the early 1950s. But, as Lichtenstein argues, the "Treaty of Detroit" had a profound, long-range impact on the internal structure of the UAW. Why? Because the "Treaty" helped to consolidate and further centralise the bargaining machinery in the hands of the leadership and consequently undermined rank-and-file control and participation in the bargaining process at local level. Summing up the impact of the UAW-GM contract, Frederick Harbison wrote in 1950 that

"This kind of collective bargaining calls for intelligent trading rather than table-pounding, for diplomacy rather than belligerency, and for internal union discipline rather than grass roots rank and file activity." (59)

Centralisation and discipline rather than local bargaining and rank-and-file activity naturally led, argues Lichtenstein, to "an erosion of the union's internal democratic structure". As power became increasingly centralised in the Executive Bureau, the UAW leadership saw its primary role as one of "servicing" the membership and "policing" the national contracts.

We can see then from this brief outline of the UAW's industrial strategy in the 1950s why the ETU leadership of the 1960s should find Reuther such an admirable figure. For what was

common to both union leaderships was a strong ideological commitment to fighting Communism in their organizations and an acceptance of the principles of the market economy, and the need to operate competitively in the labour market on the basis of those principles. On the basis of this "social ideology" both unions pursued industrial strategies that involved a centralisation of power and thus a consequent decline in internal democracy as the semi-autonomous centres of power that previously existed were either curbed or abolished (the locals in the UAW, the ACs in the ETU). Both pursued centralised bargaining strategies that would not only by-pass rank-and-file negotiators but attempt also to "harmonise" industrial relations by joint management/union policing of agreements (most notably in the case of the ETU the JIB agreement that they signed in the electrical contracting industry in 1966, which was modelled on a similar agreement operating in America). Of course, the parallels should not be taken too far, but nevertheless, it seems clear that the strategy pursued by Reuther was one that the ETU wished to follow, even if that strategy would have to be modified to take account of the British terrain and the peculiarities of the ETU.

So the "New Model" union that Cannon created in the 1960s was designed not just to operate in the market economy and pragmatically adjust and adapt to the pressures and opportunities that the economy offered them, as most other trade unions did. From this time on, the Electricians' union actively accepted the priorities of the market economy and sought to mould its strategy on the basis of those priorities. The remodelling of the union was essential if this strategy was to be pursued effectively and free from the interference of the rank-and-file. This aggressive acceptance of the market, coupled with a strong hostility to a union democracy that allowed rank-and-file activists some real power, was what marked the ETU off from most other unions, and this is why we can say that in the 1960s Britain's first business union began to take shape.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONSOLIDATION CENTRALISATION AND GROWTH

Les Cannon died on 9 December 1970. But the course he had set the union on in the 1960s was to continue and develop in the 1970s under the leadership of Frank Chapple. Under Chapple's leadership the EETPU was to become even more centralised and bureaucratic, the philosophy of business unionism was to become more pronounced, and the internal democracy of the union was to become increasingly circumscribed. (1) The 1970s, then, was a period when the right-wing leadership that took control of the union in 1962 further consolidated its position. But that is only half the story. The industrial militancy of the late 1960s and early 1970s enabled the Communist Party opposition in the union to re-group around the journal *Flashlight*. This period also saw the spawning of a number of rank-and-file groups, as well as the first significant organized political grouping outside the control of the CP - the *Rank-and file Contact* group, dominated by the Socialist Workers Party. So as well as being a period of consolidation for the leadership, the 1970s were also a period in which the organized opposition carried on a determined battle to win control of the EETPU. While in this chapter we shall see how well the opposition fought the final stages of the restructuring programme that began under Cannon, we will deal more fully with the challenge of the organized opposition in the the following chapters. Here we shall concentrate on how the leadership consolidated its position under Chapple's leadership.

Consolidation and centralisation

The "New Model" union created by Cannon in the 1960s placed more and more power in the hands of fewer and fewer elected full-time officials. By the time Cannon died the elected 17 man Executive Council had under them a bureaucracy of over 100 full-time appointed national and area officials. Chapple, however, was determined to push this centralising process still further and in so doing augment his own personal power.

With the death of Cannon there was naturally a vacancy for the Presidency of the union, and an election was expected early in 1971. But it was not to be. There was a rather complicated legal wrangle instigated by the EC, who claimed that the rules of the union debarred full-time officials from standing for office. A legal opinion was sought and it was found that full-time officials could not stand either as President or General Secretary without first resigning their posts. Moreover, the barrister, Ronald Waterhouse, also held that both President and General Secretary were simultaneously Executive Council members and National Officers, and as EC members were prevented from standing as National Officers, so unless he resigned from his post as General Secretary Chapple could not stand for the Presidency. The upshot of this farcical situation was that the entire EC as well as prominent National Officers like Chapple and Young were excluded from Cannon's succession, and the election was deferred till after the October 1971 Rules Revision Conference. Meanwhile, in September 1971, Chapple was re-elected as General Secretary. In the following year, and despite the previous legal ruling, the election for the Presidency finally took place, and Chapple won it outright.

A further election was now expected to fill the vacant post of General Secretary, but the new President had other plans. By the time of the EETPU Conference in May 1973, there had still been no moves to hold an election for the vacant post. At that Conference some 200 delegates signed a petition demanding that an election take place in the near future. The petition, together with the hundreds of protest resolutions that had already been sent to the EC, extracted an assurance from Chapple that, pending the outcome of merger talks with several other unions, a decision about the election would be made by the end of the year. New Year came and went and still no election. But late in 1974, after more than 200 branches had called for the election, the EC decided by 7 votes to 4 not to hold the election, but to ballot the membership on whether or not the post of President should be abolished. The result was that 77,943 voted for the abolition of the Presidency and only 17,221 against. Chapple now held an unrivalled position of authority in the union.

Chapple informs us that it was Cannon who first mooted the idea of getting rid of the "dual leadership" and merging the two posts. (2) But the final decision to abolish the post of President seems to have been arrived at on the basis of a report on the union's structure compiled by a firm of business consultants, the Glasgow based Higher Productivity (Organization and Bargaining) Ltd (HPL), whose managing director was James Dobbie Houston, chairman of the Joint Industrial Board for electrical contracting. The report recommended that five national heads of department be created, that the post of President should be abolished and be replaced by a Chairman elected by the Executive Council, and that the General Secretary should have a number of powerful personal assistants. (3)

The centralisation of power went a step further at the union's 1977 Conference, where it was agreed that full-time officials should in future be free to stand for the Executive Council without first resigning their posts. The separation of powers between the appointed officials and the elected EC that been near enough destroyed in 1969 when the election of officials was abandoned was now effectively dissolved. Also passed at the 1977 Conference was the EC recommendation that the number of Divisional members of the EC be reduced by one to 13. The Executive Council was now to comprise the General Secretary, the Plumbing Secretary, and 13 Divisional members (10 from the electrical section and 3 from plumbing). The two Secretaries were also empowered by the Conference to now vote on issues brought before the EC, and the "President" (Chairman elected by the EC in line with the HPL recommendation) was now entitled to vote as a Divisional EC member and was also given an additional casting vote in the case of a tied vote on the EC. (4)

In the space of just over ten years the number of elected positions in the union had been reduced from 145 to a mere 15, whilst over the same period the membership of the EETPU had shot up from 250,000 to around 400,000. Power was now firmly in the hands of the Executive and their appointed bureaucracy, and free from those semi-autonomous centres of power that existed in the 1960s, and free also from the vagaries of frequent elections. The EETPU was now displaying many of the classical characteristics that

H.A. Turner attributed to one of his three typologies of trade union government - "popular bossdoms":

"...such unions are marked by a generally low level of membership participation, and by the greatest difference between the members and the professional officials on which they depend...there is often a distinct hierarchy among the officials themselves...senior officials may virtually appoint their own successors." (5)

Turner also talks of the "central, and usually dominating role of the General Secretary" in such unions. (6) One ex-EETPU official goes further, claiming that power in the union was effectively wielded by Chapple and his close associates and not the elected EC:

"It became very obvious after only a few days spent working in the EETPU head office that the union was run by a tight-knit group of leaders, and that this group was not the ostensible ruling body of the EETPU, namely, the executive council." (7)

Add this testimony to that of another ex-official of the union who claimed that the rank-and-file in the EETPU "have no real power" and the Michelian thesis seems to come to life once more. (8) For here we have a formally democratic organisation which is in fact governed by a bureaucracy which is directed, and derives its power from, a "tight-knit" oligarchy dominated by one man, Frank Chapple. This seems to confirm not only Michels but also a point made by Weber, a point that we have already noted in connection with the CP domination of the union in the 1950s:

"The bureaucratic structure goes hand in hand with the concentration of the material means of management in the hands of the master." (9)

Weber, unlike Michels, however, considered that there were a number of mechanisms by which the inherent tendency of bureaucracy to accumulate power could be prevented from reaching the point where it controlled the policy and action of the organisation that

it was supposed to serve. And as we shall see, although rigid control of the apparatus made it all the more difficult for the organized opposition in the union to break the hold of the EC, this control was still open to challenge and was at times badly dented by the forces of the opposition. The continuing fight over the final stages of restructuring is a case in point.

Restructuring in the 1970s

As we saw in the previous chapter, Cannon's 1963 document the *Internal Structure of the Union* was widely discussed in the union and the proposals for moving to an industrial branch structure debated at the 1965 RRC. And the 1969 Biennial Delegate Conference (BDC) referred to the leadership a motion calling on the Executive Council "to investigate and reorganise the area structure of the Union within the framework of the existing Rules".(10) However, what became apparent by the early 1970s, was that much of the restructuring of the union was, contrary to the rules, being pushed through without consultation with the appropriate sections of the membership. At the 1973 BDC all these grievances came to a head.

Debate at the Conference centred on three areas of union reorganization: firstly, the merging of Plumbing Trades Union (PTU) lodges with Electrical Trades Union branches; secondly, the closing down of Area offices; and, thirdly, the closure and amalgamation of branches. In 1967 the 55,000 strong right-wing led PTU voted to amalgamate with the ETU to form the Electrical Electronic Telecommunication and Plumbing Union (EETPU). At the time of the amalgamation the PTU had some 400 lodges, 80 of which had been merged with ETU branches by 1973, and by the end of the 1970s there were less than 100 plumbing lodges left in existence. A *Flashlight* pamphlet listed some of the more general effects of amalgamation on PTU democracy and organization:

1. Delegates to the Biennial and Rules Revision Conferences would no longer be elected by district membership, but appointed.
2. District representation meetings could no longer mandate or in any way control their Conference delegates.

3. Conference agendas would no longer be circulated to Lodges prior to Conference.
4. The sharp cut-down in the number of PTU officials - District 1 had 4 officials before amalgamation, there were by that time only 2. This was the trend nationally.
5. Since amalgamation all District Officials were now appointed. They were formerly elected by the district membership.
6. Large scale reorganisation of Lodges in every District. In District 1, for example, from 44 Lodges down to 24.
7. Discrimination for full-time office on political affiliations. (11)

It was this loss of identity, as many plumbers saw it, that caused so much dissatisfaction in the plumbing section and which led to the formation of groups like the *Plumbers Action Committee* that we shall discuss in the next chapter. But this dissatisfaction did not clearly manifest itself at the 1973 Conference. In fact the two motions before the BDC that dealt with lodge and branch mergers were both supported by the Executive Council, with one of them urging a faster approach to "integration", and both were carried by the delegates. Debate was very short and no speakers from the floor objected to the pace of mergers, nor did anyone complain about any lack of consultation over the reorganisation. Even the left-wing plumber on the Executive Council, Bill Gannon, did not intervene in the debate, even though he had been elected to office, with *Flashlight* backing, largely as a result of his opposition to the way the plumbing section were being treated since the 1967 amalgamation.

The reason why the plumbing lodge mergers generated so little heat might be explained by the fact that the other motions that were up for debate during this session of the Conference dealt more fully with the whole question of amalgamation and closure. So motion 14 read:

"This Conference agrees that where reorganisation takes place between areas or branches consultation should take place between

the Executive Council and branches concerned, prior to the reorganisation taking place and not just a *fait accompli* as has happened in the past." (12)

Two other motions (15 & 16) were also critical of reorganisation, one complaining that "too often we find that reorganization has taken place before the membership knows anything about it". (13) A particular grievance was the closing down of Area Offices without consultation with the membership:

"It has been decided to close down No.17 Area Office at Cardiff. We in South Wales are not happy with this. If Cardiff closes in October, as we are told it will, Swansea Area will have to cover over fifty branches. We think you should maintain an office in Cardiff as well as at Swansea in accordance with the wishes of the membership.

We do not believe there has been full consultation with branches as regards amalgamation. How many branches no longer exist? How many branches no longer have opportunities to send delegates to the most important body of this union, namely this Conference? One finds we have consultation taking place only with interested officials. What about members of the branches? Were they consulted? I certainly think not." (14)

A further two motions were moved before the general debate took place. Motions 17 and 18 were concerned not just with the lack of consultation during the course of reorganisation, but with the whole policy of reorganisation that had been instituted in the union. Thus motion 17, which was concerned specifically with Area and Regional reorganisation, declared that this "Conference is opposed to the recent reorganisation that has taken place throughout the Union". While motion 18 was directed at the "void in communication" that the closure and amalgamation of branches had left in the union. It therefore called on the EC "to halt any further branch closures until such times as proven alternative

lines of communication can be established". (15) The mover of the latter motion said:

"It appears the Executive Council can close any branch with the minimum of consultation with no reference back to our members. We have seen the effects of the decision to terminate the area committees and replace this structure with the area industrial conferences which were doomed from the start to become the biggest non-event so far produced by this Union. Do not let the same sort of thing happen to the branches...". (16)

At the time of the Conference many of the branches in the major cities had been reorganized against the wishes of the members. In Glasgow, for example, two of the largest and most active branches in Scotland, Glasgow Central and Glasgow No.1, were amalgamated into a super-branch of 5000 members after the fight to keep the branches open was eventually lost in the courts. Similarly, Liverpool's eleven branches had been reduced to five, Southampton's five to one and so on. One delegate from Manchester complained that he was in his "third branch in a period of twelve months". And, as delegates pointed out, branch amalgamations also had the effect of reducing the number of delegates at the Biennial and Rules Revision Conferences, as there was only one delegate allowed to attend from each branch no matter how large or small the branch was. So whereas 650 delegates attended the 1969 BDC, by 1975 this had been reduced to 525 delegates. Reducing the number of delegates from the major cities also had the added advantage of cutting down the number of oppositional delegates at Conference as the city branches were on the whole the strongholds of the opposition in the union.

Eric Hammond replied to these and other criticisms on behalf of the Executive Council. Firstly, he distinguished between the three motions that were "concerned with how we go about reorganisation" and motions 17 and 18 that "are not concerned with method but with stopping reorganisation". Secondly, he said, contrary to what many speakers had said or implied from the

rostrum, the leadership had the power according to the existing rules of the union to implement reorganisation:

"Let us be quite clear from the very beginning who has the responsibility and the authority under the Rules of this organisation to be concerned about making decisions regarding organisation. Rule 4(2) says: 'The Executive Council shall, under these rules, have power: (j) to determine the boundaries of each branch and area'; and '(k) to determine the boundaries of the electoral divisions for the purposes of the election of divisional members of the Electrical Industry Committee and Plumbing Industry Committee...' (17)

The implication was clear: the EC, if they so chose, could go ahead with reorganisation without consulting the members. However, this was a selective reading of the rules. As Hammond himself acknowledged the "centre of gravity of the complaints seems to be on the area part of the issue, that is what branch and therefore member is in what area". Area reorganisation, therefore, necessarily entailed branch reorganisation. Specifically on the branches Hammond goes on to say that there "has been massive reorganisation". But on branch reorganisation, as we saw in the last chapter, the rules of the union were quite clear:

"The Executive Council shall have the power to establish, dissolve and determine the limits of branches in consultation with the appropriate membership" (Rule 14(1) 1975 Rules)

This rule, or a very close variant of it, had applied during the time when the CP dominated the union, it applied at the time of the first wave of reorganisation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and it applies in the union today. The critiques of the reorganisation process contained in motions 14, 15 and 16 were completely in line with the rules of the union. To quote the powers of the Executive as Hammond did was a rather flimsy attempt to claim legitimacy for actions that the EC were well aware were, if not wholly unconstitutional, then certainly not based on a full reading of the letter let alone the spirit of the rules of the union. The very

fact that Hammond spent a large part of his speech claiming that consultation had taken place with the *appropriate membership* over branch reorganisation was a sign that the content of Rule 14 was the issue at the Conference and not the powers of the EC that Hammond had referred to. But even on the issue of Area reorganisation Hammond later admitted:

"Areas were amalgamated and some offices closed. We examined carefully the reasons for these changes and believed them to be in our members best interests. But in this matter we did not consult as we now feel we should have done and as we fully intend to do in future."

(18)

When it came to the vote the EC supported motion 15, which was a non-committal motion concerned with the ability of officials to service large Areas, and were not against motion 14. To recall: motion 14 said that consultation should take place prior to any reorganisation and should not be presented as a *fait accompli*. Both motions were carried. However, the Executive Council opposed motion 16 which read:

"This Conference should be concerned by lack of consultation between the Executive Council because too often we find that reorganisation has taken place before the membership knows anything about it." (19)

Seemingly the wording of this motion was just a little bit too strong for the EC. Nevertheless, the delegates ignored the Executive's recommendation and voted for this motion as well. The EC also opposed the two motions (17 & 18) that were against reorganisation and not just lack of consultation. Both motions were defeated. So, the delegates at the 1973 BDC were in no doubt that there had been very little consultation with the membership over the reorganisation of the union, and the leadership themselves were forced to concede that this was the case despite Hammond's arguments to the contrary.

There was a lull in the pace of amalgamations and mergers in the wake of the 1973 BDC: reorganisation without consultation, it seemed, had been stopped in its tracks by the force of the rank-

and-file members' feelings on the issue. But by that time over 100 branches and lodges had been merged and amalgamations had taken place in virtually all the major cities and towns. So the lull was in part because the bulk of the proposed mergers and amalgamations had already been carried through. And it was never the intention of the leadership to reduce the branch structure to such a scale that it would consist solely of a series of mega-branches. The geographical location of the membership would at any rate rule this out.

As a result of this lull, the heated debate that took place at the 1973 Conference was not repeated at the 1975 BDC. There were only two motions up for debate on branch amalgamations, both of which were supported by the Executive Council and carried by the Conference. Both motions were uncontroversial, one favouring the retention of local branches drawing their membership mainly from a single industry as opposed to the formation of large multi-industry branches, the other declaring that steps should be taken to merge lodges with branches where it was possible to do so. Any lingering fears about reorganisation without consultation were laid to rest by Charlie Lovell, National Secretary of the plumbing section and EC member:

"What we have got to get clear is that we do not want branches and lodges merged by force. That is not being done. It is being done after proper consultation; and we are continuing to do that." (20)

Following the 1977 BDC, however, there was a renewed campaign by the leadership to force through branch closures and amalgamations, and the first to feel the brunt of this operation were Charlie Lovell's plumbers. A rule change that was passed at the 1977 Conference gave the EC the green light to amalgamate the majority of the remaining plumbers lodges (about 300). Previously the plumbing section representation at the Biennial Delegate Conferences had been on the basis of two delegates from each PTU District; Districts with over a 1,000 members were allowed to send three delegates and Districts with over 2000 members four delegates. This rule was abolished at the 1977 BDC to bring the plumbing section representation at BDC into line with the

electrical section representation - one delegate from each branch. This move was welcomed by many in the union who were hostile to the leadership but, as *Flashlight* reported,

"It was a sprat to catch a mackerel and it was swallowed. Delegates were warned by some of their rank-and-file colleagues that Lodge closures would inevitably follow. This is what is now happening. The central feature of the re-organisation is to bring about an equation of the number of delegates under the new rule as the plumbers had under the old." (21)

What this meant in practice was that in order to establish the right level of PTU representation on the basis of one delegate per lodge the number of lodges had to be drastically reduced. In London, for example, the 17 lodges were reduced to just 4, in Manchester 17 lodges were also amalgamated into 4. A similar pattern was repeated throughout the country so that by the end of the 1970s there were only about 100 plumbing lodges left intact. As for Lovell's statement at the 1975 BDC that there would be no forced amalgamations, the experience of the Manchester plumbers is enough to discredit such rhetoric - 16 out of the 17 lodges were against amalgamation. The only lodge to survive intact after the London amalgamations was Eltham and District, which just happened to be Lovell's lodge.

Opposition began to mount once again in the wake of the forced amalgamation of many of the plumbing lodges and the closure and suspension of a number of opposition branches. At the union's 1979 BDC at Brighton, and against Executive Council advice, the delegates, in what the *Financial Times* described as a "grassroots revolt", voted in favour of a motion from one of the leading opposition branches, Cardiff, which declared that the

"wholesale policy of closure of branches and the spate of compulsory amalgamations that the Executive Council implemented recently in 1978 were not in the best interests of the members concerned." (22)

A second motion affirming that branches should be managed by elected branch officials was also carried against EC advice. But as

with the "rebellion" against lack of consultation, the horse had already bolted. The bulk of the EC's plans for reorganisation had been pressed through with or without the consent of the membership. All the EC had to do then was bide its time and, when it chose, take on the strongholds of the opposition in order to complete its reorganisation of the union's structure. For example, the three London contracting branches were finally amalgamated into an all London super-branch of 11,000 members only in 1982. At the 1983 BDC there was no discussion whatsoever about branch amalgamations and closures. So the restructuring of the union that began under Cannon in the 1960s was, with the exception of a few rearguard skirmishes, completed in 1983 (the all London Contracting branch, for instance, was suspended by the EC after its first meeting and was not opened again until four years later).

Branches are now mostly administered by an appointed full-time branch secretary, and the sheer size and geographical coverage of many of the branches makes it impossible for many members to participate in the union's affairs. For example, the London Lift and Escalator branch covers the whole of south east England, and so not surprisingly few of its 2000 members attend branch meetings. And as with the London Contracting branch, oppositional branches are frequently suspended by the EC for alleged infringements of the rules. All in all, the industrial restructuring of the geographical branches has effectively reduced rank-and-file democracy in the EETPU.

Union growth

The rapid expansion of the union's industrial base in the late 1960s and 1970s also served to further augment the power of the leadership, while at the same time diluting the influence of the traditional oppositional centre in the union - electrical contracting. Between 1964 and 1974 EETPU membership increased by 22.9% reaching a total membership of some 413,000 by 1975. Expansion was mainly in light engineering and telecommunications and in the service industries that employed largely semi-skilled and women workers (the increase in women members was 116%, from 24,000 in 1964 to 52,000 by 1974). To co-ordinate recruitment a new

department was set up in 1969 employing seven recruitment officers. At the union's 1971 Conference growth was reported in telecommunications, engineering, and in particular radio and television servicing where "our membership...now stands at 10,000 compared with 4,400 two years ago." (23) And two years later the EC could report that

"The service industries have been an extremely fruitful field, with large and stabilized increase in membership in many of the major companies...

In domestic appliance, and other service industries, there has been a considerable advance and is part of a continuous process of further expansion." (24)

The EETPU's expansion was far from being exceptional: after all, this period was, as Robert Taylor writes, "one of the great periods of expansion for the British trade union movement, similar in magnitude to the growth between 1911 and 1913". (25) Moreover, it is not at all surprising that the union should have achieved this increased growth mainly in the service sector, for it was precisely this area of the economy that was expanding. But the most rapid and spectacular growth rates occurred in the public sector trade unions, in the areas of local government, education, health and so forth (between 1964 and 1974, NALGO grew by 60%, NUPE by 111%, TASS by 90% and ASTMS by 346% (26)). "White-collar" trade unionism was booming. Put another way, in the decade up until 1978, 2 million "white collar" trade unionists were added to the labour force, but only 1 million manual members, so that by 1978 the proportion of trade union members in "white collar" jobs had risen to 39% from a figure of 30% ten years earlier. (27)

In an effort to cash in on this boom the EETPU created the Electrical and Engineering Staff Association (EESA) in 1971. But they had little success in recruiting "white collar" workers directly, as the established unions proved to be far too strong for them to break into this area. The only substantial gains the EETPU were to make in this field were as a result of mergers, or more precisely takeovers, of much smaller trade unions. Even here

though, the only substantial gain that was made in the early 1970s was announced by Chapple to the union's 1973 Conference:

"I can report with great pleasure the merger of the B.I.C.C. Staff Association with EESA and the pleasure that this gave us was not lessened by the fact that the merger ballot of 4000 B.I.C.C staff chose this union by a majority vote of 6 to 1 with 70% of the members voting."

(28)

So minimal were the overall gains made in the "white collar" area that the EESA membership figures were excluded from the Executive Council's 1973 report. We can only presume that at this time the bulk of the EESA membership were made up of BICC workers, despite claims of expansion by the EC. (29) An indication of the problems that the EETPU were having in recruiting in this general area was the drop in membership in the technical and supervisory section from 11,613 in 1971 to 11,516 in 1972, after a sharp increase between 1968 and 1970. By the early 1980s, however, the EETPU was claiming that EESA had a membership of some 50,000, representing "technical, managerial and professional staff". (30) How had this growth been accomplished? Largely by mergers with staff associations not affiliated to the TUC, as we can see from Table 1 below.

Table 1 Mergers with the EETPU 1971 -86

1972	BICC Staff Association	4000 members
1976	Association of Managerial and Electrical Executives	?
1979	Laurence Scott and Electromotors Foremans Association	?
1980	United Kingdom Association of Professional Engineers	8000
	Steel Industry Managers' Association	9000
	Telecommunication Staff Association	?
1982	British Transport Officers Guild	2,640
1983	Association of Management and Professional Staffs	?

1984	Rolls Royce Management Association	?
1986	White collar staff employed by Radio Rentals	2,056

Sources: various

By the 1980s EESA had become, in Chapple's own words, "a union within a union". (31) This "union within a union" has acted as a solid right-wing block within the EETPU, and as such has given staunch support to the leadership of the union at the all-union Biennial Delegate Conferences. The electrical contracting section, which was the bastion of opposition in the union, was by the late 1970s an isolated section of an expanding union. Now any serious challenge to the leadership would have to be mounted on a much wider front, one that brought in members new to the union (women, the semi-skilled and "white collar" workers) and to the traditions of militancy that existed in the contracting and supply sections.

Chapple was so pleased with the catches that the union had made that in 1982 he recommended to the EC that

"with the transfer of engagements to the EESA section of several professional and managerial groups and the prospect that others would follow, our organisation would be strengthened by the establishment of a Council of Professional and Managerial Staffs." (32)

COMPS was to act as a sort of mini-Executive Council co-ordinating and furthering the work of EESA. Needless to say, COMPS was to be firmly under the control of the EC, as the new amendments to the rules made clear:

"The Executive Council shall determine the terms of the objects and the constitution of COMPS after consultation with all the appropriate groups of members." (33)

EESA was so structured then that any organisation joining it could in theory retain its identity within the "white collar" section, while at the same time having influence over EESA's direction and policies through COMPS, and thus over the parent body the EETPU. Thus small organizations could still view themselves as "profess-

ional associations" with all the "status" this implied, while still having the protection of a strong, "moderate" and ideologically conducive trade union around them. In this way it was hoped that the membership of other professional associations, who might otherwise shudder at the thought of joining a trade union, could be pulled into the EETPU's orbit by the bridging mechanism of EESA. As we can see from Table 1 the EETPU were quite successful in this venture.

Throughout the 1970s the EETPU, as with so many unions, also attempted to extend its base by merging with industrial unions of comparable strength, and as a result was involved periodically, and unsuccessfully, in merger negotiations with two large trade unions - the NUGMW and the AUEW. The rationale for merger was not just ideological (at the time of the first set of merger talks with the engineers the AUEW was controlled by the left, at the time of the second talks in 1978 by the right, and both times the negotiations led to nought), it was also to do with cost and efficiency and the power to corner particular areas of the labour market. Having said that ideology was not all, it is plain to see that the vision that the EETPU leadership had was one of a right-wing mega-union capable of out-voting and out-organizing the left in the TUC. And this vision is far from being dead. At the 1986 TUC, leaders of UCATT, the AEU, the Institution of Professional Civil Servants and the EETPU met in secret to draft a blueprint for a new mega-union codenamed "Project 2000". Yet even before the project got off the ground UCATT and the IPCS withdrew from the negotiations. (34)

Merger talks usually collapse because one or more of the participants is not prepared to abandon a particular feature(s) of their union's autonomy or internal democracy, and this was, by and large, why the EETPU merger approaches failed. So, for example, the prospects of a marriage between the AEU and EETPU which have been in the air for so long, and which to most observers seemed to be a most compatible marriage, have floundered on, amongst other things, the AEU's refusal to abandon its District Committee structure and the election of its full-time officials. Although in the renewed merger talks between the two unions that began early in 1988 it seems that the AEU is now prepared to drop its insistence that its internal democracy should remain intact. And with the prospect of

the EETPU being expelled from the TUC it now seems most likely that the unions will merge into what will be Britain's largest, most powerful, and right-wing union.

If we consider the Michels/Gouldner debate, the picture of continuing centralisation, consolidation and expansion that we have painted above, seems to lend further credence to Michels and not to Gouldner. After all, bureaucratic control was tightened in the EETPU during the 1970s, the bases of the organized opposition in the union (particularly contracting) were weakened as they became a smaller proportion of an expanding union that now had within its ranks 50,000 professional and managerial members, and where they did raise their heads (for example, on branch amalgamations) they were out-manoeuvred and eventually defeated. On top of all this, it could be argued, the apathy of the majority of the membership to the affairs of the EETPU only confirms Michels' contention that most union members are indifferent to the goings on in their own organizations and thus fail to act as a check on the power of the leadership.

This is certainly one picture that could be presented, and in the following chapters there is further evidence that could be used to confirm this, but it is far from being the whole picture. It is a distortion, one that lacks balance and focus. In truth we find a constant tension in the struggles in the EETPU between democratic and oligarchical tendencies - it is seldom one-way traffic. To view the EETPU under Chapple's reign, as well as today, as monolithic, is nonsense. Our discussion on restructuring in this chapter shows what pressures the leadership were under to act democratically. That the opposition were eventually defeated is in a sense secondary, since the point is that the power of the EC was constantly challenged and checked by the activity of thousands of rank-and-file EETPU members, and this presents us with a picture far removed from the simplicities of Michels' "iron law" with the apathetic and incompetent mass being easily manipulated by the sophisticated technocrats in the union leadership. In fact a more detailed look at the history of the organized opposition in the union lends credence to Gouldner's contention that the evidence offered by Michels (and his disciples, we might add) could enable

us to formulate the very opposite theorem to the "iron law of oligarchy, the "iron law of democracy".

PART THREE THE CHALLENGE OF THE OPPOSITION

CHAPTER SIX

STRATEGIES FOR REFORM: THE RISE OF ORGANIZED OPPOSITION

Opposition to the right-wing leadership existed from the very first day that they took control of the union on 2 January 1962. The focus for that opposition was, and still is, the Communist Party. But in the early 1960s, with the ballot-rigging trial still fresh in the minds of the membership, and with the subsequent ballot that debarred CP members from holding any office in the union, which in its turn resulted in the defection of all but one of the CP's ETU full-time officials, the CP members in the union were demoralized and in some disarray. This, together with the climate of "red-baiting" that existed in the union, affected their capacity to organize against the policies of the leadership. The non-CP left in the union were also affected by the defeat of the CP, for those who had worked alongside CP members were now cast in the role of Communist dupes or "fellow-travellers" by the right in the union. This state of affairs should not be exaggerated: after all, the union had under pressure from below initially swung to the left after the Cannon leadership took office. What it did mean though, was that the "organized opposition" in the union (the CP and its supporters) were in a very vulnerable position, and as such were not capable in the early 1960s of leading any sustained counter attack against the new leadership.

By the late 1960s, however, the memory of the trial was fading and the leadership's continuing support for the increasingly discredited Labour Government under Harold Wilson, together with an industrial strategy that brought them into conflict with the best organized sections of the union, enabled the CP to re-group and an organized opposition movement to emerge. If we briefly look at the turmoil in the electrical supply and contracting sections of the union, which as well as being the best organized sections made up something like a third of the total membership, then we can more clearly see the industrial climate that allowed the organized opposition to emerge.

The promised fruits of the various Productivity and Status Agreements for electrical supply, which the Electricians' union had signed along with four other unions, had by the late 1960s still not materialized in any meaningful way. A NBPI report stated that although hourly earnings had risen between 1964 and 1967, "average weekly earnings...are now more than 30s. below the 'all industries' figure. This gap has steadily widened since April, 1965". (1). Or, put another way, between 1965 and 1969, supply workers suffered a fall in real income of 0.6% per year. (2) True, average hours worked in the industry were reduced from 49.3 to 41.8 per week, a fall of 16%, but this was accompanied by a sharp move to shift and staggered patterns of working - a 14% increase from 1964 to 1966. (3) Moreover, the benefits that the Agreements gave the workforce (staff status being the main one) were accompanied by significant rises in productivity. The union itself claimed that the deal resulted in an 18.2% increase in productivity between November 1967 and September 1969. (4) As a consequence management was able to drastically reduce the workforce. In 1969-70 the Area Boards, on the distribution side, lost 9.4% of their manual workers, while the CEGB lost 4.1%. The figures for apprentices, always a good indicator of the state of the industry, show an even sharper decline - 19% for the Area Boards and 14.6% for the CEGB. (5) Not surprisingly, the union's 1969 Supply Conference repudiated the Executive Council's policies in the industry and demanded that in future there be consultation before any agreements were signed. That same year, the supply workers won a 10% wage rise against the background of unofficial strikes. And in 1970, a work to rule and overtime ban caused major power cuts - 31% at peak periods - as well as inspiring E.P. Thompson to write his famous essay in response to an outraged letter to the *Times*, "Sir, Writing by Candlelight".

The situation was no better in the electrical contracting industry where the union had sole negotiating rights. On 1 March 1963 the ETU signed a three year agreement with the National Federated Electrical Association - the employers' organization. Under this deal, a NBPI report informs us, pay relatives deteriorated:

"...improvements from pay deriving from the 1963-1966 electrical contracting agreement failed to live up to the expectations of its negotiators in that, if anything, the relative position of contracting electricians was somewhat worsened rather than improved during the three years." (6)

At a meeting of the Executive Council on 7 June 1966, the new 1966/69 industrial agreement for electrical contracting - "A Transformation in Management-Labour Relations" - was discussed and approved by 9 votes to 2. (7) The main features of the agreement were:

- "(a) substantial increases in national wage rates planned for September 1966, September 1967 and September 1968;
- (b) the replacement of the old Industrial Councils by a Joint Industry Board (JIB) supported by 13 Regional Joint Industry Boards;
- (c) the regrading of the entire operative labour force from old traditional grades into new grades linked with qualifications and ability." (8)

The most controversial aspect of the agreement was the formation of the JIB. The inspiration for the JIB came from a similar institution for electricians in operation in New York State. A joint ETU/NFEA team had visited the USA in September 1966 to see how it operated and, as *Electron* reported, the ETU delegation were particularly impressed by the high rate of productivity achieved under the scheme. (9) The JIB came into operation in England and Wales (a similar agreement was not signed in Scotland until December 1968) on 1 January 1968, and the objects it set itself were clearly laid out in the agreement:

- (1) increasing skills and proficiency
- (2) increasing productivity by improved methods of work
- (3) improving the welfare of the employees
- (4) increasing the profitability of the industry

(5) measuring output to ensure increased productivity and making corresponding benefits to the employees

(6) regulating and controlling overtime and eliminating all unauthorised stoppages of work, and

(7) providing for a right of appeal by either employers or employees from decisions of the Board to an independent authority. (10)

The JIB also had wide disciplinary powers:

"The Agreement implies a far higher degree of discipline among member firms and workers than is commonly found in British industry, and this is likely to be strengthened as the work of the JIB develops. The character of this discipline is largely influenced by the troubled history of the industry before 1962 and by the hostility of a fringe of militant workers to the introduction of the Agreement...the Rules provide for penalties against members who break the Rules (including those failing to comply with the disputes procedure) or behave in a way 'prejudicial to the interests of the JIB'. These penalties range up to expulsion and include such provisions as loss of welfare benefits or fines of up to £100 for operatives or £1000 for employers..." (11)

The leadership of the union considered the operation of the agreement a great success, for the industry-wide deal clearly demonstrated the benefits of a centralized bargaining system. So, for example, between 1966 to 1969 the agreement had led to the virtual eradication of "wage drift" in the industry and seen productivity rise at an annual rate of 4 to 5 per cent. (12) Moreover, the initial high wage increase of 13% under stage 1 of the deal ensured that the majority of the union's 70,000 electricians, who worked largely in the smaller and not so well organized workplaces and sites, accepted the agreement, or more precisely the money. But on the large and well organized sites it

was a different story. This was to be expected given the JIB's attitude to site agreements:

"The JIB is hostile to the whole concept of site agreements and claims that they are a threat, not only to their own agreement, but to the national incomes policy and good industrial relations." (13)

Here we see a convergence of the objectives of the Executive Council, the Donovan Commission and the Labour Government. For site agreements not only threatened the power of the union's central bureaucracy, they also threatened the Government's incomes policy by encouraging "wage drift" and unofficial strikes. In short, site agreements were part of the "informal system" of industrial relations that the Donovan Commission argued was in conflict with the "formal system" embodied in the official institutions. The objective of all three was to incorporate the "informal system" within the framework of the "formal system" and thereby, it was hoped, reduce conflict and promote "harmonious" industrial relations. The major difference was that Donovan envisaged this move coming about on the basis of voluntarism, while the Labour Government with the backing of only one major union by 1968, the Electricians, moved, or were forced, steadily away from the voluntary tradition as the pay norms of their incomes policy legislation gave way to pay freezes and pay ceilings and, to top it all, *In Place of Strife*.

However, the JIB agreement had also generated a large movement of opposition in the union. Even Cannon had to admit, in a centre page spread in *Electron* that was designed to allay the fears of contracting members, that the members were confused about the agreement. (14) The activists in the union, and many more besides, were far from being confused. They saw it as yet another curtailment of their power and ability to control wages and conditions at local level. They saw it as a direct attack on the strongest centre of opposition in the union and a further diminution in the union's internal democracy. Protest meetings were held up and down the country, culminating in a mass rally of 2000 in Coventry. Chapple recalls being punched, manhandled and having his hair pulled as 300 demonstrators descended on the union's HQ.

(15) Hooded electricians turned up several months later at another picket of the union's Hayes Court Headquarters. They had good reason to be hooded, because all the activity against the implementation of the agreement was unofficial, and as such members could be disciplined or expelled from the union. As a report in the *Sun* on 1 November 1967 shows, the leadership were determined to cut the head off the opposition in contracting:

"A private film show was screened yesterday for the 11 man Executive of the Electrical Trades Union to help them identify ringleaders of recent rebel activities in the union...A member of the ETU Executive who attended the film show said last night: 'Some of the film was based on TV recordings. Some had been taken on a cine camera by someone at the meeting. Each film lasted about five minutes. We identified as many of the ringleaders as we could.'" (16)

Eventually 20 members of the union were expelled for engaging in "unofficial activity".

This internal dissent was fanned and spread far wider than the activists in the union by the leadership's continuing support in the late 1960s for the policies of Harold Wilson's Labour Government. Hinton writes that

"In the autumn of 1968 the Government's economic policies were overwhelmingly rejected at both TUC and Labour Party Conferences...There were limits beyond which the trade union leadership could not be induced to place nation before class." (17)

This is not quite correct, as there was still one major union prepared to put the interests of nation before class - the EETPU. At the 1968 TUC the EETPU put forward a motion that reaffirmed support for the Government's prices and incomes policy, albeit with the usual reservations about the damage that a too rigid policy would do to productivity and the plight of the low paid. The disillusionment with the Labour Government was amply expressed in the vote: 360,000 votes for the motion and 8,252,000 against. Frank

Cousins' motion opposing the incomes policy legislation was carried by 7,746,000 votes to 1,022,000. (18) At Blackpool the Labour Party Conference voted for the repeal of all incomes policy legislation by 5,098,000 votes to 1,124,000. (19) But still Chapple could write in *Electron*, in an editorial entitled THIS VICIOUS CRITICISM, that "the Government have already done much to create the foundations upon which a more socially just and more efficient Britain can be built." (20) Moreover, there was support for this stance in the union. At the union's 1969 Conference, the same Conference that rejected further "reforms" in the internal structure of the union, the EC's position on incomes policy was endorsed, as was its support for *In Place of Strife*, by a 3 to 1 vote.

But the very fact that Cannon spent much of his opening address to the 1969 Conference attacking the left in the union and in the wider labour movement, was a clear indication that the leadership were under some pressure for their continued support for the economic strategy of the Wilson Government. The danger for the leadership was that the growing internal dissent from large sections of the membership was liable to mushroom as the union's isolation from the mainstream of the movement increased. And increase it did. The EETPU's isolation was made almost complete when at the Special TUC held at Croydon on 5 June 1969, they were the only trade union to oppose the TUC's *Programme of Action* designed to combat Barbara Castle's anti-union legislation - *In Place of Strife*.

So in the late 1960s the discontent in the two most important sections of the union - supply and contracting - the general discontent manifested at the 1969 Conference to the EC's proposals to further reduce the union's democracy, together with the isolation of the EETPU from the rest of the labour movement as widespread opposition began to mount against the economic and anti-union policies of the Labour Government, formed the backdrop for the rise of the organized opposition.

The rise of organized opposition

Two national rank-and-file newspapers - the *Power Worker* and the *Electricians' Voice* - were the only manifest signs that any openly organized opposition existed in the union for most of the 1960s.

(21) Of course this could present a misleading picture, for opposition was widespread amongst the activists at least, but it had no national focus, no platform which could attract wider sections of the membership into activity. Oppositional was, by and large, carried out informally through the CP network in the union. The *Power Worker* was the exception to this general rule. It organized openly and was produced largely by CP members working in the electricity supply industry. But, it must be remembered, the supply industry was covered by five unions - the National Union of Enginemmen, Firemen, Mechanics and Electrical Workers (which merged with the T&GWU in 1969), the Electricians, the AUEW, the T&GWU and the GMWU - and so the *Power Worker* did not have to face the same problems as a paper produced exclusively from within the Electricians' union (falling foul of the rules, being accused of "unofficial activity" and so on). What made the *Power Worker* such an important rank-and-file paper was not just its contents, but the fact that it was linked with the unofficial Power Workers' Shop Stewards' Combine.

Both the *Power Worker* and the Combine had existed under the Communist leadership of the ETU. In fact they were a considerable embarrassment to the CP leadership of the time. Foulkes, for example, said in November 1960, while he was still President of the union and Chairman of the Electricity Supply National Joint Council, that "unofficial bodies are not in the best interests of the industry". (22) One result of this attitude was the disciplining by the AUEW of George Wake, secretary of the Combine and also a CP member, for continuing to oppose a productivity deal signed by his fellow CP member Frank Foulkes. This was just one sign of the tension that existed between CP full-time union officials and CP militants on the ground. For on the one hand, CP members had achieved a good number of official positions in the unions, while on the other hand, decentralized bargaining and the growth of the post-war shop stewards' "movement" meant that many CP

members were elected as stewards because they were the best militants. The result was a serious contradiction. Because, as we noted in chapter one, during the 1950s and 1960s there was a growing conflict between union officials and shop-stewards. And this conflict, no matter how it might have been mediated by a common political outlook, existed within the Communist Party too.

After the fall of the Communist leadership in the ETU the *Power Worker* was no longer looked upon so unfavourably by the CP leadership. For now that all four main unions covering the industry were controlled by the right, unofficial pressure was to be encouraged not discouraged. So, for example, when the Combine called for a "go-slow" in 1963 in order to put pressure on the employers at the time of wage negotiations, a call that was taken up at a number of power stations, there were no jibes about "unofficial bodies" from CP leaders.

The *Power Worker* and the Combine continued through most of the 1960s to call for the election of left officials as the way to advance the interests of workers in the industry. However, by the late 1960s, the political make-up of two of the unions in the industry had shifted dramatically to the left. With Jack Jones leading the T&GWU and Hugh Scanlon now President of the AUEW, it seems that many of the militants organized around the Combine and the *Power Worker* no longer saw the need for such unofficial bodies and publications. After all, Jack Jones was not only the chosen successor of Frank Cousins, but like Hugh Scanlon he was closely associated with the Institute of Workers' Control. What need now of unofficial organization if the reins were held by the left? Thus, soon after describing the 1968 supply agreement as a "plan for unbridled speed up and redundancy" the *Power Worker* ceased publication. (23)

The second oppositional paper to appear in the 1960s was the short lived *Electricians' Voice*. It appeared only a few times from 1966, and was one of the series of *Voice* papers edited by Walter Kendall during the birth of the Workers' Control Movement on the left of the Labour Party. It ceased publication in April 1968 after a libel action taken against *Voice of the Unions* and Ripley Printers by the Executive Council of the EETPU. While the *Electricians' Voice* was able to propagandise in favour of rank-and-

file candidates such as Fred Morpew, who stood for the position of General President against Les Cannon in 1968, unlike the *Power Worker* it was not an organizer. So the organization of the nomination campaign that gave Morpew over 200 branch nominations was carried out largely by the Communist Party. Nonetheless, the *Electricians' Voice* played an important, if short lived, role in propagandising for the Left in the union.

As we have said, the real opposition in the union was still carried out by Communist Party members and other activists. This involved, amongst other things, getting oppositionists placed on union committees and sent to union conferences, and organizing support for left candidates such as Fred Morpew. But the CP did not organize openly because, as was demonstrated in the run-up to the 1965 Conference, any organized intervention could be labelled as "outside interference in the affairs of the union" by the Executive. And given the history of the union the Communist Party were very susceptible to this charge. Moreover, the way the leadership dealt with the rebellion in the contracting industry proved only too clearly that they were not adverse to using the rules to get rid of their opponents. All in all, then, oppositionists had to tread carefully. It was only at the end of 1969 that *Flashlight*, the CP dominated newsheet, appeared and began to openly propagate a series of demands to reform the union. Yet in the late 1960s the fight against the JIB agreement in contracting did encourage the production of a number of local and area rank-and-file bulletins that began to articulate what were to be the central demands of *Flashlight*. One such bulletin was *The Spark* produced in Glasgow.

The first issue of *The Spark* came out in May 1967, and its editorial made it quite clear where it stood with regards to the leadership of the union. It lamented the decline of democracy over the previous five years and attacked the way the rules had been manipulated by the EC so that the elected full-time officials could not challenge them. It set its tasks out as follows:

"We shall name firms which are adopting a reactionary attitude towards electricians. We shall mention sites where the boys aren't getting a fair crack of the whip. We shall

encourage stewards who are doing a job in the best interest of our members...and most important of all, we will fearlessly criticise any paid official of the ETU who shirks an issue or falls down on the job he is paid by US to do. Namely, the advancement of the wages and conditions and organisation of the Electrical contracting industry." (24)

The September 1967 edition contained *The Spark's* main demands for regenerating internal democracy in the ETU:

- (1) All positions in the Union to be Elective.
- (2) A part-time EC which would truly be based in the workshops.
- (3) The right of recall, which unlike Bro. Chapple's oversimplification of it, meant that if the members felt aggrieved at the conduct of an official, they would have the right to demand a ballot vote to decide on his removal, with the built in safeguard for the official, that he would be allowed the right to state his case.
- (4) An Annual Policy Conference, made up of one delegate per branch of up to 500 members, with an additional delegate for every 500 members, up to a maximum of 3 delegates from one branch. All decisions of Conference to be binding on the EC.

Suprisingly, the reconstitution of the Area Committees was not one of the "minimal demands" of the Editorial Board. But demands 1 and 4 were to become central demands of the opposition platform in the 1970s. The Board itself seems to have been made up of local CP members and ETU militants and shop-stewards influenced by the CP. Although in one edition of *The Spark* it was stated that the bulletin was produced by the National Shop Stewards Committee (NSSC), it was apparent that it was produced in and largely aimed at West of Scotland electricians. (25) Consequently this was the first and last reference to the NSSC in *The Spark*. Contact was of course made with other electricians nationally through the CP

network, but there was never any serious link up of militants in contracting as there had been in the case of electricity supply and the *Power Worker*. What the reference to the mysterious NSSC did indicate though, was that the Glasgow electricians saw the need to co-ordinate their activities on a national scale and outside the confines of electrical contracting. So after the first edition, which confined itself to events in Scotland, subsequent issues tended to have a wider coverage of national events and issues that affected all sections of the ETU - equal pay, incomes policy legislation and so forth - although there was always a greater emphasis on Scottish events.

Following Cannon's re-election as President of the union in 1968, *The Spark* wrote that the increase in the left vote was an indication of "the inevitable coming to maturity of the various factions of the Left, there is considerable hope for the future". (26) This optimism was a product of the rising tide of resistance inside the union and the increasing isolation of the Electricians within the wider labour movement as it doggedly supported the Labour Government. The Executive Council's continued support for the Wilson Government presented the activists in the union with the ideal opportunity to raise openly the banner of opposition. For they could not only attack Cannon's remodelling of the union, they could also come out openly and attack the leadership politically now that such criticism so clearly cut with the grain of the wider opposition in the labour movement to Wilson's policies, and so could not be simply dismissed by the leadership as Communist interference in the affairs of the union. In these favourable circumstances, then, it was decided, mainly by CP members in the union, to launch a national rank-and-file newspaper. The first edition of *Flashlight* appeared in December 1969, and the last edition of *The Spark* appeared in October 1969, confirming the not too closely guarded secret that *The Spark* had been run largely by Communist Party members.

Flashlight

The aims of *Flashlight* were spelled out in its first editorial - "Our Policy":

"This paper is being published exclusively by and for members of the E.T.U.P.T.U. We do so not because we believe in a rank and file movement or a rank and file journal within and for members of the union. It is our conviction that rank and file participation in Union affairs should be provided for in the democratic structure and rules of our union.

When union democracy flourishes there is little need for a paper such as this. Members are then fully free to participate and fulfil their own destiny and aspirations to determine and have a say in their conditions of labour and to join when necessary workers from other unions who are faced with the same basic problems that we are.

The Electrical Trades Union has a long and proud history as a fighting militant and progressive Trade Union. Unfortunately during the past few years our union leadership has developed into a self-perpetuating elite showing more and more contempt for democracy and the will of the membership.

Can any member of our union feel proud that this paper is necessary or that we cannot give the names of members who contribute to its publication for fear of expulsion. For what reason. For putting on paper what every member of our union knows to be the truth.

This paper is not dedicated to any faction or aspirant to union office. It is dedicated to the best interests of all the members of our union irrespective of differing viewpoints. That's what democracy is all about. Our policy therefore is simply - Transform our union into a fighting instrument democratically run by the membership so that all of us will have a

greater say in our union affairs and in our wages, hours and conditions of employment.

When we win the fight with your help, this paper will be unnecessary." (27)

It might seem a little odd that a rank-and-file newspaper *For Electricians and Plumbers*, as *Flashlight's* masthead proclaimed, should, in its very first issue, say that it did not "believe in a rank and file movement or a rank and file journal within and for members of our union". The answer to this conundrum is to be found in the industrial strategy pursued by the Communist Party. Following the ballot-rigging trial, the CP moved away from a strategy of organizing predominantly as the CP in the trade unions, to one which attempted to seek out Labour Party members and non-affiliated activists to form Broad Left electoral pacts. So for example in the AEU, the CP wound up its rank-and-file publication *The Metalworker* in 1962 in order to clear the way for its Broad Left electoral turn. From 1965 it used the non-CP front *Engineering Voice* as its election organiser. (28) And the Broad Left turn in engineering, coupled as it was with the traditional strength of the CP in the industry, was very successful, culminating in the election of Hugh Scanlon as President of the AEU in 1967. The CP in the Electricians' union were quite prepared to see Walter Kendall's *Electricians' Voice* play a similar role, and, as we have seen, the good showing of Fred Morphey against Les Cannon in 1968 seemed to confirm the correctness of this electoral strategy. But since the *Electricians' Voice* had been put out of action, *Flashlight* now had to don the mantle of Broad Left organizer, and this above all else meant that it had to distance itself from any idea that it was a CP-front, or a CP Party building exercise. Thus the editorial in the first edition was at pains to make clear that *Flashlight* was seeking change in the EETPU only through the election of left or progressive candidates to office, and once this operation was complete there would be no need for *Flashlight*. The editorial then, was designed to alleviate any fears that those to the right of the CP might have about the intentions of the *Flashlight* group.

But the editorial was not just aimed at allaying the fears of the CP's potential allies on the right, it was also laying down a marker to those on its left who would seek to go beyond the

electoral strategy of the CP. The reason the CP in the EETPU had to take any notice of the small forces to its left in the union was due to its own relative weakness in the wake of the ballot-rigging scandal and the proscription from holding any office in the union:

"...the CP was forced to be more 'tolerant' of the anti-stalinist left (International Socialists, the Militant group) than in most other unions because they needed non-CP members to carry the *Flashlight* banner in the elections they were so concerned about." (29)

At the same time, if the CP needed the support of the far-left, groups like the International Socialists (IS) also needed the CP and *Flashlight*:

"We needed to work with the potential that the CP could muster. But within *Flashlight* from the start we pushed to transform it into an expanding rank-and-file organization that would fight on issues rather than simply on elections." (30)

Why *Flashlight* stressed so strongly that it was not attempting to build a rank-and-file movement was largely for the benefit of groups like the Trotskyist IS who shared a common heritage with the CP which went back to the 1920s and the CP's attempts to build a rank-and-file movement - the National Minority Movement. *Flashlight* was clearly saying that this is not the path we are going down. You are welcome to join us, but on our terms. It was, of course, an over reaction on the part of *Flashlight*, for the largest of the far-left groups that would work with the CP, the International Socialists, were in no position to greatly influence the direction of *Flashlight*, let alone launch a cross-union national rank-and-file movement. However, five years later the IS did consider they were strong enough to launch such a movement, and we shall see how this affected the organized opposition in the EETPU further on in the chapter. At its launch in 1969, then, despite reservations, *Flashlight* had the support of all the left factions in the union bar the ultra-orthodox Trotskyist Socialist Labour League. An uneasy alliance, but alliance nonetheless.

The first issue of *Flashlight* seems to have been well received, with the editorial in the second edition - BEYOND OUR FONDEST HOPES - claiming that 10,000 copies had been sold. (31) In terms of content *Flashlight* was very similar to *The Spark*. The first two editions, for example, carried articles on a meeting of 240 shop stewards from electricity supply who had called for strike action throughout the industry, the continuing unrest associated with the JIB agreement in contracting, the dangers of merging with the NUGMU, the closing down of the "progressive" Clydebank branch of the union, the need to develop opposition to productivity agreements and so forth. But the unifying theme that ran through all these different articles was the lack of internal democracy in the union and how this directly affected the wages and conditions of EETPU members. For example, *Flashlight 2* reported how the National Agreement between the Independent Television Companies and the ETU had "aroused anger, frustration and concern amongst electricians". Anger at the "derisory settlement of 4%" and "frustration at the Executives's attitude in repeatedly ignoring the representations of the shop stewards and members on wages and conditions".

At this stage, however, *Flashlight* did not contain a list of proposals or demands that would act as a focus for a unified opposition platform within the union. What changes were needed in order to democratise the union were left unsaid. Instead of concrete demands and proposals, the first two editions of *Flashlight* contented themselves with rather vague comments about the need for a more democratic union:

"Only a change in policy will ensure that changes in structure go hand in hand with democracy, and the members have a say in the running of the union."

"[we must] fight to make our union a truly democratic organisation responsive to the needs and aspirations of the membership." (32)

What *Flashlight* was clear about though, was that any change that was to come in the union was to be brought about by electing left-wing or progressive candidates onto the Executive Council of the

union. So from the start *Flashlight's* strategy was overwhelmingly electoral in outlook. The aim was to capture the EC by promoting a national body of alternative EC candidates - the "shadow" EC. Of course, when we say that *Flashlight's* strategy was electoral, we do not mean that they ignored strikes or that CP members in the union were not still the best shop-floor militants in the union, far from it. What we mean is that they saw the transformation of the union coming about solely through the electoral process, and that this concentration on elections resulted in them missing opportunities to build a wider opposition in the union that, in its turn, would have encouraged broader support for *Flashlight* candidates. We shall come back to this issue when we look at the growth of oppositional groupings that rose independently of *Flashlight*, and when we compare *Flashlight's* strategy with that of the *Rank and File Contact* group that split from *Flashlight* in the mid-1970s. For the moment let us see how successful this electoral strategy was.

Flashlight's electoral fortunes

No sooner was *Flashlight* launched than a test of its actual strength in the union presented itself. For the entire Executive Council of the union were coming up for re-election in 1970. Four editions of *Flashlight* appeared before the elections in November, and in all save three Divisions, *Flashlight* candidates got at least the three minimum branch nominations needed to stand against the sitting candidate. As can be seen from Table 2, the two *Flashlight* candidates (Gannon and Montgomery) were elected onto the EC (although the Montgomery election was subsequently declared void, see below), another sitting member (O'Neil) was also defeated, and all tolled the high total vote cast against the leadership (45%) was a very good result, if not quite the "tremendous success" described by *Flashlight* (33).

TABLE 2.

The EC Election results for 1970/71 were as follows:

Div.2:	Montgomery*	4,201
	Blairford†	3,598

(This election was then declared void by a 7 to 4 vote of the EC, and another election was then called in June 1971. By then another candidate had entered the field and the final votes were:

Div.2:	<i>Blairford</i> †	4,614	Re-elected
	Montgomery*	3,088	
	Milligan	769	
Div.3:	<i>Hadley</i> †	5,125	Re-elected
	Main	4,311	
Div.4:	<i>Breakell</i> †	5,020	Re-elected
	Sabino*	2,900	
Div.5:	<i>Sheasby</i> †	5,390	Re-elected
	Shaw*	2,496	
Div.7:	<i>Clarke</i>	4,180	Elected
	O'Neill†	4,027	
Div.8:	<i>Hammond</i> †	4,770	Re-elected
	Morphew*	2,899	
Div.9:	Gittins†	2,500	
	Pearce-	1,579	
Div.10:	<i>Blair</i> †	3,392	Re-elected
	Gore*	3,278	
Div.11:	<i>Clayton</i> †	3,218	Re-elected
	Dormer-	1,348	
	Aitken*	1,247	
Plumbers 1:	<i>Gannon</i> *	6,578	Elected
	Frasert	5,080	

(The election in Division 6 took place in June 1971 and the sitting EC member Ashfield was re-elected against a far right Chapple supporter)

† Sitting member

* *Flashlight* Candidate

- SLL/WRP Member

Source: Jefferys, "EETPU: The Decline of the narrow left", *International Socialism* 88, May 1976.

The attitude of the EC to opposition candidates is well illustrated by the the cases of Charlie Montgomery and Fred Gore, two of the leading oppositionists in the union at the time. On 10

June 1970, three months before the branch nomination for the EC elections, there was a one-day strike of 4000 electricians in protest at the introduction of the Scottish JIB agreement. As a result of his attendance at the Glasgow protest meeting, Montgomery, the Scottish *Flashlight* candidate, was expelled from the union in September, the month of the branch nominations, by the EC. However Montgomery, who had already received 23 branch nominations, took out an injunction against the EC for his exclusion from the ballot paper and his expulsion. Justice Plowman on this occasion ruled against the Executive Council, so Montgomery was reinstated and the election went ahead in January 1971. Montgomery defeated the sitting candidate, Blairford, by 4,201 votes to 3,598 votes. But this election was then declared void on the grounds of "outside interference" by a 7 to 4 vote of the EC. The EC then ordered a re-run of the election in June, but by then a third candidate appeared, splitting the vote and returning Blairford with an absolute majority over the other two candidates.

Fred Gore, *Flashlight* candidate for Division 10, tried unsuccessfully to take the union to court for having added without his permission to his election address a warning against "communist interference" in the union. Despite this interference by the EC, Gore came only 114 votes behind the sitting candidate. Such incidents, especially the disqualification of opposition candidates and the re-running of elections whose results were unfavourable to the EC, were to become commonplace under the leadership of Frank Chapple. The rules of the union allow the leadership ample scope for detecting infringements of the electoral procedure, and it is the EC themselves that determine when there has been a breach of the rules. So, for example, if a political organization that regularly distributed leaflets outside the gates of a number of workplaces (a common practice in the 1970s) happened to advocate support for an opposition candidate, this could be interpreted quite constitutionally by the EC as "outside interference", and the election could be declared void. In the hands of such an Executive Council the rule book becomes a minefield that oppositionists cross at their peril.

The success of the 1970 campaign only confirmed for the *Flashlight* leadership the correctness of their electoral strategy.

Flashlight 6 appeared immediately before the election for the General Secretary in May 1971. But in the six months prior to this election there had been major strikes and demonstrations against the Industrial Relations Bill, but *Flashlight* made no concerted attempt to bring together the thousands of EETPU members that were opposed to the Bill round a common programme of opposition aimed directly at the Executive Council's constant equivocations on the this issue (see chapter seven). They seemed unwilling to campaign around such political issues, and instead concentrated their efforts on elections. However, when the votes for the General Secretaryship were counted the *Flashlight* candidate, Fred Gore, had done nowhere as well as expected. Chapple was elected with 65,231 vote to Gore's 18,132, and the openly political candidate, Dormer, who stood as a Socialist Labour League candidate, gained a creditable 12,007 votes. Either way, 30,000 opposition votes were not to be sniffed at, and *Flashlight* could take heart from the respectable vote the joint opposition candidates received.

We said earlier that in its first few editions *Flashlight* had not outlined in any concrete fashion proposals or demands for transforming the union. Following the success of the 1970 campaign, however, *Flashlight* did formulate its proposals for change, and these appeared in the pamphlet *The Case for change in the EETU - PTU*, produced in 1971. The theme of the pamphlet was the decline of internal democracy in the union and how this "debasing of...democratic rights (had) gone hand in hand with a sacrifice of wages and the surrender of long-standing and hard won conditions and security of employment." The most important aspect of any union, argued the pamphlet, was its democratic structure. "A structure that provides for a two way exchange of ideas between the elected leadership and the members they represent. A structure that gives the members the right to decide policy through their elected delegates at Policy and Industrial Conferences." For such a democratic structure to become a reality in the EETPU, *Flashlight* put forward the following "broad outlines of what our union should be like":

"(1) An Executive Council that is dedicated to democratic changes in the structure of our union.

(2) The election of all officials of the union, including Trustees. No official has the right to hold office except by the consent of those he is to represent.

(3) Policy Conferences should be held every year. And, policy decided must be the policy for all members of the union, including the Executive Council.

(4) Area Committees to be reconstituted within the confines of each Division. Area Committees to elect delegates to a Divisional Committee.

(5) Area quarterly shop stewards conferences which will elect the delegates to the various National Industrial Conferences.

(6) The National Industrial Conference to have authority on negotiating policy and elect a lay member from Conference to be on the negotiating body for their respective industries, and have power of ratification of agreements before they are signed.

(7) The bans against Communists holding office to be removed...

(8) The Rank and File Final Appeals Committee must be reestablished. The present system is a travesty and violates the basic rights of natural justice of every member.

(9) Branches must be allowed to send notice and agenda of quarterly meetings and summon special meetings at the discretion of the Branch Committee." (34)

To the present day, with one or two exclusions and additions (*Flashlight* no longer calls for the reconstituting of the Area Committees, for instance), these are still the broad demands campaigned for by *Flashlight* in the EETPU. What they were proposing

in the pamphlet was essentially a return to the democratic structure that existed following the "orgy of democracy" at the 1962 Special Rules Revision Conference, and which was dismantled in Cannon's re-modelling of the union from 1965 onwards. This was an amalgamation of the old pre-1962 structure of the union with the 1962 reforms grafted onto it (see Diagram 2, Appendix). With this positive programme of reforms and the success of the 1970 campaign behind them, together with the good showing of the joint opposition candidates in the election for General Secretary in 1971, it might be expected that *Flashlight* could have entered the contest in 1972 for the position of General President following the death Les Cannon with some confidence. But this was not the case.

There were in all five candidates running against the favourite Frank Chapple for the post of President. After Fred Gore's disappointing results in the 1971 election for General Secretary, it was argued by a section of *Flashlight* that they should support not Gore but the mainstream left candidate Eric Hammond. The reasoning was clear: if the Broad Left strategy had not been as successful as anticipated in 1971 the reason was that the Broad Left had not been broad enough - cast the net wider and catch more fish. Eric Hammond was to be the bigger net. However the national *Flashlight* meeting that considered the proposal renewed its support for Gore by a vote of 2 to 1. But in both the edition of *Flashlight* out before the election and in the special election leaflet, the support for Gore was not as unequivocal as it had been in 1971. Hammond was given nearly as much favourable coverage in the pre-election issue as Gore. And in the end *Flashlight* came down on the side of neither Gore nor Hammond:

"The EETPU membership is presented with a situation far more complex than at the time of the election for General Secretary. We have to consider who, if elected offers the best chance of a breakthrough towards a strong, democratic union. For obvious reasons rules etc., we must not endorse a candidate as it would be used against him as it was in the Montgomery case."

This was a far cry from the 1971 election, when *Flashlight* ran the front page headline FRED GORE NOMINATED FOR GENERAL SECRETARY, with Gore's picture and a glowing article on his record and qualities, and when *Flashlight* activists openly campaigned with the slogan "Don't Grapple with Chapple, Score with Gore". (36) *Flashlight's* more cautious position was not primarily because it feared endorsing Gore, that was a red herring. The real reason was the split within *Flashlight* which resulted effectively in the endorsement of two candidates - Gore and Hammond. As might have been expected, this ambiguity was reflected in the election results:

Chapple	44,623
Young	10,972
Gore	10,747
Hammond	7,108
Dormer	5,820
Sanderson	3,834

Ironically, in its post-election edition *Flashlight* complained of the "separateness of forces" among those who wished for democratic reform, and of the need for "wider unity" to be established. (37)

As the Gore/Hammond debacle had shown, there was a danger of *Flashlight's* Broad Left strategy becoming so broad that electoral expediency would become the governing motive for supporting a candidate, rather than the candidate's principles and proven track record of opposition. The tacit support that *Flashlight* gave Eric Hammond was an indication of how elastic the Broad Left strategy was becoming. A further example of such elasticity, and what *Flashlight's* calls for "wider unity" meant in practice, was provided by *Flashlight's* campaign during the election for the, it was assumed (see chapter five), vacant position of General Secretary now that Chapple had won the Presidency.

As the election results above show, the nearest challenger to Frank Chapple in the Presidential election was Mark Young. Young, it will be recalled, was one of the original members of Les Cannon's band of ex-communists who had formed the *Reform Group* in the post-1956 period in order to rid the ETU of the Communist leadership. Following the death of Cannon in 1970, there followed a power struggle amongst leading members of the union over who should

occupy the now vacant position of President. Now that Chapple had won the Presidency the focus of struggle moved to the supposedly vacant seat of General Secretary. But, as the account given in the previous chapter showed, Chapple had no intention of sharing the top job in the union, for this might have meant his eclipse as in the "joint leadership" days of the 1960s under Cannon. Young it seems was considered by Chapple to be more of a threat to him than any candidates from the left, and so after ten years service as National Organizer Young was sacked in August 1973. Chapple's reason was given at the union's 1975 Conference:

"You thought he was a good fellow. Quite simply, I do not want to go into the detail, the Executive did not think so, and that is why he was not appointed." (38)

The consequences of the 1969 ballot that abolished the election of all full-time officials were now coming home to roost. As Young said in *Tribune*:

"I was dismissed as a union official because I was critical of some union policies...On that principal any official can be dismissed and we would have a collection of yes-men." (39)

Michels would have not been at all surprised at Chapple's desire to surround himself with "yes-men":

"There arises in the leaders a tendency to isolate themselves, as it were, with a wall, within which they will admit those only who are of their own way of thinking. Instead of allowing their successors to be appointed by the choice of the rank and file, the leaders do all in their power to choose these successors for themselves, and to fill up gaps in their own ranks directly or indirectly by the exercise of their own volition." (40)

For *Flashlight* the real question that the Young affair posed was whether or not the one time lieutenant of Cannon and Chapple could now act as a focus for increased oppositional activity in the union. *Flashlight* answered in the affirmative:

"Has the sacking of Brother Young unleashed new forces against Chapple and Company, and if so, can they write^[sic] with us under one cause? The answer to both questions is yes. We must bring about as rapidly as possible the closest co-ordination behind the struggle for changes in the EETPU. It may be asked, 'where does Brother Young stand in all this?' Quite simply, it remains to be seen. If his actions measure his words and stated intentions, they cannot do other than help. We shall observe and act accordingly." (41)

In fact the oppositional forces in the union at this time, 1973, were unleashing themselves without any assistance from Young as the same edition of *Flashlight* quoted above reported:

"The sounds of rebellion in the EETPU are rising to a new crescendo. The deep and intense feelings of concern felt by many of us in recent years about the undemocratic developments in our union are now finding far wider expression. We are witnessing new and important sections of our union taking up and forcefully expanding our arguments and slogans. This new awakening of feeling - almost like a shock wave has created another extension of support for *Flashlight*." (42)

It seems that *Flashlight* entertained the idea that Young could act as a figurehead for this oppositional upsurge. Thus the cryptic, "We shall observe and act accordingly" in *Flashlight* 12. A very Broad Left campaign in support of Young in the soon expected election for General Secretary could act, the reasoning might have gone, as a rallying point not only for the old oppositionists in the union around *Flashlight*, but also the "new forces" that were on the move, as well as for many on the centre and right of the union who were disillusioned with the Chapple leadership. Young could possibly provide the opening for the "wider unity" that *Flashlight* sought by securing the position of General Secretary and thus preparing the ground for the "breakthrough" that *Flashlight* hoped

was possible in the Executive Council elections in two years time, 1975. If this was the reasoning, and we believe that it was, the Broad Left strategy was giving way to a kind of Broad Democratic Alliance within the union based solely on winning elections. This is not at all surprising, after all the Communist Party's programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, envisaged change coming about in Britain through a Broad Democratic Alliance of progressive forces. If in Britain, why not in the EETPU? In the end *Flashlight* did not have to throw its weight behind Young, for as we know the election never took place. And in 1974 Young left the EETPU to take up the appointed position of General Secretary of the British Airline Pilots Association.

The rank-and-file "rebellion" of 1973

We have seen that *Flashlight's* main interest in the "rebellion in the EETPU" in 1973 was how these new forces could be harnessed in a democratic movement to transform the union's structure, and this for them meant broadening their electoral appeal to encompass forces well to the right of the organized opposition in the union. What is interesting is that this rebellion should throw up rank-and-file organization independent of the only organized grouping in the union - *Flashlight*. How strong was this rebellion and how did *Flashlight* react to it?

The rising militancy amongst many sections of the EETPU has to be placed firmly within the context of the general sharp rise in industrial and political militancy that took place in the early 1970s. One labour historian, Royden Harrison, has described the struggles under the Heath Government as "the most extraordinary triumph of trade unionism in its long conflict with government":

"The Labour Unrest of 1970-1974 was far more massive and incomparably more successful than its predecessor of 1910-1914. Millions of workers became involved in campaigns of civil disobedience arising out of resistance to the Government's Industrial Relations Act and, to a lesser extent, its Housing Finance Act. Over 200 occupations of factories, offices,

workshops and shipyards occurred between 1972 and 1974 alone and many of them attained some or all of their objectives. Strikes in the public services became more frequent and prolonged. Some of them began to exhibit an ominous concern with the conditions of *distribution* as well as production...

But it was the coal miners, through their victories in the two Februaries of 1972 and 1974 who gave to this Labour Unrest a structure, a final roundness and completeness which their contribution of 1912 had failed to supply to the earlier experience. First they blew the Government 'off course'; then they landed it on the rocks. First they compelled the Prime Minister to receive them in 10 Downing Street - which he had sworn he would never do - and forced him to concede more in 24 hours than had been conceded in the last 24 years. Then two years later their strike led him to introduce the three-day-week - a novel system of government by catastrophe - for which he was rewarded with defeat at the General Election.

Nothing like this had ever been heard of before!" (43)

This generalised militancy was reflected in the EETPU in a number of ways. Firstly, the 1971 BDC decision that took the union off the Industrial Relations Act register was reaffirmed against the wishes of the Executive Council at the 1973 BDC. Secondly, EETPU members were involved in some of the most prominent industrial disputes of the period. Thirdly, the opposition managed to capture 3 of the 12 seats on the EC in 1973. Finally, and this is what we are concerned with here, the period produced a number of rank-and-file organizations independent of *Flashlight*.

Three rank-and-file groupings independent of *Flashlight* appeared in 1973 - the *Reform Committee*, the *Plumbers Action Committee*, and the *Electricians' Charter Committee*. The *Reform*

Committee, ironically named after the Committee that was formed by Cannon, Chapple and Young in the early 1960s to oust the CP leadership (known as the *Reform Group* in the 1950s), was formed as a direct result of the sacking of Young from his post as National Organizer in 1973. The *Reform Committee* was given space in *Flashlight* to state its views:

"We welcome this opportunity of putting forward the views of the CAMPAIGN FOR THE DEMOCRATIC REFORM OF THE EET&PU. In doing so we are aware that this paper - which represents the platform of the broad left within the Union - has consistently put forward similar proposals to the ones we are now campaigning for.

The difference between our two groups lies in our objectives. As a left-wing grouping, Democratic Reform is only one plank in a number of associated policies for which you stand.

In our case, Democratic Reform is our single and only objective. We represent various opinions and therefore we cannot put forward a common collective view on wider policy matters and once the reforms we advocate are secured, we shall immediately disband.

It is important that this is understood; because any future coalition we can construct together to reform the Union's structure and rules cannot be extended to include broad policy matters." (44)

The *Reform Committee*, like *Flashlight*, protested that "since 1965 we have witnessed a whittling away of members' rights and the concentration of power at the top of the Union", and the changes they advocated (election of all full-time officials etc.) were almost identical to *Flashlight's*. Even the distinction between "broad policy matters" and democratic reform, which the *Reform Committee* saw as distinguishing themselves from *Flashlight*, was not so clear cut. After all, in its first issue *Flashlight* had said there would no longer be a need for such a paper as *Flashlight* once

the reforms they were advocating had been achieved. *Flashlight's* aim was to reform the union, it gave no indication that once this was achieved that it would continue as a left-wing body campaigning on "broad policy matters". True *Flashlight* carried articles on broader issues such as strikes and the need for the EETPU to oppose the policies of the Heath Government, but their actual demands on the union leadership were almost exclusively concerned with internal reform. So the gap between the *Reform Committee* and *Flashlight* was not all that wide. No doubt in his bid for leadership Young wanted the support of *Flashlight*, but at the same time he wanted to keep his own independent grouping together to further his own ambitions and distance himself from the CP in the union.

The *Plumbers Action Committee* (PAC) was set up in the North East of England in June 1973 in order to combat what they saw as the loss of identity of the plumbing section of the EETPU since the ETU and PTU merged in 1968. A national meeting of some 60 plumbers was held on 29 September 1973 aimed at broadening the base of the PAC. But it was not until a further national meeting was held in Manchester on 8 December 1973 that the demands of the PAC were fully formulated. These were listed in the main resolution before the meeting:

- "(1) Reconstitution of the District Committees.
- (2) Election of all full-time officials.
- (3) Better deal for Table Z members.
- (4) The Final Appeals Committee to be restored as a rank and file body and elected by ballot.
- (5) Full democratic rights for all members.
- (6) More representatives for plumbers on the Executive Council.
- (7) Call for a National Delegate Conference of the Plumbing section." (45)

As well as the main resolution being carried, the following recommendations were also agreed upon:

- That the *Reform Committees'* petition be supported [i.e. for the re-instatement of Mark Young].

- That we demand that the election of General Secretary be held.
- That we broaden our activities as much as possible and aim for a more widely representative conference in Spring 1974.
- That the organising committee of this conference becomes the basis of a national committee, and steps be taken to widen representation on it." (46)

Rank-and-file organization independent of *Flashlight* was also taking place in electrical contracting. On 3 March 1973, sixty delegates met in Liverpool to discuss a common programme of action for contracting electricians in the union. The programme decided on by the Liverpool Conference became known as the *Electricians' Charter*, which contained 10 points:

- (1) End the grading system [i.e. the JIB grading system which resulted in differential rates of pay depending on how the electrician was classified].
- (2) £1.50 per hour with local negotiations.
- (3) 35 hour week without loss of pay.
- (4) De-casualisation of the industry.
- (5) Full pay during sickness and unemployment.
- (6) Four weeks holiday with average pay.
- (7) No penal clauses in the agreement (referring to the disciplinary powers of the JIB).
- (8) End the Lump - 100% trade union organisation.
- (9) Introduce the right to strike.
- (10) Better apprenticeship training and conditions.

Another conference was held in Manchester on 15 September 1973. This was largely concerned with discussing the 1974 wage agreement and the need to press for local bargaining. The 10 point charter was re-endorsed and a standing committee - *The Electricians' Charter Committee* - was elected to co-ordinate the

activities of rank-and-file electricians around the points of the charter and the decisions of the two conferences. (47)

The high point of the rank-and-file "rebellion" came in May 1974, when more than 600 plumbers and electricians attended a "Reform the Union" rally in Birmingham. What was so significant about the rally was that it was jointly sponsored by *Flashlight*, the *Reform Committee*, and the *Plumbers Action Committee*, and represented the first real attempt by the opposition forces in the union to act together to democratise the EETPU. A statement of policy and aims was carried without dissension at the rally:

"Our primary aim is a democratic union ensured by the following:-

- Election of all officials.
- Reintroduction of District Area Committees.
- Full democratic rights for all members - end political bans.
- Final appeals committee to be restored to a rank-and-file committee.
- Better representation for plumbing section members."

In short, the rank-and-file groupings wanted a return to the internal democracy that followed the 1962 SRRC. To this end the rally endorsed a number of immediate demands: a Special Rules Revision Conference to be called in 1975 to give effect to the changes needed to democratise the union, the election for the vacant post of General Secretary to be held without any further delay, and opposition to the proposed merger with the G&MWU. (48) Mark Young spoke at the Conference, and the only people to openly criticise his record were Billy Williams and Rab Jeffery, who were both members of the International Socialists. Nonetheless, Young did not receive the endorsement he was clearly hoping for from the Conference as the joint opposition's candidate for the expected election for General Secretary: an endorsement that would in all likelihood not have been opposed by a large faction of *Flashlight* activists, including its leadership.

What was *Flashlight's* reaction to the emergence of organized opposition independent of its own organisation? Quite simply, they

welcomed it. In fact, the emergence of the PAC and the *Electricians Charter* seems to have had the effect of pushing *Flashlight* to the left. For their almost exclusive concern with elections and union conferences was undermined somewhat by the PAC and especially the *Charter* group, who were concerned with immediate economic demands as well as demands for democratic change in the union. It was precisely because *Flashlight* did not appear to be articulating these day to day grievances that such groups appeared in the first place. *Flashlight*, it goes without saying, reported the day to day grievances of plumbers and electricians, and the leading activists on the sites were very likely to be *Flashlight* supporters, but they did not attempt to *organise* this discontent on a national scale. The PAC and the *Electricians Charter Committee* were attempts to do precisely that: *Flashlight* merely tail-ended these initiatives. Moreover, the very fact that three opposition candidates had been elected onto the Executive Council in 1973, pointed to the fact that rank-and-file activity on the ground could be translated into electoral success. The lesson of the 1973 "rebellion" would seem to be that rank-and-file organization and electioneering had to be run in tandem if any significant change in the union was to be brought about. *Flashlight's* tendency to concentrate on electioneering received a corrective during 1973, but the events of that year also raised a political problem for the *Flashlight* leadership.

In its first edition *Flashlight*, it may be recalled, stated that it did not "believe in a rank and file movement or a rank and file journal". Their strategy had been to build a Broad Left opposition whose aim was to replace the right-wing EC with a left-wing one. Yet in 1973 the PAC had set up an unofficial National Committee, the *Electricians Charter* had a *Standing Committee* and in London there existed a strong "*Shop Stewards Movement*". In fact, it was the initiative of the London Shop Stewards Movement to set up the *Electricians Charter*. These developments showed all the signs of an embryonic rank-and-file movement gestating in the body of the EETPU. Even *Flashlight* now began to talk of the rank-and file movement. For example, after the December PAC Conference in Manchester it reported:

"This conference in itself was testimony to the tremendous growth in a very short period of our rank and file movement." (49)

Now the CP leadership of *Flashlight* knew only too well what the difference was between rank-and-file activity in the EETPU and the building of a rank-and-file movement, but what they tended to do was to wilfully confuse the two. The major hallmark of the two attempts to build rank-and-file movements in Britain - the Shop Stewards & Workers' Committee Movement of the First World War and the Communist Party instigated National Minority Movement of the 1920s - was their capacity to mobilise from below and act independently where necessary of the union leaderships whether they be left-wing or right-wing. How successful they were in this task is another matter, but that is what they aimed for. The CP's Broad Left strategy of the 1960s, was an attempt to control the unions by getting left-wing and progressive candidates into office, not by building rank-and-file "minorities" in the unions that could act against those very same left-wing officials if need be. We shall deal further with this subject when we examine the strategy of the International Socialists. What we can say here though, is that the leadership of *Flashlight* were bound by the CP's all-union industrial strategy of building Broad Lefts in the unions, so they were certainly not going to push for the building of a national rank-and-file movement which would have necessarily entailed linking together with other oppositional groupings in left-led unions like the AUEW and T&GWU, as well as right-wing ones.

What happened to the groups? After the 1974 ballot that abolished the post of General Secretary, Mark Young, as we have seen, abandoned ship and consequently the *Reform Committee*, which was essentially a vehicle for Young, disappeared. The fate of the PAC and the *Electricians Charter* group seems to have been the same. They continued in name only for a short while but took no notable initiatives. So there is no reference to either group in *Flashlight*, or any of the left press, after the joint rally of May 1974 in Birmingham. Certainly the activists did not disappear, but the momentum of 1973 had obviously not been strong enough to maintain two national organizations without any political backing. *Flashlight* could sustain itself not only from the support it

received from rank-and-file EETPU members, but also from the backing it could depend on from the 30,000 strong Communist Party. This was not primarily financial help, but organizational and political, providing *Flashlight* with a nationwide network of contacts throughout the trade union and labour movement and more importantly a political direction. The other grouping in the union to last out the 1970s was the *Rank and File Contact* group, and this was because it also had political backing - the International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party. The only other oppositional journal to appear in the union in recent years has been the *Beacon*, which is backed by the *Militant* "organization" and which appeared as their star was rising over Liverpool in the early 1980s.

Another factor is the general ebb in industrial militancy that accompanied the first two years of the 1974-1979 Labour Government, with the number of days "lost" through industrial disputes falling from 14,750,000 in 1974, to 6,012,000 in 1975 and to 3,284,000 in 1976. There was also the expectancy that the new Government which had promised "a massive and irreversible shift in the distribution of both wealth and power in favour of working people and their families", would deliver this time round. The only way that the groups that emerged in 1973 could have been developed was if *Flashlight* and the CP had thrown their weight behind them. But of course *Flashlight* had its own road to travel, and it is more than likely that the activists in these groups gravitated towards *Flashlight* in the changed circumstances of 1975. By the end of 1974, then, organized opposition seems to have been firmly back in the hands of *Flashlight*.

The Executive Council elections of 1975.

Flashlight appeared four times in the run-up to the Executive Council elections of November 1975. But again it gave no indication of who the *Flashlight* candidates were for fear of journalists like Woodrow Wyatt denouncing them as Communists and Trotskyists, and of the EC taking action against alleged "outside interference" in the affairs of the union. Justified as these fears were, not to openly support a slate of candidates was a novel way of electioneering and could only lead to confusion. An indication of this confusion was

that when the election results were announced all but one of the right-wing candidates increased his majority. (see Table 3) The one exception was the victory of Hector Barlow, who defeated the sitting candidate after a re-run election was ordered by the EC and after, as in the case of the Montgomery election in 1970/71, a third candidate entered the race. The increased votes of the sitting members were explained by *Flashlight* by the press' "particularly outrageous intervention in union affairs", but went on to say that some comfort could be derived from the increase in the votes of the progressive candidates compared to 1970. *Flashlight* concluded on an optimistic note: "we take heart from the changing complexion of the EC over the last five years as shown by the election of Bros. Gannon, Best, Ramshaw and now Barlow, and the steady growth of support for democratic reforms in our union." (50)

Table 3.

1975 EC Election Results

Div.4:	<i>Breakell</i> †	8,694	Re-elected
	Sabino*	3,004	
Div.7:	<i>Clarke</i> †	8,236	Re-elected
	Bevan*	3,766	
Div.8:	<i>Hammond</i> †	8,611	Re-elected
	Banning	3,549	
	Atkinson*	1,692	
	Pearce-	649	
Div.10:	<i>Blair</i> †	9,518	Re-elected
	Gore*	3,810	
Div.11:	<i>Clayton</i> †	7,483	Re-elected
	Aitkin*	2,788	
Plumbers 1:	<i>Gannon</i> †	Returned unopposed	
Plumbers 3:	<i>Barlow</i>	2,035	Elected
	Gaffney	1,546	
	Sweeney	447	

† Sitting member

* Flashlight candidate

- WRP candidate

Source: Jefferys, op. cit.

The next electoral hurdle for *Flashlight* was the 1976 election for the General Secretary. Harold Best was the candidate supported by *Flashlight*. Best was in many ways a dream candidate for *Flashlight*, for he refused to be identified with *Flashlight* or any other grouping in the union and so was not as readily open to the charge that he was a Communist dupe. Best was in today's parlance a "soft left" candidate, and as such *Flashlight* reasoned that he could attract votes from a larger section of the membership. This election is also of special interest because we see the entry for the first time of an opposition candidate backed by a rival political organization, an organization that had previously worked within the Broad Left *Flashlight* umbrella. Billy Williams stood as a Rank and File candidate and, as *Flashlight* pointed out, his demands for change in the union were "virtually the democratic demands long established by *Flashlight*." Moreover, his decision to stand "arising from the policies of the International Socialists, led to an angry rift in the rank and file movement", and had undoubtedly been a "harmful one" which "in another situation could be disastrous". (51) The questions are though, why had Williams' standing caused such an "angry rift in the rank and file movement", and why did he gain so many votes first time out?

Chapple	83,838.
Best	24,254.
Williams	10,270.

These questions can only be answered by examining the alternative strategy offered by the *Rank and File Contact* group.

Rank and File Contact 1976-1980

In the militant years of the early 1970s the International Socialists (from 1977 the Socialist Workers Party) attempted to build a national rank-and-file movement. The reasoning behind this industrial strategy was summed up some years later by Alex Callinicos, a member of the SWP Central Committee:

"It was an attempt to give a class-wide perspective and a national structure and

leadership to rank-and-file organizations which had been built up gradually between the 1930s and 1960s, and which were now coming into increasing conflict with the employers, the trade union bureaucracy and the state. Out of this conflict would come, so it was argued, an increasing potentiality for the economic class struggle to assume a directly political character. Revolutionaries, by relating to workers in struggle, and seeking to weld them together into a class-wide movement, could win mass support for their politics." (52)

Central to this perspective, and in stark contrast to the Broad Left strategy of the CP, was the belief that left-wing trade union officials should not be relied upon. The IS took the sentiments expressed in the first leaflet of the Clyde Workers Committee in November 1915 as their guiding principle as far as trade union officialdom was concerned:

"We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them." (53)

Not that the IS thought that all union officials were hewn from the same rock, they didn't. They recognised the importance of ideological differences and realised that such differences affected the way officials acted in practice. So in the EETPU IS members worked within *Flashlight*, and in other unions they supported the left against the right. But the fundamental fact overriding all differences of ideology, argued IS, was that at times of radical crisis or in periods of high militancy like the early 1970s "all sections of the bureaucracy seek to curb and control workers' militancy". (54) This was true, for example, IS argued, in the period immediately following the Pentonville dockers crisis in the summer of 1972, when left and right union leaders took part in tripartite talks in an effort to deflate the political crisis. (55) It was also true in September 1973 when the leaders of the T&GWU and the AUEW urged their members to cross the picket

lines of 156 striking electricians at Chrysler's Coventry plants who were in the process of breaking the Tory incomes policy, and it became abundantly clear with the continuing support given to the Labour Government's Social Contract by Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon when in 1977 a rising tide of militancy threatened to destroy the Government's incomes policy.

Besides the favourable objective conditions for launching a national rank-and-file movement in the early 1970s, Callinicos argues that there were two further crucial pre-conditions for the IS initiative. (56) The first was the role of the Communist Party. In the early 1970s, writes Callinicos, the CP found itself virtually paralysed by the increasingly glaring contradiction between the trade union bureaucracy and the rank-and-file which ran through its own ranks. Thus, while its industrial front, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU) led two large unofficial stoppages against the Wilson Government's anti-union proposals in 1969, followed by two other unofficial stoppages in 1970-71 against the Industrial Relations Bill, in the much bigger struggles to follow they made no effort to link the rank-and-file militants together in a national organization.

The second pre-condition was IS's own implantation in the workplaces. Between 1971 and 1974 IS was transformed from being a predominantly student to a predominantly working class organization. By March 1974 it had a membership of 3,310, of which 1,115 were manual workers (90 in the EETPU) and 950 routine "white collar" workers, and they were organized into 13 trade union fractions and forty factory branches (as well as geographical branches of course). (57) Two of the most successful factory branches were in Glasgow. The branch at the Chrysler plant in Linwood had 25 members, 12 of whom were shop-stewards, including the first elected chairman of the JSSC, Willie Lee, and the convenor of the T&GWU stewards, Peter Bain. At its peak the branch sold between 200 and 250 copies of *Socialist Worker* each week at the plant. The Glasgow Corporation branch included some of the organization's leading EETPU militants, such as the convenor George Kelly, and they were to play a leading role in *Rank and File Contact*. During this same period IS members in various industries had launched rank-and-file papers whose aim was to group around

them militants who did not share all their political views but who were prepared to work with them around specific issues such as higher wages. By 1973 these papers had achieved a small, but nonetheless, not insignificant circulation.

It was in these circumstances that IS took the first step towards building a national rank-and-file movement by calling a delegate conference to discuss the prospects of such a movement on 30 March 1974. 500 delegates representing 270 trade union bodies attended, and set up the National Rank and File Organising Committee (NRFOC). A second conference in November of the same year was attended by 460 delegates, including 61 shop stewards committees and 8 strike committees. (58) It was in this context that *Rank-and File Contact* was launched at the beginning of 1976.

Rank and File Contact

The International Socialists had had a presence in the Electricians' union since the late 1960s, and, as we have seen, operated within *Flashlight* from its inception in 1969. They also produced two pamphlets in this period - *Grading and the Contracting Sparks* and *Rank and File Struggles in the ETU* - both of which were attacks on the JIB agreement in electrical contracting. The latter pamphlet was produced in Glasgow and was concerned mainly with showing Scottish electricians the dangers of the JIB agreement that had come into operation south of the border (it will be remembered that the Scottish JIB agreement was signed in 1968, two years after the English and Welsh one). Even at this early stage the IS stress on the primacy of rank-and-file organization at site and workplace level as opposed to electoral activity is clearly evident. But, on the whole, it is doubtful if any activist in the union, CP or otherwise, would find much to quarrel with in these two pamphlets.

In the early 1970s the IS produced a number of *Socialist Worker* specials for electricians. Again most activists in the EETPU would agree with the bulk of their contents - attacks on the Tories, the right-wing of the TUC and the policies of the Executive Council. What many of them would not agree with though, were the attacks made on the left of the trade union movement. For example, an *Electricians Special* produced in the summer of 1973 attacked not

only the right-wing of the TUC for its failure to fight the Tories "Counter Inflation Policy", but went on :

"Certainly no faith can be put in the will or ability of the existing 'left' leaders to stop the rot. The painful truth is that they differ from the right wing in words but not, for the most part, in deeds. Scanlon, Jones, Daly and their friends have not seriously fought for militant policies. Nor can this simply be put down to their personal failings. It is a political failing. The belief that the way forward lies mainly in a struggle for office, the replacement of this right wing official by that left wing one, ignores the fact that only a powerful rank and file movement can force the leaderships to act or by pass them if they refuse. No serious militant can fail to recognise the value of supporting left-wing candidates for office. But this activity can have a real effect if, and only if, it is an integral part of the struggle to build a big rank-and-file movement on a fighting programme which rejects class collaboration and seeks to unite workers against the employers and their government." (59)

Here we have the IS strategy neatly summarized. From 1969 to 1975, IS electricians attempted to push this strategy within *Flashlight*, but with the launching of the NROC in 1974, IS attempted to strike out on its own under the banner of *Rank and File Contact*. Consequently Billy Williams was run as a *Rank and File* candidate in the election for the General Secretaryship in 1976. Williams was a member of the Communist Party but left after "they [the CP] broke up our attempt to build a Liaison Committee for Defence of Trade Unions in Cardiff. I couldn't find any fighting spirit in the Communist Party. I joined the International Socialists, and that's full of fighters. I say in my election address I'm in the IS. I'm proud of it." (60) Williams was asked in one interview why he wasn't supporting Harold Best (who was the

Flashlight supported candidate) against Frank Chapple. He recounted a story of a lobby of the union's HQ during the 1975 Local Authority electricians dispute:

"...we got stewards together from all over the country...Speaking to Chapple at that time I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was wondering who these people were. He'd never seen them before in his life.

He loves debating with his known opponents on the left, the *Flashlight* candidates, the professional opposition-men. But these people were different, young rank and file militants who had no respect for him at all, who treated him as an equal and demanded action from him... Now these are the people I'm representing in the election: the people who want to change the union from the bottom up. For far too long, the left have tried to change it from the top.

I don't expect to touch Chapple in the vote. But I do expect, through this election, to make lots of contacts and to start the argument about who controls the union." (61)

Given that it was Williams' first time out in an election, and given that he openly declared that he was a member of the International Socialists, his 10,000 votes compared to Best's 24,000 were very creditable, and showed that there was a significant minority that went along with *Rank and File Contact's* approach and ideas. Seemingly the *Flashlight* leadership were in two minds whether to support Williams or not, and this might account for Williams' good showing, with many *Flashlight* supporters voting for him.

As part of Williams' campaign the *Rank and File Contact* group produced a pamphlet - *The Ugly Face of Chapple's Union - and how to change it*. This was a potted history of the rise of Frank Chapple and how under his leadership there had been a complete failure to fight the anti-trade union legislation of the Tories, the wage cutting policies of the Labour Government, and how he had attacked those within the union who had fought for better wages and

conditions and against the policies of both Heath and Wilson. It also contained a stinging section on "How Chapple keeps his Grip", outlining the decline in internal democracy in the union. In this section, Chapple's frequent use of lawyers to vet election addresses and material critical of the union was referred to, and as an aside it was said: "It is nearly 100 per cent certain that this pamphlet you are now reading will be sent to the EETPU lawyers". It was, and attracted damages of £22,500, but the publishers, S.W.Litho (the IS print-shop) avoided the cost by going bankrupt (Chapple was also awarded costs of £4000 against *Socialist Worker* for their reference to him as Franco Chapple). A month after the *Ugly Face* appeared a national *Rank and File Contact* Conference was held in Birmingham and the first issue of *Rank and File Contact* appeared. How then did the immediate demands of and the actual practice of the *Rank and File Contact* group differ from *Flashlight*?

In terms of the formal demands for the restoration of democracy in the union the two groups' demands were virtually identical. The only major differences being that *Rank and File Contact* wanted all elected officials to be paid their members' average wage and unofficial shop stewards' Combines to be set up in every section of industry with EETPU members. Where they differed was on many of the economic/political demands that they put forward. *Flashlight* would put forward anti-incomes policy slogans (in fact they were often to the left of the CP in criticising Scanlon and Jones' support for the Social Contract), but they would never call "For occupations to force nationalisation without compensation of firms that sack workers", or come out against all immigration and import controls as *Rank and File Contact* did. (62) In short, the differences reflected the different politics of the Communist Party and the International Socialists.

In terms of practice, the *Rank and File Contact* group were constantly trying to make the links between the fight for better wages and conditions in the union, the fight against the Social Contract, and the need for a national rank-and-file movement that could act independently of the trade union bureaucracy. To this end they organized a number of conferences to bring those militants together in the union that were prepared to "unite and spread the opposition to Chapple". The first Conference was held on 12 June

1976 in Birmingham, and was attended by 65 EETPU members. Besides sharing their experiences and articulating the demands needed for a real campaign against the leadership, the delegates also criticised *Flashlight's* Broad Left strategy. One critic's comments, Jim Atkinson, carried special weight as he had been a leading member of *Flashlight* and had stood as an opposition candidate. He said that "a branch and workshop base" was the key to building opposition, and that "the experience of the T&GWU and the AUEW is that the election of left-sounding officials is no solution to the problems of the rank and file". This criticism of left officials continued when one shop-steward, Colin Simpson, representing striking electricians from Sheffield, complained that the EC member for his area, the *Flashlight* supported candidate for the position of General Secretary, Harold Best, had not been near the strike in the five weeks it had been on. (63)

This was a recurring criticism made by *Rank and File Contact* about left-wingers that had been elected onto the EETPU EC, and it was a criticism that totally undermined *Flashlight's* strategy. It was a criticism that was taken up by Steve Jefferys in a major critique of *Flashlight* that appeared in the International Socialists theoretical journal the month before the Birmingham Conference:

"So far the 'opposition' grouping of Gannon, Harold Best and Phil Ramshaw...has few achievements to its credit. At only his second meeting, for example, the Minutes recorded Best as seconding acceptance of the Stage 3 deal in the Electricity Supply industry; that meeting took place during the 1974 miners' strike against the Tory wages policy. And when *Flashlight No 13* headlined the need for the General Secretary election to take place, only Ramshaw voted against the EC decision to wait for the industrial consultants' report. Gannon and Best went along with Chapple." (64)

The ineffectiveness of the oppositionists on the Executive Council also came across in the pages of *Flashlight* itself. A

delegate from Manchester to the 1975 BDC reported in *Flashlight* that the:

"outstanding aspect at this year's conference on the Isle of Man was once again the dominance of Bro. Chapple within the leadership. Their apparent obedience to his promptings and wishes stuck out like a sore thumb. Although in all fairness, we do know that some EC members were opposed to many of Bro. Chapple's remarks, it must be said that it did not manifest itself in any way, unless their silence was itself a protest." (65)

The only way to stop left-wing officials drifting, it was argued at the Birmingham Conference, was for them to be accountable to a strong rank-and-file organization at workplace level. Building that organization was the main task. It would be difficult and would take time, said George Kelly, the Convenor of Glasgow Corporation Electrical Workshops:

"We have a programme of what we want to achieve, but we can't expect to carry everything at once. We have to walk on two feet on issues like wages and conditions and on issues like racialism." (66)

It was a brick on brick strategy in many ways, with the group focusing on those areas where EETPU members were attempting to improve their wages and conditions, and from this economic struggle attempting to generalise about the EETPU's and the Labour Government's policies. A good example of this was a dispute involving 22 electricians at Dinnington colliery in South Yorkshire early in 1977. After a 10 week strike the electricians won a 35 pence increase in their hourly rate which broke the JIB agreement. The EETPU leadership instructed the men back to work and announced that the strike was political because it breached the Social Contract pay limit. For *Rank and File Contact* this was precisely the kind of action that should be encouraged, for it showed very clearly the potential for a rank-and-file movement within the union. As one *Rank and File Contact* electrician put it:

"The Dinnington lads knew they had to rely on rank and file EETPU members to win. From the beginning, strike bulletins were produced to explain their case to other workers. Support was won from sites and factories all over the country. The victory is the first step towards uniting rank and file EETPU members in a fight against the stranglehold of the JIB on wages and conditions." (67)

To build on this victory against the JIB, the *Rank and File Contact* group organized a Conference against the JIB in Sheffield on 28 May 1977. The Conference was a success with over 80 delegates attending from some of the major sites and strike committees in the country. A declaration was adopted by the Conference which called for an hourly wage rate of £2.50, a campaign against the blacklisting of militants and the JIB grading system and for a lobby of the union's BDC. The lobby took place and was criticised by *Flashlight*:

"The Lobby of our Biennial Conference organised by the "Rank and File" Contact, in no way assisted the fight inside the conference. On the contrary Chapple was able to exploit the situation to his own advantage. Many delegates reported on the adverse effect the lobby had. Perhaps some lessons have been learnt, but at what cost?" (68)

Flashlight is giving the impression here that a lively lobby of around 100 electricians somehow tilted the balance at the BDC in favour of the leadership.

Such criticisms were part of a general "counter-attack" that the Communist Party and *Flashlight* were making against the industrial strategy of the IS/SWP. In the December 1976 edition of *Marxism Today*, Geoff Roberts wrote a lengthy critique of the IS/SWP industrial strategy as well as reaffirming the CP's own strategy. (69) For its part *Flashlight* responded to the critique of their strategy that appeared in *International Socialism* with an article entitled "People in Glass Houses":

"We are accused of being primarily concerned with elections and not of fighting on issues. This is quite wrong. It is true that we regard the official channels of struggle as being very important. The defeat of Chapple's line on the Industrial Relations Act owed much to the agitation that was stimulated, maintained and led by our movement. In many militant struggles *Flashlight* supporters gave leadership, whilst our paper has fought consistently to present a left policy as part of a general campaigning to influence the direction of the whole labour movement. The ability to get marchers out on the streets does become, from time to time, crucial, but it is by no means the sum total of rank and file expression [this is a reference to the 'Right-to Work' marches organized by IS/SWP]. To be able to achieve the best correlation of forces seeking democratic change must be the constant aim. The electoral processes offer unique periods for being able to forward this aim. But, again, neither is this the sum total of the fight that has to be waged. Success will depend ultimately on a blend of all forms of activities, initiatives and motivations." (70)

Flashlight also defended its position of not always supporting rank-and-file candidates where they considered a more moderate, or better established, left candidate would stand a better chance of being elected:

"We do not take the view that supporting rank and file candidates is the 'only principled' position. Or that full-time officers aspiring to leadership posts must do deals and align themselves formally with the rank and file movement is another example of 'principle'. For us, the honest presentation of our broad

policy, its democratic aims and reasoning is a sound principle." (71)

Clearly *Flashlight* was taking the challenge of *Rank and File Contact* seriously (a small indication of this is the change in *Flashlight's* masthead in 1977 from *FOR ELECTRICIANS AND PLUMBERS* to *A RANK AND FILE PAPER FOR EETPU MEMBERS*), just as the Communist Party was taking the IS/SWP seriously. For the showing of Billy Williams in the General Secretary election, the production by 1977 of a pamphlet and three issues of *Rank and File Contact*, the organizing of a number of conferences which attracted some of the best militants in the country, the lobby of the 1977 BDC, and the general pull of the new grouping all presented a serious challenge to the *Flashlight* leadership within the EETPU. A third National Rank and File Conference organized by IS in November 1977, which was attended by 522 delegates from 251 trade union bodies, could only have reinforced the potential challenge that *Rank and File Contact* posed to *Flashlight*. Moreover, despite *Flashlight's* broader base in the union, and despite the fact that the CP must have had hundreds of members in the union at the time (where IS/SWP had about 100), their ability to bring together militants in the union seems to have been no greater than *Rank and File Contact's*. So that a *Flashlight* Conference held in Manchester in 1978 attracted 75 EETPU members, no more on average than the *Rank and File Contact* group was pulling. (72) However, 1977 was in many ways the high point for the *Rank and File Contact* grouping in the union. They never extended their base any further, and by the early 1980s *Flashlight* had reasserted its hegemony as the main oppositional grouping in the union. Why?

The fortunes of *Rank and File Contact* were clearly linked to the IS/SWP strategy of building a cross-union national rank-and-file movement, which in turn was dependent on the level of combativity of the working class. With hindsight the SWP now admit that the movement that they launched in 1974 was "still born", and that the explosion of rank-and-file militancy in 1977 (which was why the SWP called the third National Rank and File Conference) was a "false dawn". What their analysis did not take account of, the SWP now argues, was the existence of a number of long term tendencies whose effect was to undermine the strong workplace

organization that had been built up during the 1950s and 1960s. The essential features of this process were threefold. Firstly, the widespread replacement of piecework by national or plant agreements and the "bureaucratisation" of full-time convenors and senior shop stewards. Secondly, the collapse of the left trade union leaders, most notably Scanlon and Jones, in the face of the Social Contract, and the damage that had inflicted on a whole layer of militants that had worked for the Broad Left strategy. Accompanying this was the rightward drift of the Communist Party, which deprived militants of the main organizational framework that they had previously possessed. Finally, the shop stewards' politics were, at best, militant reformism. But the acute economic crisis of the 1970s meant that this would no longer do - militant economism needed to be transcended. However, in the absence of a credible alternative, most workers went along with the prevailing ideology - profitability, national interest etc. Taken together, the SWP argued, these factors amounted to a

"threefold crisis in the labour movement - of organisation, leadership and ideology - [which] had led to a marked shift of the balance of forces in the ruling class's favour since 1974." (73)

This "downturn" analysis was first articulated by Tony Cliff in 1979. (74) But it was only after much internal wrangling that this analysis was accepted in the SWP, and several years before the practical consequences of the "downturn" analysis were followed through - the winding up of the rank-and-file papers and the abandonment, until better times, of the attempt to build a national rank-and-file movement. *Rank and File Contact* was still appearing in 1981, while in the same year the group organized a Conference against unemployment and a lobby by 70 EETPU members of the union's BDC. But by late 1982, and after the EETPU leadership had disciplined 4 leading SWP electricians (one of them, Marc Mellor, being banned from holding office for 5 years), the *Rank and File Contact* grouping faded out.

Flashlight continued with its Broad Left strategy in the EETPU. In the five EC seats that came up for re-election in 1980 the Broad Left were defeated in all but one of the elections. The

next major contest was for the post of General Secretary elect at the end of 1982. *Flashlight* carried the headline BROAD LEFT CHALLENGE, and said that the election of the Broad Left candidate, John Aitken, could point the way to a "new era" in the union. And Aitken did quite well:

Eric Hammond	73,506 votes	(55.3% of those voting)	
John Aitken	32,436	(24.4%)
Roy Sanderson	26,954	(20.3%)
33% turnout			

Source: Executive Council Minute No 13 1982.

At the same time, Ian Brown, the Broad Left candidate standing for the post of National Secretary for the plumbers did extremely well against the sitting candidate (Brown 7,292 votes to Lovell's 9,557). And the "flag bearer" of the left in the Scottish Divisional election, as *Flashlight* called John O'Brien, did well against the EC member considering the left vote was split (McLuckie 5,958, O'Brien 3,426, Blacklock 1,809).

In the following year, 1983, Broad Left candidates once again put up a good showing in two of the three EC elections of that year. (75). More Executive Council elections took place in 1985 and 1986, but the Broad Left still failed to make the electoral breakthrough they were hoping for. Then two blows followed in quick succession. John Aitken was defeated by 6,100 votes to 2,850 in the Divisional election for the seat that covered East Anglia and East London (including the Wapping plant) at the end of 1986. And six months later, Eric Hammond was re-elected General Secretary by a massive 108,146 votes to Aitken's 36,684, on a turnout of 39.7%. Nonetheless, John Aitken believes that *Flashlight* is still "very strong in some areas" and this is due to a change in orientation by *Flashlight*:

"One of the weaknesses of *Flashlight* is that over the years it hasn't been a campaigning organisation. It's been more of an electoral organisation. We have changed that over the past five years." (76)

Today *Flashlight* is still the only credible organized opposition grouping in the union (*Militant* launched the *Beacon*

journal in 1985 at a Liverpool meeting attended by 60 EETPU members, but except for the odd flurry it seems to be making very little impact in the union). But on 25 June 1988 *Flashlight* organized a "Unite within the TUC" Conference in Manchester attended by 150 EETPU members to discuss the implications of the EETPU's possible expulsion from the TUC. It seems that there is now a possibility that *Flashlight* might attempt to form an "alternative EETPU" if the union is expelled from the TUC. This would be a disaster for *Flashlight*. For as the history of breakaway unions shows (and the Electricians have had four breakaways since 1945), the bulk of the membership stay with the parent union leaving those that break away isolated from the members they wish to influence and even more firmly in the control of their opponents. A breakaway from the EETPU would at best take a few thousand of the best oppositionists out of union and out of the way of Eric Hammond and the leadership. In 1983, when 800 Fleet Street electricians attempted to break away from the EETPU and join SOGAT, *Flashlight* was sympathetic but nonetheless argued against the breakaway saying that it had "caused a divisive note to be struck in the grass roots struggle for change in the EETPU". (77) If this was true of one section of an EETPU branch breaking away, how much truer is it of maybe thousands of EETPU members breaking from the union? But, as yet (July 1988), nothing definite has been proposed.

The evidence of organized opposition provided in this chapter would appear to undermine Michels' "law" and give much credence to Gouldner's. Time and time again EETPU members have not just cast their vote in opposition to the leadership but involved themselves directly in organizing against their leaders. That this has not led to the displacement of the right-wing EC many would argue is yet another proof of Michels' theory. But it really is impossible to win with Michels, for supposing *Flashlight* candidates had taken every seat on the EC, a disciple of Michels would no doubt say that one oligarchy had just replaced another. Democracy for Michels was equated with direct or, as the Webbs called it, primitive government by the masses. He argued that this type of democracy was a "mechanical and technical impossibility" in the mass organizations of twentieth century capitalism. (78) While this

might well be true at a national level, it is certainly not true at local level, in the trade union branch, at the workplace, or in the areas of activity that we have described in this chapter. There is a case to be made then that direct democracy, albeit uneven and fragmentary, still exists at the lower levels of union organization. So we could say that Gouldner's "iron law of democracy" is confirmed by the continued existence in the EETPU of that "practical ideal of democracy" which Michels seemingly thought no longer existed in trade unions. Arguably in the early 1970s, because of the high level of militancy, such "primitive" democratic tendencies were more in evidence in the EETPU than oligarchical ones. However, in the next chapter there is much that could be used in support of either side of the Michels/Gouldner debate.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE EETPU AND THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ACT

In the last chapter we attempted to show how the rise of organized opposition in the union was intimately linked to the rising tide of industrial militancy of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and to the widespread political opposition to *In Place of Strife* and the Industrial Relations Act (IR Act). In this chapter, and the one that follows on the Social Contract, we will examine how two major areas of policy were shaped by the "external" events that impinged heavily on the internal democracy of the EETPU. The argument is a simple one: that the internal democracy of a trade union is moulded by an array of social forces far wider than those that seemingly arise from within a particular union. Moreover, by looking at the EETPU and the IR Act, we hope to indicate not only how such "external" forces impinged on the internal life of the union, but also how this relationship undermines Michels' oligarchical theory.

The General Election of June 1970 was fought largely on Labour's failure to manage the economy, and in particular their failure to manage the trade unions. The Conservative manifesto, *A Better Tomorrow*, had the "reform" of industrial relations as one of its major planks. The manifesto promised that, if returned to office, the Conservatives would introduce a new Industrial Relations Bill (IR Bill) based on the ideas set out in their 1968 pamphlet *A Fair Deal At Work*, which was in turn a development of their traditional critique of trade unions as "over mighty subjects" contained in such publications as *A Giants Strength* (1958), and *Trade Unions for Tomorrow* (1966). (1) The Conservatives honoured their manifesto promise, and by November 1970 a House of Commons debate had already taken place on the IR Bill, which became the IR Act of August 1971.

Robert Carr, the Secretary of State for Employment, argued that the underlying purpose of the IR Act was not to "shackle the unions", but to "reform and strengthen" the voluntary system of industrial relations. Ironically, his ideas on the reform of the industrial relations system sound very much like those put forward by the Donovan Commission. (2) However, as McCarthy and Ellis

observe, the difference between the traditionalist and the Donovan critique of the industrial relations "problem" was not so much one of recognising the "problem", in which there was "a remarkable degree of agreement": the difference lay in the diagnosis of the causes of the "problem" and the solutions deriving from this. (3)

Robert Carr's solution was a comprehensive, restrictive legal code, which abolished overnight the whole foundation of trade union and labour law embodied in the statutes from 1871 to 1906, and was overtly aimed at curbing trade union action and strikes by means of legal penalties, and by regulating trade union internal affairs by means of a system of state vetting and registering of trade unions and their rule books. (4) Even the most sympathetic commentator would be hard put to describe this as strengthening the voluntary system of industrial relations. Certainly it had nothing in common with the majority Donovan Report, which argued that "voluntary unanimity" and the co-operation of workers and management could be strengthened by giving greater responsibility to senior stewards and by increasing the workforce's identification with "their" workplace. But Carr's solution did have a lot in common with a dissenting note to Donovan penned by the economist Andrew Schonfield. Schonfield argued for legally binding agreements, for legal curbs on "restrictive practices", and for restrictions on the right to strike in certain public services. Carr's solution also had a lot in common with the Labour Government's ill-fated *In Place of Strife*. And the labour movements response to *In Place of Strife* should have forewarned the Conservative Government of the reaction they could expect to the new legislation, but they seem prepared to ride the storm.

The labour and trade union movement response to the IR Bill was angry and immediate. Although the TUC rejected strike action, unofficial one day protest strikes took place in the West of Scotland on 11 November 1970, on 8 December a national stoppage involved half a million workers, and 50,000 came out in the Midlands on 1 January. The TUC General Council were opposed to such protest actions, not least because they were called by the Communist Party controlled LCDTU, but they nevertheless called for a "day of action" for 12 January, hoping it would be restricted to lunch time factory meetings. It wasn't. There were national

stoppages: 40,000 in Coventry, 50,000 on Merseyside, and in Oxford all the car plants were shut. Then the TUC called a national protest demonstration for Sunday 21 February, which turned out to be one of the biggest demonstrations in working class history, with an estimated 250,000 taking part. This was followed early in March by two official strike calls by the AUEW, and on both occasions 1½ million workers struck in response. On 18 March a Special TUC was convened at Croydon, where affiliates were "strongly advised" to completely boycott the IR Bill if it became law.

From a very early stage the EETPU leadership were at odds with the TUC campaign of mild defiance to the IR Bill. They argued that the Bill should not be fought with demonstrations and "days of action" which inevitably led to strikes, but should be fought by TUC involvement in consultation and attempts to amend the Bill before it reached the statute book. Under no circumstances, they argued, should trade unions use their power to defy legislation passed by a democratically elected government, and this was the danger with the TUC's course of action. Les Cannon well expressed the EETPU's position in an article in the *Sunday Times* in October 1970, when the Bill was at its consultative stage:

"...There are three general arguments which have been widely used in this debate. *One - That it will seriously undermine the power and authority of the unions built up over a century.* This I regard as nonsense. Even if all the proposals of the consultative document were implemented in legislation, the trade union movement would have sufficient power exercised legally to have a devastating effect on important sections of the economy.

Two - The legislation is an unwarranted interference in the field of collective bargaining. This really is an irony because during the 1960s legislation had to make up for serious shortcomings in the collective bargaining system. Take the Contracts of Employment Act, the Industrial Training Boards, the Redundancy Payments Act, and equal pay for

equal work. Every trade union negotiator knows that the only way to get a universal right of independent appeal against unfair dismissal is through legislation.

Three - That it is an interference in the internal affairs of trade unions. Again the 1960s have many cases of injustice against trade unionists who have gone to law and where the union rules have had to be construed by the High Court either because of their ambiguity or inadequacy. There is nothing I personally welcome more than the right to be given for trade unionists to challenge a fraudulent leadership such as existed in the Electrical Trades Union in the 1950s, which could not be resolved within the trade union movement at that time and which could not be resolved by the TUC even today.

Cannon goes on to say that it seems unlikely that there will be any further constructive dialogue between the Government and the TUC in the remaining five weeks still left for consultation:

"...This leads inexorably to a confrontation between the TUC and the Government and it also raises a constitutional issue of the highest importance.

Having been invited to consult and try to modify details of this programme, will the TUC be right in the event of not having all its demands met decide that it will use its great power against the fulfilment of a mandate which the party now in government sought and received from the electorate? I think not.

Millions of trade unionists whose working lives will be much affected by this legislation have the right to expect that their leaders will go through the entire document with the Government, submitting reasoned amendments to its proposals. If the TUC stands on principle

in total opposition to the document I fear the case of these millions of workers on many unsatisfactory features of the document will go by default." (5)

However, it was not until after the death of Cannon that the EETPU had its first major opportunity to put its position on the IR Bill to a trade union audience. The occasion was the Special TUC held in the Fairfield Halls, Croydon, on 18 March 1971, and attended by 1,057 delegates. Seven recommendations were presented to the Congress by the General Council, five of which were carried without division. (6) The other two recommendations turned out to be more contentious. Recommendation No.1 "strongly advised" affiliated trade unions not to become registered under the IR Act. The argument at the Congress centred on whether or not "strongly advised" would be sufficient to deter many TUC unions from registering. Vic Feather, the General Secretary of the TUC, defended the recommendation against those who wanted the TUC to *instruct* affiliated unions not to register, by arguing that to make non-registration an absolute condition of affiliation would only dis-unite the movement in the face of the Tory attack. Vic Feather's reasoning narrowly won the day: 5,055,000 voted for the recommendation and 4,284,000 against, a majority of 771,000. (7) Recommendation No.7 stated that:

"Congress should concentrate its support behind the positive recommendations in this Report and preserve its unity of purpose that has hitherto characterized the campaign of opposition." (8)

This was an endorsement of the TUC's rejection of industrial action to prevent the passing of the IR Bill. It was carried by 5,366,000 votes to 3,992,000, a substantial majority of 1,374,000. (9)

The EETPU had been arguing for some time that the TUC's strategy contained the seeds of a final confrontation with the Government, a confrontation that challenged their right to govern and therefore put parliamentary democracy at risk. (10) At the Special TUC Frank Chapple argued for a new TUC initiative that would avoid such a confrontation:

"Before we take the step from which there is no retreatought we not challenge the

Government's bad faith with our regard for national interest? Could not the General Council, for example, in return for withdrawal of this legislation, give some guarantee of a strike free year? What is wrong with a year of honoured agreements to prove this Government's policies are wrong?

He goes on to say that the legislation could be defeated by "over co-operation":

"We say this Bill is an unworkable Bill. We say it will worsen the industrial relations of this country. Why not let us prove that by trying to co-operate with it, to over co-operate with it, because I do not believe it can succeed." (11)

Despite these suggestions, Chapple ended his speech by urging the Congress to support the General Council's proposals. When the Bill became law in August 1971, however, the formal support that the EETPU had given was put to the test as the TUC firmed up its opposition to the legislation.

At the Blackpool TUC, held the month after the Bill had become law, a motion moved by Hugh Scanlon of the AUEW which instructed affiliated unions not to register under the IR Act, and to take the necessary steps to remove themselves from the provisional register, was carried by 5,625,000 votes to 4,500,000, a majority of 1,125,000. The AUEW motion also provided for Congress to take any necessary disciplinary action against any union that did not de-register in the near future. (12) De-registration now became the central focus of the TUC's campaign against the Act, but even this passive resistance caused a major internal dispute in the TUC as many affiliated unions were reluctant to de-register. The reason for such reluctance was fear of the consequences of de-registering. For an unregistered union was liable to unlimited damages if it induced a breach of any employment contract or any commercial contract, and it also lost certain valuable tax concessions. At a time when strikes were increasing, then, de-registration could prove to be an expensive business for a cost conscious union leadership. These and other considerations made the de-registering policy highly controversial. (13)

A month after the September TUC, 72 affiliated unions with a total membership of 4,960,000 "had already taken actions and decisions required of them" reported the TUC. By January 1972, 82 unions with 5,038,000 members had complied with Congress policy; 10 unions with 2,446,000 members intended to de-register; 12 unions with 1,921,000 members were still postponing their decision; 32 unions with 590,000 members had signified to the TUC that they intended to remain or become registered; and two unions with 7000 members had not informed the TUC what they intended to do. At their meeting of 28 June 1972, the General Council reviewed the situation and noted that 40 affiliated unions remained registered, and the EETPU was one of them. It was decided that those unions who had not de-registered, but had not previously been summoned to meet the F&GPC, should now be called to give an account of themselves. Before the meeting with these unions was held, however, three more unions de-registered, and one of these was the EETPU. Nonetheless, the EETPU asked for its meeting with the F&GPC to go ahead so that it could put on record what it thought was wrong with the policy of de-registration. (14) Why did the EETPU leadership decide to de-register then? Was it simply a change of heart, a wish to abide by the decisions of the TUC and its own BDC?

Late in October 1971, three months after the IR Bill became law, and two months after the TUC policy on de-registration had been carried by Congress, the EETPU held its BDC. After attacking the IR Act in his opening address to the Conference, Chapple went on to argue that the main problem now was "how best do we manage while it stays on the statute book:

"My personal view is similar to that expressed by the late President in an interview on the subject of the Bill...he said, we should as a Trade Union Movement have sought to amend the Bill clause by clause. The Movement's reaction to the Industrial Relations Bill, seems to have crystallised itself into a blind act of faith that we must not register.

It must be accepted by everyone, it is certainly accepted by me, that if we all failed to register it would have presented the

Government with a problem, and it might have succeeded in defeating the legislation. I reject the idea that a frontal assault on both the Bill and the Government was either the best or the correct way to achieve our aims.

I believe we missed opportunities in the way we conducted that fight and I hope that later on in the week we will seek new attitudes that might improve on the situation. Neither adventurous action, nor slogans can substitute for carefully reasoned policies..." (15)

Chapple's remarks were typical of the EETPU leadership's highly ambiguous stance on the IR Act. Formally, albeit reluctantly, they supported the TUC's position:

"After discussing the topic in great detail the Executive Council decided to give full support to the stand taken by the General Council of the Trades Union Congress." (16)

How, it might be asked, was Chapple's denigration of the central plank of TUC opposition - de-registration - consistent with the "full support" that the union was supposed to giving the TUC's stand? Chapple's talk of "carefully reasoned policies" suggests that there was a "third way" to oppose the IR Act which would avoid a "frontal assault" on the Government, while at the same time offering a more practical and realistic strategy than the TUC's "blind faith" in de-registration now that the legislation was the law of the land. Clearly the EETPU leadership would have preferred the AUEW's de-registration motion to have been defeated at the September TUC (after all they did vote against it). Why then were they now being so uncharacteristically cagey about their position? Why not openly oppose de-registration and unfurl the banner of the "third way"? The answer is that they were under pressure from outside the union - the massive protest strikes, the Special TUC, the September TUC - and from the opposition within the EETPU to fight the IR Act. The ambiguity of their position reflects their desire to traverse their own course, while at the same time being pulled and checked by forces working in the opposite direction. Once again, then, we have a situation where the "oligarchical"

leadership is being buffeted by forces that are preventing them from carrying through a course of action that they wish to follow. This "external situation" was sharply reflected in the shaping of the union's policy on the IR Act at their BDC.

At the EETPU BDC at the end of October 1971, the opposition in the union pressed the leadership to translate their verbal opposition to the IR Act into some action. This took place during the lengthy session that debated the one motion on the IR Act:

"This Conference believes that the object of the Tory Government's Industrial Relations Bill is to weaken the trade union movement so that they will be able to depress the living standards of working people and to create a pool of unemployment as a means of keeping wages down. Accordingly Conference calls upon the Executive Council to initiate a campaign of explanation and action throughout the union and, in the event of the Bill passing into law, to refuse to register. Furthermore the Executive Council should submit to the Labour Party Conference that a future Labour Government should immediately repeal this law and to formulate, together with other unions and the TUC, a policy of non-cooperation in the Government's Industrial Relations Bill." (17)

Debate centred on how the IR Act should be fought and on the implications of any actions that the union would subsequently undertake. The first fourteen speakers in the debate spoke in support of the motion, until the Chairman, Frank Chapple, intervened and called on delegates to mount the rostrum who had differing opinions to the previous speakers. J. Atkinson, the mover of the motion, expressed the general views of the opposition in the union to the Act:

"...No doubt people will tell us later on in this debate that there will be tremendous problems if we do not register. Of course there will be. There will be even bigger problems if we do register because we will be allowing the

Government to tie our hands behind our back, fighting on their terms. We hear quite a lot about the Tory Government being the choice of the people. We hear that we should not oppose the elected Government of the country. This is something that had our ancestors done, we would be working 100 hours a week for 10/- a week because we only advanced on the basis of the struggle that the workers have put up over the last 200 years; a struggle which has meant deportation and imprisonment; a struggle of workers who wanted a better life, demanded to keep them and their families in relative comfort. They fought for the position we have today. Let us remember that we are not only fighting for ourselves, we are fighting for the interest and welfare of our families. This is the measure of the struggle we have to put up now. I am not saying that if we register that will finish trade unions. What I am saying is that if we register, if we divorce ourselves from the mainstream of the trade union movement then we are allowing the Tory Government to divide us, to weaken us to make it easier to resist our wage demands.

Not only that, if we agree and allow this Bill to be operated, what we are doing is allowing trade union activities to come into the realm of criminal law...

Carry composite motion number 5 and we will be bringing ourselves back to the main stream of the trade union movement, we will be sending a message from this Conference to the whole trade union movement to stand firm and resist this vicious piece of class legislation."(18)

The same central themes that Atkinson raised in moving the motion, de-registration, the need to defy unjust laws, and unity in the face of the Tory attack were hammered home by the other

delegates who spoke in favour of the motion. In fact, these were the central issues that were debated in the entire labour and trade union movement. Atkinson's speech, or something very close to it, must have been repeated in conference halls, union branches, at demonstrations, and in works canteens throughout the country. One of the most powerful pressures that was exerted on the EEPTPU leadership at the BDC was for them to unite behind the TUC, and not to break ranks and divide the movement. Vic Feather's address to the BDC had concentrated on the issue of unity, as indeed his whole campaign in the labour movement had done. As one delegate from Glasgow put it:

"Vic Feather was appealing to us not to 'rat' on the movement. With only 4% for registration, are we to be among the few out of step? ... We as a union supported the TUC line here in Blackpool a couple of months ago. Since then the need for trade union unity has hardened... TUC policy has been very well thrashed out and overwhelmingly carried. It is official policy. Rank and file members get branded as unconstitutional if they carry out unofficial policy. It is the Executive Council this time who are creating difficulties on this one, one of the most vital issues in trade union history. We delegates must tell them we just will not have it. We must instruct them to return to the agreed policy and cease the unofficial action and abide by the TUC agreement which they are party to..." (19)

This is a classic case of the union leadership being hung by its own petard. For ever since the right-wing EC took office in 1962, division and dissension within the union were regarded as undesirable and even dangerous. Rank and file members seeking democratic control of their union were accused of being "divisive", having "ulterior motives", and of destroying the unity of the union and thereby weakening it in its struggle to improve the wages and conditions of the membership. As we have previously mentioned, this approach has been dubbed the "here-come-the-saboteurs" strategy,

which attempts to forge a link between opposition and the work of the employers. (20) Now the oppositionists were turning the tables and presenting the EETPU leadership as the saboteurs motivated by political considerations. It was a powerful blow in the charged atmosphere that surrounded the entire fight against the IR Act. The result was that the leadership and its many supporters at the Conference were on the defensive. All were against the Act in principle but, nevertheless, argued that de-registration could seriously damage the union and warned of the grave consequences of breaking the law of the land. A delegate from Scunthorpe, W.L. Wright, highlighted the problems that de-registration would bring:

"If we refused to register as the motion states in line 8 the union will no longer be afforded any protection from the liability for inducing a breach of contract in furtherance of a dispute. Section 3 of the 1906 Trades Disputes Act has now been repealed and therefore any such inducement under clause 85 of the new Act will then become an unfair industrial action for anyone other than registered unions and those acting within the scope of the said unions. It will also follow that any unregistered union along with its officers at any level will then be completely exposed to actions in court for damages and this will be virtually applicable to every industrial action of the union.. Our unions finances will be placed at risk because of the peculiarity of the Inland Revenue laws applicable to unions. On the other side of the coin, what are the advantages if we do not register? They are very limited indeed ..."(21)

Another delegate, P.L. Carr, pointed to what he considered to be the benefits of registration:

"Firstly, only registered trade unions can apply for an agency shop agreement.. Secondly, the right of a worker to belong to a trade union and to take part in union activities only

applies to registered unions. It will be an unfair industrial practice to dismiss a worker for trade union activities in respect of a registered union. If we de-register, we will be put in an invidious position of being unable to protect our members. Thirdly, a registered trade union may apply to the national industrial relations court to amend a defective procedural agreement.." (22)

That the law of the land should not be defied was the other major theme raised by those speaking against the motion. The following extracts from two of the delegates' speeches were not untypical:

"The only way you can fight the law with any success, is with the law.. and believe you me there is no bill a lawyer cannot sit down and find a way round. There is no reason why the trade union movement could not do this .. If as a shop steward you go about your normal business, the employer stops you and says you are causing a disruption and gives you the sack you call a meeting to protect yourself and your members you can be had for disruptive practice. You will not be put in prison. Anybody who thinks he will be the first one to go to prison so he will be a martyr, is wrong. They are not going to make a martyr, they will slap a big fine on you and attach it to your earnings.."

"Now the Bill is an Act, is law. We can only change it or throw it out by electing a Labour Government pledged to do just this, but for the next three or four years it will remain, whether this union registers or not. It makes not the slightest difference. Our union, our funds, our officials, our shop stewards, indeed our members are going to have to work within the confines of the law.." (23)

Chapple then entered the debate. Firstly, he replied to a delegate who had suggested that industrial action would be needed to defeat the Act:

"I want to make the Executive's position quite clear. We believe that the slogans and the marches and the strikers far from weakening this Tory Government have served to prove the Tories lies that we are out to ruin this country. Instead of strengthening the battle against the Bill, it has led to dissension and confusion in our ranks and often you are blamed if you do not support these acts whatever they were. You are the one who is blamed for the division. It was not the policy of the TUC to take the head-on view as the right way to defeat the Bill. Let me say that those who advocated general strikes to defeat democratically elected government's legislation, however much you might not like the Government, are digging a grave for democracy inside and outside the trade union movement."

How then was the legislation to be defeated?

"...the Executive believe that the best way to to confront the country over this Bill is to point out that it is simply irrelevant to any of our problems either industrial relations or economic and then to say that what the Government should tackle is improvement in management and decent worker representation at the workplace with some greater power legally enforceable on the rights of shop stewards. That is our stand on the matter. That is a positive alternative to all that has been said." (24)

It was a very weak "positive alternative", and the leadership knew it. The leadership were now in danger of being totally outflanked by the mass of delegates who wanted to fight the Act by

supporting the TUC position, or by going further and calling for strike action to defeat the Tories. Fearing this isolation and, so he argued, in order "to maintain unity", Chapple came out in support of the motion. It was a wise move by the leadership, for if they were to manage the discontent in their own ranks, to "make regular what might otherwise be disruptive", they had to channel the "disgruntlement and ebullience" of the membership into safer waters. (25) So straight after supporting the motion, Chapple, like C.Wright Mills' archetypical union leader, attempts to dampen down the discontent on the central issue of de-registration:

"Let there be no mistake about the difficulties...Whatever other unions have said and done about this, there is no union yet that has de-registered. They have said that they are going to do all they could against the the Bill, as indeed we have said. They have all passed motions and put their hands up for them. In fact there is none that has de-registered. To put ourselves in the position of being the first union to de-register I believe would be an act not of courage but of foolishness that would put us not in the vanguard of the movement but down the drain of the movement...If we had a million and a half members or a million and a quarter with £15 million or £20 million assets, I would have said we would de-register and fight the Bill as a single union all the way down the line because we would have had nothing to lose except a few million pounds but our membership would have remained intact...We will stand where we have always stood, with the TUC. We are not in the front, neither are we behind...We support the motion" (26)

The motion was carried, with very few against. So at the end of the EETPU's 1971 Conference, the union was officially committed to a campaign of explanation and action throughout the union and, more importantly, to de-registration. It was a notable victory for

the opposition in the union. However, as we have seen, things were not that clear cut. The leadership's strategy all along had been to formally support the TUC stand, while actively trying to undermine that same position by proposing an "alternative" course based on compromise and negotiation. The question now was, would the Executive Council implement the democratic decisions of the TUC and their own union and de-register?

Chapple had said at the 1971 BDC that the union would not de-register on its own. By January 1972 he no longer had that excuse, for, as we have seen, by that time 82 trade unions had de-registered. Nonetheless the leadership still refused to implement the Conference decision and de-register. By June 1972, only 40 of the TUC affiliated trade unions had refused to de-register, and the EETPU was one of them. Clearly, the EC's objections to de-registration ran deeper than an aversion to going it alone. It was only in the wake of the jailing of the five London dockers, the "Pentonville Five", in July 1972 that the EETPU de-registered and so finally carried out the 1971 BDC decision. Ironically then, as Chapple recalls, it was the dockers defiance of the law, and not the wishes of the EETPU membership, that led the union to de-register:

"The EETPU position over registration was rudely overtaken by events. We had contended that no one would end up in prison because of the Heath laws, but the dockers proved us wrong. The Pentonville Five refused to obey an order of the National Industrial Relations Court and were jailed. The crisis was tremendous. We could no longer sustain any co-operative gesture with the Government and told the TUC that we would de-register after all." (27)

Of course, the union's position was not that they would de-register if any trade unionist was jailed under the Act: the official policy of the union, as we have seen, was for de-registration full stop. Where Chapple is correct, however, is in saying that the "crisis was tremendous". It was this crisis that forced the EETPU leadership to back down and fall in line with the

TUC's and their own union's policy decisions, both of which they formally adhered to. In short, the crisis brought to a head the internal and external pressures that were being exerted on the union leadership to act democratically.

The crisis facing the Heath Government had been rumbling on ever since he had taken office in June 1970, but it came to a head on 9 January 1972, when the first national miners' strike since 1926 began. At the beginning of the strike editorial comments in all the national newspapers forecast defeat or at most a pyrrhic victory for the miners. The *Financial Times* commented that

"It is extremely difficult to see what the miners hope to gain out of the national strike they are bent on starting this weekend. Mr. Joe Gormley... has explained that they are fighting a battle with the Government over its wages strategy on behalf of the trade union movement... The last union leader to speak in similar emotive terms was Mr. Tom Jackson of the Union of Post Office Workers early last year. But the union movement learnt a salutary lesson from his long and unproductive strike both about the futility of taking on a determined Government and about the apparent inability of the unions to unite together in battle.." (28)

The miners, like the postal workers before them, were doomed to defeat in the face of a determined Government and a trade union movement unable or unwilling to offer solidarity was the message that was coming over loud and clear from the media. Six weeks later, the miners had won an historic victory over the Heath Government which would have been impossible without the solidarity received from other workers. After the settlement, the *Financial Times* had this to say:

"It will be some time before we shall be able to assess even the direct costs of the coal strike to the country. But this immediate cost pales to insignificance compared to the potential long-term damage done not merely to

the economy, but to the country as such. Most important in this context is that the authority of the Government has been damaged... In war - and that is what the miners' dispute turned out to be - the active support of the community as a whole is essential. The Government failed to obtain it. That is why it lost." (29)

It was in this atmosphere of defeat that the Heath Government first attempted to enforce the IR Act. Shortly after the Act became law, the three railway unions put in a claim for 16%. Their response to an 11% offer was a work-to-rule and an overtime ban. The Government applied to the NIRC and obtained a 14-day cooling off period. Sir John Donaldson, President of the National Industrial Relations Court (NIRC), ordered a return to normal working. The unions agreed but promised more industrial action once the 14 days had lapsed. On 11 May 1972, the Government applied to the NIRC for a compulsory ballot. The Government was anxious for the ballot to be conducted with the minimum of delay, since it believed that it had the support of the public for its actions. In an opinion poll conducted in May 81% of those questioned favoured the holding of an obligatory secret ballot before any union resorted to industrial action, and 41% believed that the Government should get even tougher with the railwaymen. The TUC granted the unions the right to defend themselves in the NIRC but lost both the initial case and an appeal to the High Court. So the ballot went ahead - and resulted in 80% of the railwaymen (in a turnout of 87%) voting in favour of further industrial action. The unions settled for 13%, the evening before they planned to resume their work-to-rule and overtime ban. So the Act's first outing gave the Government another humiliating defeat. (30) But worse was yet to come for the Heath Government.

A month after the railwaymen had delivered a double blow to the Heath Government - they had discredited the Government's use of the "national emergency" provisions of the IR Act and its public sector wages policy, n-1 norm, which was intended to award pay increases 1% below the previous one - the NIRC attempted to deal with an unofficial dockers' boycott of low-paid container work. Although the T&GWU, advised by the General Council, agreed to

appear before the NIRC, it could not prevent the dockers from continuing their action. The climax was reached when the Appeal Court ruled that, due to faulty drafting, the Act did not after all make unions answerable for the actions of their members. The NIRC then switched its attention from the T&GWU to the dockers themselves, and on 22 July 1972 five of their shop stewards were jailed for contempt of court. Widespread industrial action began to escalate and the TUC threatened a one-day General Strike if the dockers were not released. As Jack Jones, the leader of the T&GWU, recalls:

"The TUC General Council had an emergency meeting with Ted Heath, who said he could do nothing - 'The law must be obeyed'. In face of this the General Council decided to call a one-day General Strike. Supported by Hugh Scanlon, I had pressed for this; the one thing a free trade union movement cannot tolerate is the imprisonment of its people, even if they are out of step." (31)

The panic comments of *The Times* that week were testimony to the deep crisis the Heath Government found itself in. On 22 July its editorial was entitled "The Crisis for Mr Heath" and on 28 July, with a General Strike looming, "Yes, We Are in Danger". However, the Law Lords reversed the decision of the Appeal Court, and the Government sent in the mysterious figure of the Official Solicitor to secure the release of the "Pentonville Five". (32) Edward Heath tolerated such a humiliating defeat because the consequences of not releasing the dockers could have been far worse. As J.A.G. Griffith comments:

"A political and economic crisis of possibly considerable dimensions was avoided.. It appeared very much as if the judicial system had bent itself to the needs of the politicians and that, in particular, that the principles of the rule of law to which the NIRC earlier paid such respect had been sacrificed to the expediency of the political and economic situation." (33)

This was the "tremendous crisis" that compelled the leadership to finally de-register and so honour the union's BDC decision and their oft repeated claim of "total support" for the TUC campaign. Moreover, it seems that the EC now realised that the IR Act was a direct threat to their own position as brokers between labour and capital. How was this position threatened?

Antonio Gramsci, writing in 1920, expresses well the position of trade unions under capitalism:

"Objectively, the trade union is the form which labour as a commodity is bound to assume in a capitalist system, when it organizes itself to control the market. This form consists in an office staffed by functionaries, organizational technicians (when they can be called technicians), specialists (when they can be called specialists) in the art of concentrating and guiding the workers' forces in such a way as to establish a favourable balance between the working class and the power of capital.

The development of trade-union organization is characterized by two facts: 1, the union embraces an ever increasing number of workers; 2, the union concentrates and generalizes its scope until the movement's power and discipline is focussed in a central office. This office becomes divorced from the masses it has regimented, and removes itself from the eddies and currents of fickle whims and foolish ambitions that are to be expected in the excitable broad masses. The union thus acquires the ability to negotiate agreements and take on responsibilities. In this way it obliges the employer to acknowledge a certain legality in his dealings with the workers, a legality that is conditional on his faith in the union's *solvency* and its capacity to secure respect for contracted obligations from the working masses." (34)

But it is precisely because this "industrial legality", this desire to "establish a favourable balance between the working class and the power of capital", is constantly being disturbed and at times shattered by the inherent conflict between labour and capital, that the leaders of trade unions find themselves under a series of contradictory pressures. On the one hand, they are under pressure from their members to deliver some satisfactory results and thus are at times willing to mobilize the rank-and-file to strengthen their bargaining position with the employers. On the other hand, they suffer pressure from the employers who want a controlled labour force and nice, tidy settlements. C. Wright Mills put it like this:

"Even as the labour leader rebels, he holds back rebellion. He organizes discontent and then sits on it, exploiting it in order to maintain a continuous organization; the labour leader is a manager of discontent." (35)

With the introduction of the IR Act, and the end of the "voluntary system" of industrial relations that it heralded, a further pressure was brought to bear on the union leaders - the power of the State in the form of the NIRC. It was the open introduction of the law in favour of the employers that in the eyes of most trade union leaders upset the favourable balance they were constantly trying to establish between labour and capital within the framework of the "voluntary system". What is more, the introduction of the Act unleashed a torrent of rank-and-file protest and militancy that the official union leaders at times found hard to control. For example, it wasn't Jack Jones' leadership of the T&GWU that effectively destroyed the IR Act: it was the unofficial action of London dockers in defiance of Jones that led to the Act's demise. Robert Carr's Act, to the dismay of the Government and trade union leaders alike, had released forces from the nether world that were throwing all into confusion. Gramsci's "favourable balance" had to be restored, and that meant on the unions side getting rid of the Act without recourse to industrial action, and on the Government's side some saving of face. The TUC at least saw the tripartite talks on economic

strategy and incomes policy that took place between July and November 1972 as an attempt to move towards that goal.

The leadership of the EETPU were as anxious as the other union leaders to restore what they considered to be a favourable balance to industrial relations, as Chapple made clear at the 1971 BDC:

"For us, improving industrial relations means creating a climate in which unions and employers can meet on better, preferably more equal terms. The legislation is bad because it is irrelevant to Britain's industrial and economic problems and we should all be united in wishing to see it repealed." (36)

However, the EETPU leaders were more reluctant than most to defy the Act because they were much more ideologically committed to the rule of law than most other union leaders. Although the most prominent left-winger at the time, Hugh Scanlon, President of the AUEW, made it quite clear at the 1972 TUC that

"generally speaking the trade union movement accepts, operates and conforms with the law of the land. Our opposition and determination is quite specific. It is to this law to this Act and to the courts set up thereunder." (37)

In his theory of oligarchy Michels argued that in a trade union it is even easier than in a political party for the officials to initiate and pursue a course of action "disapproved of by the majority of the workers they are supposed to represent" although

"Theoretically the leader is bound by the will of the mass, which has only to give a sign and the leader is forced to withdraw... But in practice...for various reasons the leaders enjoy a large degree of independence." (38)

Or, as J.R. Coleman puts it:

"Because the democratic ethos is deeply rooted in the labour unions, continuing pressures are felt by their leaders to maintain the form if not the substance of democratic decision-making." (39)

We see this "mock democracy" being enacted by the Executive Council time and time again, whether it be over the TUC decisions for which they voted or, and more importantly, their unwillingness to implement the BDC decision on de-registration that they themselves had supported. But, as we have tried to indicate above, the situation was far more complex than the EC saying one thing and doing another. The very fact that they supported the TUC campaign, despite the constant criticisms of it, indicated that they were being pulled into opposition against the Act not just because of the pressures from the rest of the movement, but because it was in their own self-interest to oppose the Act. They were being buffeted from all sides: from the TUC, from their own members, from the Heath Government, and not least from their own uncertainty. With a union leadership so committed to the idea of the rule of law and a philosophy that totally ruled out the use of industrial action for political purposes the strains must have been quite severe. The resulting deadlock that these competing pressures had placed on the leadership's capacity to decide whether to de-register or not was broken with the jailing of the "Pentonville Five".

Again, Michels' theory seems to take little account of the complex pressures that lead union leaders to act democratically. His concentration on the formal mechanisms of decision making within organizations offers only a one-dimensional view of the relationship that exists between union leaders and the rank-and-file. No matter how forceful Michels' account might be, it is nevertheless limited. For not only does Michels neglect the countervailing pressures that operate against oligarchy within an organization, but there is hardly a mention of the external social and economic pressures that induce leaders to act democratically. In the case of the EETPU's decision to de-register, as we have seen, it was the unofficial action of London dockers who acted in defiance of their own left-wing "oligarchy" that finally forced the EC to succumb to the multiple pressures that had been building up inside and outside of their own union since the fight against the IR Bill began. This is not to say that Michels' theory has been refuted, far from it. Only that it has to be treated with caution.

Another shortcoming of Michels' theory is the historical specificity of his work. Michels drew his examples of oligarchic trade unions principally from the German trade unions, which were indeed highly centralized and bureaucratic. In one sense this might seem an advantage when studying a present day trade union which is also highly centralized and bureaucratic. This is one of the attractions of Michels. On the other hand it is a weakness, for the development of British trade unionism since 1945 has been characterised not just by centralization and bureaucratization, but also by de-centralized collective bargaining at the workplace and the growth of a strong shop-stewards "movement" which in 1988 still numbers 335,000. These are features which tend to mitigate against bureaucratization and oligarchical control in trade unions. They allow room for the rank-and-file to shape union policy precisely because they are partly autonomous from the central union organization. And at times of working class militancy even highly bureaucratized unions such as the EETPU are forced into following the wishes of the membership.

By the end of the summer of 1972 the IR Act was dead in virtually everything but name. However, the TUC was still left with the problem of what to do with those trade unions that had defied its policy and registered under the Act. During the summer the General Council announced the suspension of a number of unions who had refused to de-register. By the time Congress met in Brighton in September, there was a recommendation before them that the suspension of 32 unions with a membership of 500,000 should be confirmed for a year. If these union failed to de-register by the 1973 Congress, they would be expelled from the TUC. Some of the unions who were due to be suspended made appeals against the recommendation by pleading special cases. (40) The EETPU had intended to speak against the suspensions but, according to Chapple, were prevented from doing so by the Congress President George Smith, who along with Vic Feather "wanted to keep the temperature down in the debate". Because of this, "our whole delegation upped and walked out in disgust". (41)

As it turned out, Chapple was not just prevented from speaking against the suspensions but against the whole of the TUC's campaign against the IR Act. For in a front page spread in the September

issue of *Contact*, in an article entitled "Here is the speech they wouldn't allow", Chapple tells us that

"Congress policy has been a mistake from the beginning. We thought we could prevent the Act from reaching the Statute book but we failed. We thought it could not be implemented, but it is being implemented, however incompletely ... There is no easy way out. The best way is the traditional way of the British Labour Movement in dealing with what it believes to be unfair acts of Parliament and the most certain way of securing the repeal of this Act, would be to prove that it is unworkable in practice. This means reversing the current non-co-operation policies of Congress... Are we really saying that we don't want an Act which provides workers with protection from unfair dismissal? Are we saying that we don't want an Act which forces employers to bargain with unions for the first time in their history?

It is contrary to a 100 years of TUC policy for us not to make use of what is to our advantage under the law and oppose and seek to change that which is damaging...

Many of you feel (revolutionaries, young and old) that the unbending opposition of the TUC, backed by the demonstrations that have been taking place, is shocking the citadels of capitalism to its foundations and see the fall of this Government as imminent.

To coin a phrase, I don't know how the Government sees you, but by God you frighten me." (42)

This was a quite staggering speech from Chapple. For what was most notable about the TUC campaign of "unbending opposition" was a strict "adherence to a strategy of constitutionalism" and its desire to "avoid any strikes which might antagonise public opinion". (43) Shocking the citadels of capitalism to its

foundations! As for proving that the Act was "unworkable in practice" the unofficial action of the London dockers had already done that. Moreover, it was the fear of similar such actions that made many employers reluctant to utilise the Act's legal sanctions, sanctions that were designed to enhance their own authority. (44) Thus throughout the 2½ years of the IR Act there were only 4 applications to NIRC against the closed shop, and only 33 applications by firms seeking relief from industrial action, and this was at a time when the actual number of industrial stoppages was rising (2,228 in 1971, 2,497 in 1972, and 2,854 in 1973). (45) In this context, and at such a late hour, Chapple's call for a reversal of the TUC's policy of non-co-operation didn't make much sense. It was yet another example, more explicit than most, of the EETPU's dual stance on the IR Act. Clearly the leadership wanted the union to officially endorse Chapple's "strategy" of non-co-operation, but by de-registering they had committed themselves to the policy decisions of the TUC and their own union. Nonetheless, the leadership seemed determined to move the union away from its official support for TUC policy, and this they attempted to do at the union's BDC held on the Isle of Man in April 1973.

In its Report to the Conference the Executive Council stated that after discussing the 1971 motion on de-registration they "agreed that the principle contained therein be adopted". (46) However, the tightly controlled Standing Orders Committee let two motions onto the agenda which called for a ballot of the membership over the registration issue. It seems fairly certain that one of the motions was EC inspired, although no conclusive proof can be offered. The leadership played a very canny game at the Conference. They kept their distance from the controversial ballot motions, no doubt waiting to see which way the wind was blowing. So no speaker from the EC intervened in the lengthy debate on the IR Act until the very end, when Chapple spoke. Ideally, for the leadership, the pro-registration ballot motions would be carried by the delegates without their intervention, thereby fending off criticism that they had betrayed TUC policy with the argument that they were merely implementing the wishes of the membership. The union democracy that was for so long ignored after the 1971 BDC, could now possibly be used to reverse the 1971 decision on registration.

There were four motions to be debated at the session on the IR Act on the fourth day of the Conference. The first of them, motion 70, read as follows:

"This Conference demands that the Executive Council uses its influence to have many of the bad aspects of the Industrial Relations Act amended.

It further calls on the EC to test the feelings of the membership on registration by a ballot vote of all members." (47)

The second motion that called for a ballot on registration was rather odd. Besides calling for a ballot, it urged total support for any union that found itself in conflict with the IR Act and was "pleased to note that this union's policy continues to be one of non-registration". (48) It nevertheless called upon the EC to hold a ballot of the membership, with the case for and against on the ballot paper. Seemingly, the mover of the motion believed that a favourable ballot result would be a green light for the union to take a more active and aggressive stance against the Act.

Of the two other motions to be debated, one simply called upon the EC to do all in its power to assist the trade union movement to have the IR Act repealed, while the other, composite motion 4, was the one supported by the opposition and those who wanted to uphold the union's 1971 position. This read:

"This Conference reaffirms the 1971 policy conference decision of de-registering and calls upon the Executive Council to join in the fight for a stronger and more united TUC policy to defeat the Act and Conference calls on the Parliamentary Labour Party to repeal this law, when it becomes the Government, and to pledge that no Labour Government will interfere with any of the hard won rights of the trade union movement." (49)

Oppositionists at the Conference argued that it was united action that had defeated the Act and made it unworkable. The Heath Government were now very reluctant to use the legislation themselves, one delegate argued. So, instead of using the

provisions of the Act against building workers involved in picketing during the national strike of 1972, they were being tried under the 1875 conspiracy act (they were to go down in trade union history as the Shrewsbury Pickets). Charlie Montgomery from Glasgow, a leading oppositionist, expressed the feelings of most of those delegates who wanted a determined and united opposition to the Act:

"Let us face the facts of the Industrial Relations Act. It is dead not because we crept up on it but because we went out in the streets and demonstrated. This is the reason they are frightened. Why did they not continue to gaol people after the Pentonville Five? Because they knew they would have been blown out of office and their whole rotten system with them." (50)

As the debate neared its conclusion it was clear that the Conference was split between those who wished to register under the Act and take advantage of its "positive aspects", and those who wished to reaffirm and strengthen the 1971 Conference decision on de-registration. At this juncture Chapple entered the fray. After reiterating the EC's position on the Act, he then called on the movers of the motions to remit them to the EC (effectively shelving them) in the interests of unity. He said:

"If you do that we will then be left with the motion passed last year [sic] and the way the Executive Council has pursued that policy in the ensuing two years.. I am going to put it to conference.. I am concerned about real unity not spurious unity. I am concerned about reserving a bit of dignity for the EETPU..." (51)

A vote to remit the motions would have been an endorsement of the Executive's ambiguous position on fighting the Act and a rejection of the criticism implicit in composite 4 of the EC's dithering over the previous two years. Chapple's call for unity was an attempt to scotch the opposition's motion which by now he must have judged was going to be carried by the Conference. Such calls for unity, as we have noted previously, can very often be

just a means to stifle democracy. (52) The vote to remit went against Chapple by 205 votes to 291. Motion 70, which called for a ballot on registration was defeated by 227 votes to 260, as was the other pro-ballot motion by 235 votes to 268. Motion 4, which reaffirmed the union's position, and motion 73, which called upon the Executive to do all in its power to defeat the IR Act, were both carried by the Conference (no figures given).

Once again, then, the opposition had achieved a notable victory over the leadership. How this would affect the leadership's actions was of course, as the delay in implementing the 1971 decision had shown, a different matter. All the oppositionists were demanding was that the EC carry out official union policy, which was totally in line with TUC policy. As we have seen, the leadership formally supported both the union's and the TUC's policy, but, in practice, continually undermined it and avoided any positive action, constitutional or otherwise, that might hinder the working of the legislation. And now the tremendous pressure that even Chapple had felt in the wake of the jailing of the dockers had been lifted. By the time the TUC Congress convened in September 1973 any lingering thought of "unity" had long faded. Chapple had this to say of the TUC in *Contact* :

"Sitting and listening at the TUC often resembles watching a play. The actors strut across the stage mouthing their lines, breathing defiance or simulating sympathy, every now and again glancing at their prompter for assistance. Off stage most of them revert to ordinary human beings facing ordinary human problems in the empirical and reasonable way that trade unionists always have done." (53)

The reason for this outburst was no doubt the Congress's decision to expel 20 affiliated unions with a total membership of 370,000 for not complying with the TUC's policy of non-registration. In addition to the expelled unions one union, the National Graphical Association, resigned from the TUC over the registration issue after a ballot of its membership (32,770 for, 30,630 against). (54) So to the very end the EETPU leaders went

against the policy of the TUC, the very same policy that had been endorsed by two conferences of the union.

By now, however, the IR Act was in its death agony. But it managed one more violent final spasm before it departed. The same month that the TUC met, a small engineering firm, Con-Mec, obtained an NIRC order against the AUEW concerning a recognition dispute. As usual, the AUEW boycotted the Court, so the NIRC sequestered £100,000 of the union's assets, eventually confiscating £75,000. It also announced that Con-Mech could apply for compensation for losses arising from the industrial action. The dispute resulted in a number of one-day strikes in some key industries, especially the motor and print industries. But it was not until April 1974, with a Labour Government in office and in the process of repealing the IR Act, that the Court awarded Con-Mech £47,000 compensation. An indefinite national strike was called by the AUEW which affected large sectors of industry, and most newspapers were closed down. Then an anonymous donor - believed to be the Newspaper Proprietors' Association - paid the money which the AUEW owed the Court, and the strike was called off. (55) And that was the end of the IR Act.

In summary, we can say that the EETPU leadership were deflected from the course of action (or non-action) that they wished to take over the IR Act by a number of contradictory pressures bearing down on them. Their ambiguous stand on the Act was the most obvious sign of the tension that these competing pressures caused. Both the internal and the external demands for the leadership to act democratically were realised when the dockers were jailed and the EC consequently decided that their own interests might well be threatened by the Act. The forces that compel union leaderships to act democratically are thus multi-dimensional. Michels' theory has a tendency to be one-dimensional, concentrating on the internal workings of trade unions, and not seeing the wider relation of forces that can operate against oligarchical control. But once the oppositional pressures, whether they be internal to the union or external, begin to lift, then the oligarchical control that Michels details begins to reassert itself. We saw this clearly in the EETPU once the "tremendous crisis" of the summer of 1972 ended.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE EETPU AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

The Times reported on 9 January 1974 that,

"Mr Heath's Government cannot survive if they are seen to be defeated by the National Union of Mineworkers. Such a defeat would not only destroy the authority of the Conservative Government...(but) would involve damage to the constitutional principle on which the authority of all governments in Britain is based." (1)

This air of panic in ruling circles echoed most hysterically in the pages of the *Economist*, which drew parallels with Germany before Hitler and Latin American political instability:

"A surrender now would make unlawful force seem the normal way of conducting the business of earning Britain's living. There is not just a sniff of Weimar in Britain. There is a smell of Argentina." (2)

Heath did not surrender, but called a General Election and campaigned on the theme of "who governs Britain?" Although the Conservatives gained a larger share of the vote than Labour, (37.9 to Labour's 37.2) the Heath government was defeated. The Labour minority government under the leadership of Harold Wilson took office in February 1974 and lasted until October of the same year when another General Election was called. This time the Labour Party gained a tiny overall majority in Parliament. Labour's *Programme 1973*, the basis of the 1974 election platform, was the most radical since 1945, promising "a massive and irreversible shift in the distribution of both wealth and power in favour of working people and their families". Dennis Healey promised tax changes that would produce "howls of anguish from the rich", and declared that "we will squeeze the rich until the pips squeak".

At the heart of Labour's radical proposals was a deal between the trade unions and the government - the Social Contract - under which unions would behave "responsibly" in return for the repeal of the 1971 IR Act and the implementation of a host of pro-union laws.

The origin of the Social Contract was a 1973 TUC-Labour Party liaison committee document entitled *Economic Policy and the Cost of Living*. As Harold Wilson recalls:

"...the parties agreed on a comprehensive alternative strategy, covering a wide area of the social and economic life of the nation. This included food subsidies, price controls, housing and rents, transport and a redistribution of income and wealth, combined with a policy for increasing investment in industry. Together with the repeal of the Conservatives' Industrial Relations Act, this would 'engender the strong feeling of mutual confidence which alone will make it possible to reach the wide ranging agreement which is necessary to control inflation and achieve sustained growth in the standard of living'. This was widely interpreted as a voluntary agreement to accept restraint in pay demands as part of a wider social agreement." (3)

When returned to office the Labour Government did indeed introduce a wide range of legal rights in favour of the trade unions as their part of the bargain:

"The two years after 1974 were probably the height of union influence over government. A detailed programme of legislation was enacted, giving unions and individual workers new rights. The 1974-6 Trade Union and Labour Relations Acts restored to unions the legal immunities that had been swept aside by the 1971 Act. The 1975 Employment Protection Act secured new collective bargaining and job security rights. The 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act and the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act instituted much needed reforms in traditionally neglected areas of workers' rights." (4)

For its part the TUC promised that they would help to achieve realistic wage-claims and fewer strikes. As Jack Jones, leader of

the T&GWU and one of the main architects of the Social Contract, put it at the STUC in April 1974:

"The Social Contract does not mean control of wages, but it does mean a realistic approach to which we in the trade union movement are already responding, and so are the Government."

(5)

Trade union commitment to the Social Contract was firmed up in June 1974 with the release of the TUC document *Collective Bargaining and the Social Contract*, which set out a number of guidelines to be followed in wage negotiations when the Tories Stage 3 pay restrictions ended in July. Negotiators were told to press for a low pay minimum of £30 per week, and to give priority to agreements "which will have beneficial effects on unit costs and efficiency, to reforming pay structures and to improving job security". But they were to also recognise that "the scope for real increases in consumption is limited" and that as a result "the central negotiating objective will be to ensure that real incomes are maintained", and that a smooth transition to free collective bargaining is achieved by the observation of a twelve-month interval between major increases. The document was ratified at the September 1974 TUC Congress, with only a few dissenting voices, such as Ken Gill's of the Draughtsman's union and leading member of the Communist Party. (6)

Along with the majority of other trade unions the EETPU backed the Social Contract at the September 1974 TUC. The justification given by the supporters of the Social Contract for voluntary wage restraint was "the radicalism of the Labour Government programme, and the short term nature of the restraint proposed". (7) However, by the Winter of 1974-75 the whole basis of the Social Contract - Government radicalism and wage restraint - seemed to be in tatters. Only days after the October General Election victory Dennis Healey delivered a budget speech that was in effect a reversal of the Labour Government's radical strategic economic objectives. The previous policy of redistributing money towards low income groups was replaced by one of directing it back towards capital. The policy of reducing capital's control over production gave way to one of seeking an economic climate within which companies would

find it worthwhile to invest. Of course this reversal was not just a sudden whim of the Labour Government: in the context of falling economic production, falling exports and the resulting massive balance of payments deficit, the change in policy would have been forced on any government that was obliged to manage a capitalist economy in crisis. The straw that broke the camel's back was the run on sterling after the November trade figures took one-eighth of the Government's reserves of foreign currency. (8)

On the wages front things were not going as planned either. For with the ending of Heath's Stage 3 wage restrictions in July 1974 the last thing most workers had in mind was a period of "voluntary restraint" (although real incomes increased by an average of 3.5% per year under Heath). A wave of strikes took place after the defeat of Heath and the accession to office of Labour. The most militant response came in the autumn of 1974 in Scotland. Here so many disputes came together that it looked like they might snowball into a general strike. There was a widespread lorry-drivers' strike, with effective use of flying pickets; a strike by sewage workers and dustmen in Glasgow; and strikes by train drivers, bus workers, tugboatmen, teachers and slaughterhouse workers. By October and November, more than 40,000 workers had been involved in lengthy and bitter disputes over higher wages. (9) The militancy payed off: between April and December 1974 real earnings grew by 8%. (10) It was in response to this wage militancy that the General Council of the TUC issued a circular in November to all affiliated unions, reminding them of the guidelines already issued, and stressing the importance of the 12-month gap between settlements and the need to aim only to maintain existing real living standards. But who decided if real incomes were being maintained or not? In other words, who decided if the TUC guidelines were being followed, the rank-and-file union members, the trade union leaders, the employers or the government? This area of uncertainty was to be cleared up in July 1975 when a £6 per week pay limit was introduced by the government with the backing of the TUC, but in the meantime the boundaries of the Social Contract appeared to be quite elastic.

The EETPU leaders' attitude to the Social Contract was at one level quite straightforward - they supported it - but in practice a

number of competing and contradictory forces shaped and modified their approach towards it. By this we mean that their ideological support for the Social Contract was at times undermined by a combination of self-interest and rank-and-file revolt, at other times it was reaffirmed despite rank-and-file action, and in yet other circumstances it could be thrown into confusion with their public statements blatantly contradicting their actions. In the rest of this chapter we will follow the course of the EETPU's support for the Social Contract by concentrating not just on the union's conference decisions (one reason for this, as we shall see, is that after the May 1975 BDC, there was not another until November 1977, by which time the Social Contract was in tatters), but by focusing on three industrial disputes in which EETPU members rebelled both against the Social Contract and the EETPU leadership - the 1975 local authority strike in Scotland, the Port Talbot strike in 1977, and the Ford's dispute in 1978. An examination of these disputes will tell us something of the relationship between the EETPU leadership and the rank-and-file, and of the forces which shape this relationship.

On 20 January 1975 more than a 1000 electricians employed by local authorities in Scotland came out on strike demanding parity with contracting electricians. Council electricians had since 1970 been automatically paid the same rate as contracting electricians, which was fixed by the Scottish Joint Industry Board (SJIB), but now the local authorities refused to pay the new SJIB rate of £1.23 an hour, leaving the Corporation electricians 23p an hour worse off than contracting electricians. The strike was strongest in Glasgow where the 500 striking electricians joined up with 450 Corporation dustcart and highway drivers who were also engaged in strike action for parity with the private road haulage drivers. The two groups of workers decided to co-ordinate their fight against the Labour controlled Glasgow Corporation by holding joint demonstrations and lobbies of the City Chambers. For their part the employers flatly refused to honour the decision of 17 February 1970 made by the National Joint Council for Scottish Local Authorities which committed them to automatically paying SJIB rates. Although they paid contracting electricians working on Corporation jobs the correct rate, they argued that the financial cuts facing the

Council made it impossible for them to pay their own employees the new rate. They also argued that the new SJIB rate did not comply with the terms of the Social Contract - ie the pay rise would increase the real incomes of the electricians and not merely maintain them as the TUC guidelines recommended. This line of argument was dubious to say the least with regards to the electricians, but it was a complete nonsense in the case of the low-paid dustcart drivers. Nonetheless, Jack Jones did not make the drivers' strike official for fear that a victory would have a knock-on effect pushing up wage levels nationally and thus making the Social Contract less effective in restraining wages.

While the EETPU leadership at first promised to make the strike official, 6 weeks later it was still unofficial. The EC's strategy was to urge the workers to return to work, while they fought the Councils in the courts over the latter's clear breach of contract. By the middle of February 1975 the EC were getting very anxious about the Scottish strike. One reason for this was that the Scottish example had spread to England and Wales where local authority electricians were on strike in some of the major cities because their employers refused to pay the JIB rate. What is more, there were signs that the various unofficial strike committees were beginning to link up nationally and were being led by members of the Communist Party or the International Socialists. In Glasgow, for example, the convenor of the electricians, George Kelly, and a number of the shop stewards, were members of the IS and active in *Rank and File Contact*. And as we have already seen the industrial strategy of the IS was to build a national rank-and-file movement which could act independently of the union leaderships where necessary. To regain control of the dispute the leadership of the EETPU did two things. Firstly, Chapple sent out a personal letter to each of the striking Scottish electricians informing them that they were "being used as pawns in a vicious political game" and calling on them "to reject the extremists and to support the union's call to return to work immediately". (11) When this failed to have any effect they promised to make the strike official if certain conditions were met. The major condition was that the EC was to control any further action in the dispute. This was finally agreed to with the proviso that before the EC initiated any action

it would first consult with the strike committee. In fact the inability of the EETPU leadership to give any effective lead in the dispute meant in practice that the strike stayed firmly under the control of the rank-and-file. But at least now, after 6 weeks, the Scottish strike was official. Moreover, to regain control of the militancy that was spreading south of the border, the EC embarked upon a series of selective strikes against local authorities who refused to pay the JIB rate.

In the third week of March the Labour Government sent troops into Glasgow to break the dustcart workers' strike. The troops' actions not only broke the dustcart strike but also the Corporation electricians' strike. For one of the first actions of the Highland Fusiliers was to cross an EETPU picket line in the Maryhill district of Glasgow to light up the city's main incinerator, a job usually done by Corporation electricians. Despite the intervention of the army, and the refusal of the T&GWU to make the strike official, the dustcart drivers stayed out for 17 weeks, until they were finally forced back to work in the middle of April. Talks in London aimed at ending the 12 week old Scottish electricians dispute once again broke down when the authorities refused to pay the agreed wage rate, which would have involved an increase of £9.20 a week, and instead offered £5.30. The strike in Scotland was if anything stronger than ever, with a rank-and-file steering committee with two delegates from each main region meeting regularly to discuss and co-ordinate the strike. After 14 weeks the strike ended in a complete victory for the electricians. The electricians won the SJIB rate and a commitment from the Councils that the standing agreement of 1970 would be honoured in future. George Kelly, the leader of the Scottish electricians, said this of the dispute:

"We won because of the effort put into the fight by the rank and file. The union executive asked to be given control of the strike but proved incapable of leading it. In fact, they left it entirely to the shop stewards and rank and file to win." (12)

The Scottish electricians had won a notable victory, not just over the employers, but over the Social Contract as well, and

despite the reluctance of the EC to give the strike the backing it needed. The EETPU leadership were in actual fact caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand they could not tolerate agreements being broken by employers, whether they be Labour Councils or not, yet on the other hand, they were ardent supporters of the Social Contract which allowed wages rises only in order to maintain real incomes. Whether or not the electricians' wage rise increased or maintained their living standards is debatable - but clearly the leadership thought the wage rise broke the Social Contract. What does seem clear, however, is that the striking electricians would have received even less support from the EC if they were simply striking for the 23p an hour. It was the fact that the strike had been caused by the employers ignoring the SJIB agreement (which, as we have seen, the union leadership had taken such pains to construct in the late 1960s) that really forced the EETPU leadership to act contrary to the spirit of the Social Contract. No trade union could stand by while the industrial "legality" that was embodied in the collective bargaining process was by-passed by a particular employer. The other factor, of course, that pushed the EETPU leadership into acting against the spirit of the Social Contract was the rank-and-file control of the dispute. Early attempts to gain control of the dispute by discrediting the rank-and-file leadership had come to nought, and when they did formally gain control it made no difference, as the rank-and-file strike committee still effectively controlled the dispute.

So, once more, we see evidence that gives credence to Michels' theory, but we also see factors operating that do not fit with the oligarchic view of trade unions. Formally the EETPU leadership were out to police their membership and enforce the Social Contract guidelines on wages, and that meant taking firm control of the Scottish strike. No surprises here for Michels. However, as we have seen, two major factors operated against this: firstly, the breaking of negotiated agreements by the employers; and, secondly, rank-and-file control of the dispute that served as an example to electricians south of the border. The key element was of course rank-and-file control of the Scottish strike, and it was this more than anything else that forced the leadership to support the

actions of the electricians. Now this certainly does not square with the Michelian approach, and it highlights a point totally missed by Michels - that even in large organizations direct democracy (which, as we have previously mentioned, Michels argued in an era of mass democracy was technically impossible) is still possible, and moreover it is a strong countervailing force against the oligarchic pretensions of any union leadership, however entrenched they might appear to be.

Jack Jones informs us in his autobiography that early in 1975 the Social Contract was under severe attack:

"Harold Wilson and Dennis Healey did not seem happy at the co-operation they were receiving from the trade unions and there was strong criticism of the Government in our ranks because of their inability to stem the rapidly rising tide of unemployment and inflation. I never doubted the value of the Social Contract, which I saw as a major step towards economic equality and better conditions for working people, and used every democratic means to gain the co-operation of fellow trade unionists. Sometimes I felt that political leaders did not appreciate the hard work involved in influencing rank-and-file opinion."

Jones goes on to say that wage increases were not the root cause of inflation, but, nevertheless:

"I knew something had to be done...I decided to act. At a union rally in Bournemouth early in May 1975 I called for a new approach to be made, 'to provide for wage increases to be on a flat-rate basis. The figures should be directly related to the cost of living. The one figure should then apply to all people at work - MPs, judges, civil servants and other workers. " (13)

His call was taken up, and after lengthy discussions between the TUC and the Government a £6 per week maximum and no pay increases for those earning £8,500 a year was agreed upon. The £6 policy was

accepted by the GC of the TUC at its meeting in July but only narrowly, by 19 votes to 13. At the September 1975 TUC Jones successfully moved the motion supporting the £6 policy

Despite Jones' assertion that wages were not the root cause of inflation, his remedy quite clearly put the onus of blame on what the press were continually calling "excessive wage rises". The Labour Government certainly saw wages as the main problem, as the pamphlet that was issued to explain the government's economic strategy, *Attack on Inflation: A Policy for Survival*, carried Wilson's much publicised remark that, "One man's pay rise is not only another man's price rise: it might also cost him his own job - or his neighbour's job", prominently on its back cover. Of course the argument that wages are the root cause of inflation is dependent on how the available statistics are calculated and used. So, Wilson tells us that from March 1974 to March 1975 the wage index had risen by 32.9% against a rise in the RPI of 21.4%. Chapple argued at the 1975 TUC that it was "indisputable that the recent percentage increase in wages has been greater than in the retail price index". But Glyn and Harrison write that although between April and December 1974 real earnings grew by 8%, by June 1975 real take home pay was 9% down on the December 1974 level. Panitch argues that increases in gross money earnings for the average worker fell from 25.5% in 1974-75 to 12.4% in 1975-76, and that real wages fell by 5.5% in 1974-75. (14) Whatever the real figures, the majority of trade unionists more than likely accepted the "wages cause inflation" argument in an abstract sense at least, although whether or not *their* wages were inflationary was another matter. Added to this there was still loyalty to a Labour Government which as yet had not appeared to directly attack the working class movement. In this climate the £6 pay limit was accepted as necessary and consequently won majority support at the TUC and Labour Party Conferences of 1975.

The EETPU BDC met in May 1975, before the voluntary incomes policy between the TUC and Government was agreed upon. The Conference voted to accept a motion that applauded the Social Contract as "a positive step forward on the road to economic growth and social justice" by 365 votes to 164. (15) At the September TUC Chapple supported the motion moved by Jones which endorsed the

incomes policy which had as its centrepiece the £6 limit negotiated earlier in the year:

"My union is supporting motion No.8 not because we believe it will resolve our economic problems either in the short or the long terms but because we believe any other course we might adopt at this moment would certainly lead to a worsening of our economic situation." (16)

Motion 8 was carried without a card vote. However, a card vote was demanded and taken on the General Council's Report, and this showed, even at this early stage of the Social Contract, a wide unease at the introduction of wage restraint, voluntary or not. There were 6,945,000 votes for the Report and 3,375,000 against. (17) There were two primary reasons for this unease. Firstly, it was an abandonment of "free collective bargaining", and secondly, despite all the different figures that were being banded about to show how workers' living standards were improving, it was becoming increasingly obvious that a £6 limit was sure to lead to a decline in the standard of living for the majority of workers. As the *Economist* calculated in July 1975:

"A married man with two young children will be worse off, after tax and inflation, unless he is earning under £22 a week. Fewer than 1½ million employees fall into this bracket (and most of them young, single or, working part-time) Everybody else will suffer a sharp cut in his standard of life." (18)

By the following year the unease was growing. Although a Special TUC Congress held in June 1976 approved the General Council's report *The Social Contract 1976-77* by 9,262,000 votes to 531,000, and thus endorsed Stage Two of the Social Contract, (a limit of £2.50 for those earning up to £50 per week; 5% for those earning between £50 and £80; and a maximum of £4 for higher earners) the TUC Congress in September voted overwhelmingly for "an orderly return to free collective bargaining" at the end of Stage 2. However, large sections of the workforce were not prepared to wait in an orderly fashion until Stage 2 ran its course (August

1977) as unemployment rose and living standards fell over the winter of 1976-77. The *Observer* reported in May 1977 that,

"The past twelve months have almost certainly seen the sharpest fall in living standards of Britain's working population in any year for at least a century, including the wars. Indeed, to find any comparable fall, it would be necessary to go back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth century." (19)

As a result, early 1977 saw a spontaneous and massive rank-and-file rebellion against the Social Contract, with over a million days "lost" through strikes involving 198,000 workers in 445 stoppages in the first two months of the year alone. Of these strikes only 4.3% were made official in the months of January and February, and over the year as a whole only 79 (2.9%) of the 2,703 stoppages were made official. (20) Three of the most prominent and bitter of the unofficial disputes that took place early in 1977, those at British Leyland, Heathrow Airport and Port Talbot Steelworks, all involved EETPU members. At Leyland and Heathrow, however, the EETPU were not directly in dispute with the employers, whereas at Port Talbot the dispute solely concerned the EETPU.

On 3 April 1977 a conference against the Social Contract called by the British Leyland Shop Stewards Combine attracted 1,700 delegates, including 300 Leyland stewards and such figures as Arthur Scargill of the Yorkshire NUM. One of the speakers at the Conference was Wyn Bevan, convenor of 500 electricians who had been out on strike since the end of March at the Margam Steelworks, Port Talbot, in South Wales. For two years the electricians had been negotiating for more money and regrading because of an increased workload and new machinery. Finally the electricians blacked the new machinery. British Steel then suspended five of the workers and the strike began. But not only was British Steel refusing their claim, so was the EC of the EETPU, on the grounds that negotiations had already begun for extra payments on behalf of those working in "special areas" and that the across-the-board payment for all the electricians at the plant that the strikers were asking for would break Stage 2 of the Social Contract. They were then instructed back to work by the EC, but ignored the instruction and instead

passed a vote of no confidence in the Executive by 420 votes to 65. Not surprisingly, Wyn Bevan told the Conference that they were engaged in a battle on three fronts: "We are fighting the British Steel Corporation, our own union and the Social Contract". (21)

Seven weeks into the dispute, with the entire Port Talbot plant at a standstill, Chapple met the 27-man strike committee for the first time. He agreed that their case was a good one, but said that there was nothing the EC could do:

"We cannot support a claim that is in breach of the Social Contract. If you're saying that all the electricians in the works are a special group - then that's out. There's no way we can support you without bringing the bloody house down." (22)

This viewpoint was shared by the BSC management who, besides favourably quoting Chapple and other EETPU officials in the company's newspaper *Steel News*, also said in their public statement on the dispute that the whole collective bargaining process could be upset if they settled with the striking electricians:

"A unilateral settlement with a particular group would completely unbalance existing pay structures and lead to disruptions not only at Port Talbot works but across all the works of the corporation...This is recognised by the national executive of the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunication and Plumbing Trade Union and by the other unions affected..."

(23)

In the end the 10 week old strike was broken by a combination of BSC intransigence, the hostility of the EC and local EETPU officials, with the final blow coming when electricians at the local Tinplate works at Trostre and Velindre voted to cross the picket line set up by the Port Talbot strikers. The Port Talbot dispute was an example of what "an orderly return to free collective bargaining" meant in the eyes of the EETPU leadership. It meant strict adherence to the conditions of Stage 2 of the Social Contract despite the record fall in living standards. This was a view shared by the majority of trade union leaders, left as

well as right, as the opposition of both Scanlon, the left-wing leader of the AUEW, to the Leyland strike, and Birch the "maoist" AUEW official in charge of the Heathrow dispute, clearly demonstrated.

At Port Talbot, then, the EC were able to go against the wishes of the membership there and force them to accept a deal within the limits of Stage 2. But there was more to it than that. The action of the Port Talbot electricians, as the BSC statement quoted above makes clear, threatened the centralised bargaining system that operated in the company. The leadership of the EETPU feared that Port Talbot might serve as an example to other electricians in other plants and industries and raise the spectre of decentralised, workplace and site deals outwith the control of the officials. They could see in Port Talbot not just a challenge to their political stance in support of the Labour Government then, but also a challenge to the central control that the officials exerted over the membership. So the Port Talbot dispute was not just about the Social Contract, it was also about union democracy. And this time, unlike the Scottish local authority electricians strike in 1975, the Social Contract was used effectively to bring a rebellious section of the union back in line with the general policy of the leadership and thus thwart any democratic challenge from below. On this occasion, and in circumstances where the majority of the official labour and trade union movement supported the Social Contract, the EETPU "oligarchy" were able to win the day. What was decisive, however, was not oligarchical control per se, but the weakness of a rank-and-file opposition held in check by the Social Contract.

Nonetheless, the rank-and-file pay revolt spilled over into the annual round of union conferences in the early summer of 1977. In May the NUPE Conference and the AUEW National Committee both threw out the Social Contract. The miners at their Conference in July rejected the pit productivity deal proposed by the Executive and voted for £135 a week from November. Most dramatically of all, the T&GWU Conference ignored Jones' pleas and voted for an immediate return to "unfettered collective bargaining". (24) As for the EETPU membership, they had not met to discuss policy since their May 1975 BDC (which was before the £6 limit was introduced).

so that their May 1977 BDC would take place after two years of falling living standards and rising unemployment. To avoid any criticism of Stage 2 and the proposed Stage 3 of the Social Contract the EETPU leadership simply cancelled the May 1977 BDC, and instead moved it to November, after Stage 3 had been settled. So, unlike other trade union delegations, the EETPU leadership had a free hand to vote which way it pleased at the September TUC and October Labour Party Conference, unfettered by embarrassing conference decisions.

If the conference decisions of the major unions had been observed at the TUC in September, then a wage explosion would have been inevitable. The General Council's resolution was aimed at staving off such an explosion. Although it did not give backing to the 10% maximum wage increase allowed under Stage 3 of the Social Contract, the resolution did make the 12-month rule official TUC policy. And it was the left-wing Scanlon that not only moved the GC resolution, but cast his union's 3 million votes in favour of the 12-month rule against the wishes of the AUEW's National Conference, and against the wishes of the National Committee of the engineering section of the union and virtually the whole of the AUEW delegation to the TUC. What was at issue at the 1977 TUC then, was not continued support for the Social Contract but how to end the support without a wages explosion. As Scanlon put it:

"There is no need for excuses or alibis. The grass roots of our Movement have made perfectly plain their revolt against any question of a phase 3 and therefore there must be a return to free collective bargaining....The only issue before congress is how we return." (25)

The 12-month rule was the device that was to ensure "an orderly return to free collective bargaining" as Stage 2 came to an end.

Chapple was in line with the majority of other trade union leaders in supporting the retention of the 12-month rule between pay rises. He argued against Jones who, unlike Scanlon, followed the wishes of his own members and pleaded the case for a flexible approach to wage demands, which he said could not be reconciled with the rigid application of the 12-month rule. Chapple would have none of this:

"I found that the strangest comment of them all came from Jack Jones. He gave us instances of the difficulties that we are experiencing - and I accept that they are difficulties - with Leyland and his road haulage members. But I was experiencing those difficulties with my members in 1975, and you cannot now tell my contracting members, who gave up £10 a week on their basic pay for a £6 flat increase, that there were likely to be anomalies; we knew about all those when we agreed to Phases 1 and 2...I suggest to you that if we renege on the 12-month rule, the word of this Congress and the word of the General Council will have less meaning to any government of the future...I do not think there is any discredit to the way Hugh Scanlon describes the end of the second stage..." (26)

Composite motion 7, which called for an "immediate return to free collective bargaining at the end of the second stage of the Social Contract, with a confirmation of the 12-month rule between principal settlements", was carried by 7,130,000 votes to 4,344,000 votes, a majority of 2,786,000. (27) But, as Coates points out, the retention of the 12-month rule amounted to tacit TUC support for the continuation of the Social Contract:

"...the willingness of the majority of trade union leaders to respect the 12-month rule was alone responsible for delaying large numbers of major pay claims into the spring and summer of 1978, by which time the TUC's own failure to help the firemen had consolidated the very wage norm against which they officially committed themselves at the end of Stage 2." (28)

Nevertheless, the autumn and winter of 1977 witnessed the defeat of Stage 3 in the private sector of the economy and a certain degree of "bending" in the State sector. Overall, real wages increased by some 5% under Stage 3 (self-financing productivity deals which were permitted under Stage 3 allowed many workers to officially exceed

the 10% maximum), although at the same time unemployment had risen to 1½ million and public spending had been drastically reduced.

At the EETPU's BDC in November the EC supported both the motions that called for a return to free collective bargaining, even the one moved by Charlie Montgomery from Glasgow, one of the leading oppositionists in the union at the time. (29) From this point on the union leadership became openly critical of the Labour Government's incomes policy. Chapple wrote in *Contact* early in 1978 that,

"I have supported the TUC/Government pay restraint of the last two years - primarily because no other agreement seemed possible. But the Government's attempt to unilaterally impose a 10% policy is detrimental not only to the possibility of long term industrial recovery but reneges the agreement for restraint - an agreement to which the trade unions had kept."

(30)

In the June edition of *Contact* he wrote:

"Some of our friends in the Government ask why this union is opposed to any extension of Government pay policy. They query why we, who have shown such loyalty to Labour Governments, should be so adamant on this issue...Our position is clear. We believe that wages and conditions should be decided by the collective bargaining process - not by civil servants."

(31)

James Callaghan, unperturbed by trade union hostility to the Social Contract, unilaterally introduced Stage 4 of the Government's *Attack on Inflation* in July 1978. Stage 4 was to consist of a 5% maximum with exceptions for self-financing productivity deals and rigidly defined special cases. Chapple found that the EC's dilemma - the wish to support the Government while opposing the central plank of its policy - was heightened by the 5% limit and the Government's refusal to call a General Election. (32) Nevertheless, the EETPU leadership made a clear policy statement rejecting the Government's 5% pay policy in July.

which was re-stated further in a circular to all branches on 26 September 1978, just as the first major challenge to the pay limit got under way at Fords.

Ford's 57,000 workers came out on a national strike at the end of September 1978 for a claim of £20 per week and a 35 hour week. The company made their position clear from the outset - they intended to keep strictly within the Government's 5% pay norm. Their determination to resist the union's claim was also reinforced by the threat of Government sanctions against the company if they conceded more than 5%. The issue at stake was not Ford's capacity to meet the claim (they had made a gross profit of £246.1m in 1977 and made £300 in 1978) but the survival of Stage 4 of the Social Contract. If the claim was conceded not only would a new norm of some 30% be set as the "going rate", but the Government's attempt to discipline companies for paying over and above the 5% limit would be worthless. The result was a bitter 7 week strike that led to a partial victory for the Ford workers. Instead of £20 they received, on average, £10.50 (17%) with strings, and no reduction in the working week. But for the Government it was a total defeat, and Stage 4 lay in ruins. Moreover, during the strike itself the Labour Party Conference voted against the 5% maximum. But most disastrously of all from the Government's point of view, the breach made by the Ford workers in the pay policy led to what became known as the "winter of discontent". Some 10 million days were "lost" in strikes between October 1978 and March 1979 alone. Ironically, the bulk of the days "lost" were the result of the revolt of the low-paid in the first three months of 1979, and these were the very people that the Social Contract was supposed to help.

As we have said, the dilemma the EETPU leaders found themselves in was one of wishing to support the Government while being officially opposed to its 5% pay limit. Inevitably, this resulted in the EC attempting to square the circle - supporting the Government while opposing it. We can see this clearly in the union's attitude to the Ford dispute. Along with the AUEW and the T&GWU the EETPU made up the trade union side of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee (FNJNC). Both the AUEW and the T&GWU made the strike official, but there was no word at all from the

EETPU as to whether the dispute was official or not. In fact, the EC did not meet at all in September to discuss the Ford strike or any other events. Eight shop-stewards from Fords then travelled to the union's Headquarters to find out what was happening. Although Chapple was present, he refused to meet the stewards. Finally on 31 October the EC met, and from that meeting the following letter was sent to all EETPU members working at Fords:

"At their meeting on 31st October 1978 the Executive Council discussed the Ford Dispute. They noted that the dispute had begun whilst the existing agreement had four weeks to run and was based upon support for the principle of free collective bargaining as opposed to the Government norm of 5%. They also noted that on the 13th October the management made an offer of 8% coupled with a productivity deal and offered to continue negotiations in which more money would be available - pounds not pence. In the light of that offer the Executive Council believe that a resumption of work should have taken place to allow negotiations to continue in the normal manner.

In reaching a decision in respect of the dispute the Executive Council had to take into consideration the fact that our members could hardly have been expected to remain at work whilst the rest of the workforce were on strike. However, with regard to the payment of benefit, the Executive Council decided that to pay benefit from the date the strike began would create a precedent for breaking agreements that could not be sustained in the light of union policy.

Accordingly the Executive Council made the following decision. That the dispute be made official and that dispute benefit be paid as and from the date that the contract with the company expired." (33)

There was an angry reaction from Ford electricians to the union's withholding of strike pay for the first four weeks of the strike: 200 of them picketed the Hayes Court Headquarters of the union demanding that benefit be paid in full. The very fact that the union had made the strike official, and the leadership had themselves said that "our members could hardly have been expected to remain at work whilst the rest of the workforce were on strike", made their refusal to pay strike benefit from the beginning of the dispute even more absurd. But the refusal to issue strike pay was symptomatic of the union's reluctance to support such an open challenge to the Government's incomes policy. Even though earlier in the year they had officially sanctioned selective strikes in the contracting industry which led to pay settlements in excess of 5%. Selective, low key strikes were one thing, but a national strike of such proportions where the EETPU was the junior partner was an entirely different matter as far as the EC were concerned.

The only way out of the "dilemma" was to attempt to steer a third course which avoided the pitfalls of the 5% limit as well as the open challenge to the Government that the return to free collective bargaining had unleashed. Chapple and the EETPU leadership began, once again, cautiously hawking round the idea of a flexible incomes policy. A central feature of any such flexible policy would be productivity linked pay rises, which would, presumably, be less rigid than the self-financing productivity schemes that already allowed the 5% maximum to be exceeded under Stage 4. Such a flexible approach, they hoped, would salvage the Government's Social Contract.

This explains the EC's willingness to accept the 8% Ford offered at the beginning of October - it was coupled to a productivity deal. In the December edition of *Contact*, Chapple outlines the union's thinking at greater length:

"One thing is clear - that a fixed pay policy hits the productive and non productive alike, reduces differentials between unskilled and skilled and undoubtedly disenchants the very groups that we need to encourage if output is to be raised. However, a return to free collective bargaining will not provide an

immediate remedy. With or without a pay policy, real improvements in earnings will only be achieved when production improves so that our competitiveness can match the rest of the world.

Improved productive output and export potential are the aim of Government and unions alike. The difference between us is not that there should be reward but how that reward should be divided." (34)

The idea of a productivity based flexible incomes policy was not new. Cannon had pushed this line during 1964-70 Labour Government, and it was now being pushed by Chapple for the same reasons - to salvage the Labour Government's economic strategy in the face of a massive strike wave. The process went a step further in January 1979 with the publication of *A Better Way*. This was, as Chapple explains, an unofficial effort to edge the unions back toward reality (in fact the TUC mailing list was used to distribute it "unofficially" to Trades Councils throughout the country):

"Former Fleet Street journalist, John Grant, was now a junior employment minister and one of the BETPU's sponsored MPs. He was a passionate prices and incomes policy man and inspired his own 'private enterprise' bid to trigger off a fresh union initiative. He thought that both the Government and the TUC had grossly mishandled the situation to the overwhelming Tory advantage and he persuaded a dozen senior trade union leaders to sign a document called *A Better Way*. They included Alf Allen, the shopworkers' General Secretary and Chairman of the TUC Economic Committee, NALGO's Geoffrey Drain, Tom Jackson of the postmen's union, Tony Christopher of the taxmen, Terry Duffy, the AUEW President, Bill Sirs of the steelworkers, the NUR's Sidney Weighell and myself. He also cajoled one or two of the more reasonable left-wingers into backing the proposals.

It was hardly a blueprint for the future, but it offered the most coherent approach for a long while to the intractable pay policy problem, including a more flexible line on rewards for productivity. Regrettably, by the time it was printed and published, it was too late - we were already plunged into the horrors of the 'Winter of Discontent'. (35)

A Better Way, with its call for a flexible incomes policy and the establishment of a new Prices and Incomes Board to oversee the policy, made little headway in a climate when the Ford workers had won 17% and rejected the worst strings attached to the deal. National strikes of bakery workers and provincial journalists followed quickly on the heels of the Ford victory, and they in turn were followed by oil tanker drivers in December. By January 1979, when *A Better Way* was published, there were more workers involved in strikes than in any month since May 1968. Chapple's call for a more flexible approach to pay made little sense when strike action was delivering the goods for many workers, although overall earnings under Stage 4 did not exceed greatly those under Stage 3.

Yet another attempt to curb the strike wave of the "winter of discontent" was the *Concordat* agreement between the Labour Government and the TUC which surfaced the month after the publication of *A Better Way*. The *Concordat* traded tougher price controls, machinery through which to allow comparability studies of private and public sector pay, and a slight reduction in the restrictions on increases for the low paid, in return for a TUC agreement to bring pay rises down to 5% by 1982, to participate in an annual national assessment before Easter each year, and to issue tighter guidelines to encourage strike ballots, more flexibility in the closed shop, and more controlled picketing. (36) However, before the *Concordat* had the chance to be put into operation a General Election was called in May.

Margaret Thatcher was elected with a 43.9% share of the vote compared to Labour's 37.0%. The core of the anti-trade union legislation that the Tories outlined in their election manifesto was taken from the *Concordat*. The only difference being that the *Concordat* was to have been based on "voluntary unanimity", not the

legal compulsion that the Thatcher Government introduced. However, considering that it now seems to be taken for granted that the "winter of discontent" lost Labour the election - a position held strongly by the EETPU - it is worth noting that Labour's share of the vote had only dropped by 2.2% since October 1974 (and down by only 0.2% from the February election) and the Tories rose by some 8% thanks to the big drop in the Liberal vote from 18.3% in 1974 to 13.8% in 1979. Liberalism, if anything, ushered in the Thatcherite era, not a massive shift in the Labour vote - that was to come in 1983. What is more, at the 1979 General Election 51% of trade unionists, as opposed to 55% in 1974, still voted Labour. So there was no simple correlation between industrial militancy and the result of the 1979 General Election, although, it goes without saying, there was a correlation.

A number of points already touched upon in this and previous chapters are worth stressing in the light of the Social Contract experience. Once again we see Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" clashing with Gouldner's "iron law of democracy". For after the rank- and-file rebellion against the Social Contract early in 1977, we see the official policy of the trade union movement turn against the Labour Government's economic strategy. We also see that despite being forced to reject the Social Contract the majority of union leaderships still tacitly supported the maintenance of wage controls, the result of which was a reluctance to back open challenges to the Government's pay policy. This was clearly the case with the EETPU strike at Port Talbot and the TUC's hostility to the firemen's strike. So there was a constant tension from 1977 onwards between a trade union bureaucracy that was officially tied to a position of opposition to the Social Contract, but which on the whole wanted to preserve it in some form, and a rank-and-file who were more concerned with preserving their living standards and thus made their hostility to the Social Contract abundantly clear at the various union conferences.

The EETPU's position, therefore, was not exceptional. They were just more adamant in their support for the Social Contract. And because the rest of the official trade union movement had moved to the right since the early 1970s, it is not always that easy to distinguish the EETPU's position on the Social Contract from that

of left-wing unions, in contrast to their clearly distinguishable positions during the fight against the IR Act. This only serves to reinforce the point that a union's industrial policy, and the nature of its internal democracy, are shaped by external as well as internal forces, forces that often override the formal politics of the union leadership. So the right-wing led EETPU de-registers in 1972, while in 1977 the left led AUEW opposes strikes against the Social Contract. Which way a union will swing on a particular issue will depend on the strength of the various competing forces - the rank-and-file, the political complexion of the Government, the strength of the economy, the union's industrial coverage and traditions and so on.

The tension we have described between a trade union bureaucracy that was intent on supporting the Labour Government and a membership intent on defending and extending its own interests, is founded on the inherent contradiction that lies at the heart of trade unionism, and which has been classically expressed by Perry Anderson:

"...trade unions are dialectically both an opposition to capitalism and a component of it. For they both resist the given unequal distribution of income within society by their wage demands, and ratify the principle of an unequal distribution by their existence..." (37)

How strongly trade union leaders oppose or ratify such a system will depend crucially on the pressure exerted by the rank-and-file. The lack of will on the part of the trade union leadership to oppose the growing unequal distribution of income under the Social Contract was obviously increased as a result of their loyalty to the Labour Government. And no doubt Michels would have viewed this form of corporatism as another vindication of his theory, which at one level it is. But the very fact that the trade union leaders were forced under rank-and-file pressure to break with the Government is, contrary to Michels, a clear indication of the limitations of the corporatist thesis. (38) Of course, the relationship between the leaders of trade unions, their members and the Labour Government, was far more complex in reality than the rank-and-file versus leaders picture painted above. Nevertheless,

in recent history the dichotomy has never been clearer than in the latter years of the Social Contract.

The EETPU, as we have seen, was no more immune from the internal and external forces that pressurised the TUC to drop its support for the Social Contract than any other trade union. The ideological make-up of a union leadership is important, but at the end of the day the right-wing EETPU crumbled almost as easily as did the left-wing T&GWU. Having said that ideology is important, the very fact that the Social Contract was supported by left and right in the trade union movement shows that a common interest exists between leaderships that extends beyond the barrier of ideology. Writing in 1919 on the origins and limitations of trade union organization and struggle, Gramsci argues that there developed,

"a veritable caste of trade union officials....with a group psychology of their own absolutely at odds with that of the workers. This eventually came to occupy the same position *vis-a-vis* the working masses as the growing bureaucracy *vis-a-vis* the parliamentary State: it is the bureaucracy that rules and governs." (39)

But if Gramsci recognised the existence of a trade union bureaucracy that despite its ideological differences shared a common interest derived from its power position, he certainly did not draw the same conclusions as Michels. Not only did he believe that the Shop-stewards' committees existing in Italy during the *biennio rosso* could challenge the power of the union bureaucrats, he also believed that "developed and enriched, they must be the organs of proletarian power". (40) So according to Gramsci, the existence of a strong trade union bureaucracy or "oligarchy" does not have to lead us to the conclusions that Michels makes - "that the mass will never rule except in abstracts" - far from it, he argues that the bureaucracy can not only be challenged, but that this challenge contains a potential that at times of severe economic and political crisis can lead to the overthrow of the existing order. (41) The conclusions Gramsci draws from the

existence of a trade union bureaucracy could not be further from those drawn by Michels.

A tentative general conclusion that can be drawn from the Social Contract experience is that trade unions, whether they be left-wing or right-wing, do exhibit a bureaucratic conservatism that is most clearly manifest when their own rank-and-file members are involved in actions that challenge the authority of the leadership. The three strikes involving EETPU members considered in this chapter tend to confirm this generalisation. To this extent Michels' theory is confirmed. However, the very fact that the rank-and-file successfully challenged the ruling bureaucracies in this period is a clear indication of the limits of bureaucratic rule - the local authority and Ford electricians (and there are many other examples) are illustrative of the point in the EETPU. All in all then, the revolt against the Social Contract can be said to provide a democratic corrective to the "over-determinism" of Michels.

PART FOUR STRIKE FREECHAPTER NINEBALLOTS AND UNION DEMOCRACY

During the Conservative Government's first term of office under Margaret Thatcher, the two features of the EETPU's aggressive brand of business unionism that were to cause such outrage in the mainstream of the labour movement from 1985 onwards were already taking shape. Firstly, in April 1981 the union had negotiated what was to become its hallmark - its first "strike-free" agreement with Toshiba in Plymouth. Secondly, the "membership war" that was to culminate in the EETPU's involvement in the Wapping debacle was instigated, according to the EETPU, in 1983 when they claim SOGAT attempted to "poach" EETPU members belonging to the London Press Branch. So already we see the beginnings of a strategy that was aimed first at foremost at membership recruitment, especially in new areas of employment. However, it was only under Thatcher's second term of office that these two features of EETPU policy led them into permanent conflict with the majority of the labour movement.

In the wake of the defeat of the 1984/85 miners' strike something like a siege mentality gripped the trade union movement. There was much talk of the "crisis" of trade unionism, and the "new realism" that had been put on ice during the course of the strike was resurrected once more. The "crisis" was real enough, although greatly exaggerated, and at bottom came down to declining union membership. But how the "crisis" was perceived by a particular union greatly influenced its response to it. The EETPU's response was to press ahead with its strategy of carving out new areas of recruitment unfettered by traditional trade union taboos. Governing this strategy was a firm commitment to the business approach to trade unionism that Cannon had introduced into the union in the 1960s. John Lloyd has succinctly stated the two central features of the EETPU's business unionism:

"...first, an acceptance of a largely market economy in an active way - a commitment to harmonious industrial relations through the

famous (and misnamed) no-strike agreements, and a stance at local and national level of encouragement to go-ahead, profit and growth orientated managements as the best guarantors of employment for the union's members.

The second is the acceptance that trade unionism, for the present at least, operates in the market place in which the normal anarchy associated with such a system prevails." (1)

Such an aggressive strategy necessarily meant coming into conflict with many of the rules that governed TUC affiliates (most notably the Bridlington agreement). But the union was also on the offensive against TUC on another front in the post miners' strike period - the Government's anti-union legislation. Again their position was nothing new, they had made it abundantly clear at the time that they agreed with the provisions in the 1980 Employment Act that allowed unions to claim public money for secret ballots. And when in January 1983 the Government published its Green Paper *Democracy in Trade Unions* (to become the 1984 Trade Union Act), the EETPU moved rapidly from a position of critical acceptance of the "Employment" legislation to one of positive support for the two key aspects of the Green Paper - union elections and pre-strike ballots. But in the changed political climate of 1984/85 the EETPU's defiance of TUC policy on ballot money served not only to further its attempts to disengage itself from the restrictions imposed on it by the TUC, but it also put the TUC on the defensive on the question of trade union democracy. In fact, we shall argue in this chapter that the EETPU's position heralded a shift in the trade union movement towards a view of democracy that accepts the ballot as the central democratic mechanism.

"Affiliated unions shall observe Congress policy and not seek or accept funds for union ballots under the Employment Act 1980 ballot funds scheme."

(TUC Special Conference, Wembley, April 1982).

The 1980 Employment Act enabled unions to claim back the cost of postal ballots on various matters from public funds. The scheme had been in operation for four years and no TUC affiliated trade union had yet broken ranks and applied for funding. Late in 1984, however, the EETPU became the first union to state its intention of applying for public funds for their postal ballots. They were quickly followed by the AUEW who, after successfully balloting their membership on the issue (233,030 votes to 19,793 in favour, with more than a third of the membership voting), became the first TUC affiliated union to receive government money (£1.2m) for ballots in June 1985.

As early as 23 January 1985 the TUC General Council had voted by 26 votes to 11 to begin disciplinary proceedings against the EETPU and the AUEW for breaking with the Wembley decisions. But even at this early date the TUC's willingness to stick by the Wembley decisions was beginning to crumble:

"...in the course of a long debate, many general council members agreed that TUC defiance of the Government's employment laws, a stance adopted at its 1982 Wembley special conference, would have to be reviewed in the light of the Conservatives' 1983 general election victory and subsequent changes in the industrial climate." (2)

The EETPU leadership were well aware of the GC's crumbling defiance of the Tory laws; after all they had already complied with the 1984 Trade Union Act back in November 1984 with impunity, when they were the first union to order their members back to work pending a strike ballot during the Austin/Rover dispute. At their BDC in July 1985, smelling victory, the EETPU leadership went on the offensive.

The BDC was a complete success for the EC. The August edition of *Contact* carried the front page headline DISSIDENTS CLOBBERED, and reported that "the vast majority of 740 delegates backed the Executive Council on all the major issues":

"They agreed with the Executive's decisions to:
- take public money for ballots in defiance
of the TUC expulsion threats;

- act within the law and through the ballot box;
- oppose the TUC's support for the miners' strike;
- reject Labour's 'disastrous' unilateralist defence policy;
- seek broad understanding with Labour to include a prices and incomes policy;
- press for action against the Militant Tendency and other extremist groups within Labour's ranks;
- carry on making the controversial strike-free package agreements which include binding 'pendulum' arbitration."

Such overwhelming support for the leadership, triumphed *Contact's* editorial, was not only a defeat for "the dwindling and frustrated extremist fringe", but also a clear signal to the TUC: "It was 'hands off'. We won't be bullied'". (3)

Despite all this the opposition at the BDC still plugged away with a whole series of attacks on the policies of the leadership. In particular there were a number of opposition motions on the agenda urging the EC to oppose the Government's anti-trade union legislation and not to accept money for ballots. (4) Composite motion 5 urged the Conference to fully support the TUC's opposition to the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts, and the 1984 Trade Union Act, concluding that: "A minimum necessity is to work to agreed defensive policies of the TUC". This composite was defeated in favour of one that condemned "the current Tory Industrial Relations Legislation" and called upon the Executive "to pursue a vigorous policy within the law of opposition to the legislation", and it rejected "attempts by some to use the TUC for revolutionary purposes which is alien to our traditions". Composite motion 3 directly linked the Government's interference in the internal affairs of trade unions with the EC acceptance of ballot money:

"This Conference deplores the presumption of the Government that the internal affairs of trades unions are matters for public involvement and will resist further legislation

designed to inhibit the autonomy of unions and their traditional role.

It therefore urges the Executive Council to realign the EETPU with the British TUC policy decision not to accept government funding for ballots and calls on the Executive Council to rescind its decision." (5)

The composite was defeated.

Hammond and the leadership of the EETPU used the occasion of the BDC and the publicity surrounding it to warn the General Council of the consequences of suspending them from the TUC. They did this in two ways. Firstly, on the first day of the Conference Hammond floated the idea of the creation of a right-wing/moderate "super-union" made up of the EETPU, AUEW and ASTMS. Such a union of 1.7 million members would not only be able to out vote the left on the TUC, particularly the T&GWU, it would also provide the basis for a new right-wing trade union federation outside the TUC. Hammond himself did not say this was the reasoning behind his suggestion, instead he talked more generally about "a union for the 21st century" and the "possibilities of real advance in trade union organization". Secondly, during the debate on whether or not the union should accept Government ballot money, Hammond alluded to a dossier that was being compiled by the EETPU that chronicled hundreds of breaches of the TUC Wembley decisions by other trade unions. Hammond claimed that the "file" already included more than 100 instances of unions balloting on the closed shop, and that there was "hardly a major TUC policy that had not been breached by one or more unions". (6) Hammond was right, and not long after the EETPU Conference two of the main pro-Wembley unions, the T&GWU and the GMBATU, signed an agreement with Nabisco that complied with the pre-strike ballot provisions of the 1984 Trade Act. Things were going the EETPU's way, and they knew it. The rhetoric of defiance seemed rather hollow in the wake of the NGA dispute and the miners' defeat, not to mention the creeping capitulation to the law by almost all sections of the trade union movement. Nevertheless, the 1985 TUC was going to be the battleground where the Wembley decisions would be defended.

The 1985 TUC

As the September 1985 TUC Congress approached, the suspension of the AUEW and the possible formation of an alternative union body centred on the engineers and the electricians dominated debate in the labour and trade union movement. What was at stake was the entire policy of TUC opposition to the anti-union legislation and the collective authority of the GC that the EETPU and AUEW were flouting. For if the TUC conceded on the ballot money issue any continued defiance of the legislation would be nonsensical. There would be a domino effect, TUC discipline would be worthless, and the Conservatives could expect the smooth implementation of their 1984 Trade Union Act - which directly interfered with the way in which unions conducted their internal democracy. Neither the AUEW or the EETPU showed any signs of backing down as the Congress approached, quite the reverse. In August, just a month before the start of the Congress, Hammond added fuel to the fire when he announced that the union was in the process of recouping £120,000 of the £150,000 cost of the political fund ballot (as required by the 1984 TU Act) that the union had just conducted (140,931 votes to 23,830 to retain the political levy). The scene was now set for what sections of the press described as a "clash of principle on ballots".

On the Thursday before the start of the Congress on the Monday, the TUC General Council and the leadership of the AUEW spent a whole day locked in discussion at Blackpool's Imperial Hotel. Norman Willis, the new TUC General Secretary, argued that the Wembley decisions had to be honoured by the AUEW if they were not to be suspended and eventually expelled from the TUC. Gavin Laird, General Secretary of the AUEW, said that the Wembley decisions were now invalid, not least because the General Election of 1983 showed up the futility of that opposition. Laird also pointed out that many trade unions were already changing their rules to comply with 1984 TU Act, that ballots were being discreetly held on the maintenance of closed shops in explicit defiance of Wembley, and that in 1984 the TUC itself had taken £1.5 billion from the Government for education and training purposes, as it had for many years. The GC countered that taking money for

education was not proscribed under the Wembley principles, and that no union had actually instructed its members to ballot on the closed shop - that had happened at local levels. (7) On the Sunday the EETPU delegation reiterated its pledge that it would support the AUEW, and added that it would leave the Congress hall if the engineers were suspended. Nothing then was resolved over the weekend, so Willis' hope of avoiding a damaging row and possible split at his first Congress as General Secretary came to nought.

The key debate began on the first day. Debate was centred around two motions, one from the EETPU and one from the T&GWU and the CPSA. The EETPU motion called for a review of the Wembley decisions in the light of the 1983 election defeat of Labour. Hammond, when moving the motion, repeated the claim that the Wembley principles had been breached time and time again, and that the EETPU had details of 60 breaches of the closed-shop recommendation alone. Moreover, argued Hammond, it was absurd to lay down the law over the Wembley principles when "the equally important 1984 Act has been left to individual unions". This was a valid point. The growing number of unions adjusting their rule books to comply with the 1984 Act and holding pre-strike and political fund ballots, seemed to make a nonsense of the principles of non co-operation agreed at Wembley. As so often in the trade union movement though, "it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it" that counts. (8)

But the motion moved by the left-wing T&GWU and seconded by the right-wing CPSA was of such scope that it pre-empted the EETPU's call for a review, while staying loyal to the Wembley decisions. The very fact that it was moved by Ron Todd and seconded by the architect of the "new realism", Alistair Graham, was an indication that the motion was intended to be all things to all men and women. As the *Financial Times* wrote of the motion:

"It is... the fruit of an audacious strategy pioneered by Mr Willis: that is, to take elements from resolutions to the right and left, often calling for quite different outcomes, and to sew parts of them together to form a whole which can satisfy all parties."

The motion appeased the left by reaffirming the TUC's "total opposition" to the Government's anti-union legislation and by confirming the "policy of non co-operation agreed at the special TUC Congress at Wembley in 1982". Yet it also opened the door to a reappraisal of the TUC's stance on the legislation when it instructed the GC to "carry out a major review of industrial legislation within the TUC/Labour Party liaison committee". (10) In seconding the motion Graham left the delegates in no doubt as to what he considered the outcome of any review should be. After reaffirming the CPSA's support for the Wembley stance of non co-operation he went on to say:

"It would be foolhardy for the Labour Party to enter the next general election with a simple policy of repealing the 1980, 1982 and 1984 Acts when some of the provisions of the 1984 Act are popular with the public and our members... Ballots have given the unions an increased stature and authority to speak on behalf of their members. We must not undermine that hard won confidence in some crude political reaction to what the Government have done to us. We must ensure under new legislation that ballots operate in a more neutral atmosphere." (11)

The question that many trade unionists must have been asking themselves was, why hold ballots, which were in line with the Tory legislation, and then refuse to take the money for them? It didn't make sense, and only confirmed what had been apparent for some time, the verbal rhetoric of the TUC was not matched by its practice. Six months later, in February 1986 at a Special TUC Conference, even the verbal rhetoric collapsed as the TUC did a volte-face on the Wembley principles. The fruits of the "major review" were published some months later in a joint TUC/Labour Party policy statement, *People at work: new rights, new responsibilities*.

Hammond in his contribution to the debate had said virtually the same things as Graham, why then make such a big deal of the

ballot money issue? Part of the answer is given in a *Financial Times* editorial entitled "Hidden issue in the AUEW row":

"...some at least on the general council want to see collective discipline asserted so that it can be used to whip into line those unions which may find an understanding between the TUC and the Labour Party on incomes inconvenient."

(12)

If the collective discipline that the GC was trying to reassert on the right-wing could not be enforced over the ballot money issue, there was not much chance of them enforcing that discipline in the run up to the General Election, especially over thorny problems like incomes policy where the left-wing was likely to rebel. Graham and Willis were well aware that the "review" was the most important aspect of the motion because it was the first step in ditching the Wembley principles. They also knew that the left's zeal for the principles was in reality confined to unions such as the NUM and TASS. Willis and Graham were nevertheless able to join the left in proclaiming their support for those very same principles, but their eye was on the future election and the popularity of ballot democracy. That the left, supported by the centre and right, had taken the lead in clamouring for the collective decisions of the TUC to be honoured by the right-wing AUEW and EETPU, made it all the more difficult for them to break ranks if the principles were abandoned by the GC in the run up to the General Election. For its part the left wanted any review of the Tory legislation to be on their terms, and for the moment that meant blocking the right and holding them to the Wembley principles.

So, underlying the ballot money controversy was a recognition by both left and right that the Wembley principles were going to be jettisoned in the not too distant future in favour of a new industrial relations framework to be negotiated with the Labour Party, central to which was "positive rights" for trade unionists. What was undecided was how far the "review" would go. But for the moment the Todd/Graham motion seemingly gave both left and right strong corners that they could defend. What neither wanted,

however, was that the attempt to discipline the AUEW should lead to a split in the TUC, and there was the rub.

The Todd/Graham motion was overwhelmingly carried by the Congress. In reaffirming the Wembley principles the delegates threw down a challenge to the AUEW, either get in line or get out. The engineers refused to give an undertaking not to accept more Government money for ballots. It seemed that there was no alternative but to expel them. And Hammond's warning from the rostrum amid shouts of "traitor" and "Judas" seemed to confirm what the press had been speculating about for months - that the TUC would split:

"I must put my union's position beyond doubt.
Put us outside the TUC, declare open season on
our membership and we will not lie quiescent
waiting to be carved up.
We will do what is necessary to survive.
Unthinkable pacts about union membership, a
free for all. You ain't seen nothing yet." (13)

What actually happened was that a compromise was reached, or as the *Sunday Times* put it, a "Blackpool fudge". The AUEW was allowed to keep the £1.2 million it had already received from the Government and they would not be immediately suspended from the TUC. In return the union had to ballot its membership, which it had already planned to do anyway, but this time the ballot papers had to carry a warning that, should they vote in favour of accepting money for ballots, their union would be suspended from the TUC. Everything was put on ice then until the engineers held their ballot in late November. Meanwhile, undaunted, and before the Congress had finished, the EETPU let it be known that they were about to receive £190,000 of Government money for ballots, and that they were also now claiming £200,000, not £120,000, to cover the cost of the political fund ballot. The TUC GC then decided to write to the union, asking it to "inform the TUC of their current position and their intentions" in relation to Government money. (14) On 4 October the EETPU announced that it would ballot its membership over taking Government money for ballots at the same time as the AUEW.

The ballots and their aftermath

The ballot results were a foregone conclusion: the real question was what would happen after the results were announced. Most political and industrial commentators had no problem in answering that question. Thus, John Torode, industrial correspondent for the *Guardian*, could write before the ballot results were declared:

"The TUC is reportedly preparing to abandon its position on state funding of union ballots. The quarrel with the electricians and engineering workers is all but over. The spirit of compromise is abroad.." (15)

Interviewed in the same article, Hammond showed no "spirit of compromise":

"We are not turning back. There can be no compromise whatsoever which involves us not taking the money. We do not wish to cause unnecessary splits in the TUC, but I repeat we are going to take the money. If there is going to be a compromise, it is down to them [the TUC General Council] to back off."

What about expulsion from the TUC?

"It is for them to decide what level of punishment they impose. They could just censure us or slap my wrist at some council meeting. It is not an ideal solution but it would do far less harm than if they split the movement."
(16)

The EETPU ballot paper was accompanied by the TUC's report on the issue, which stressed the threat to unions' independence if the money was taken; a reprint of Hammond's speech to the 1985 TUC; and a further statement from Hammond explaining that "we are balloting our members so that the TUC understands without doubt where the union stands". It was accompanied by an EC recommendation to vote yes. (17) Democracy was a key weapon in the union's arsenal as Hammond's comment to Torode reveals: "Our conference resolutions are not technically binding but we feel morally bound by this one".

Clearly Hammond was confident that the ballot would fully endorse the decision taken at the union's BDC in July to accept the Government money. When the result was announced his confidence proved well founded, for it showed a 9 to 1 majority in favour of accepting Government money (136,800 to 15,339, on a 41% turnout). Just before the result was announced, as if to rub salt into the wound, the union received its first cheque for £168,000 for ballots held between 1982 and 1984.

Would the EETPU and the AUEW (which in its second ballot voted overwhelmingly to accept Government money) now be expelled from the TUC? There were only two options that the General Council had - start expulsion proceedings or admit that the Wembley principles were now untenable. There were no signs whatsoever that the electricians and engineers were going to back down on the issue. Hammond was blasé about the prospect of expulsion:

"If we made a cold calculation, we would have more members if we were outside the TUC than inside." (18)

Meanwhile Laird openly rebuked the General Council in the February 1986 edition of his union's journal in an article entitled the "TUC versus the members". Laird needn't have bothered, as the TUC withdrew its threat to expel the EETPU and AUEW in late December, and voted by 39 votes to 6 to hold a special TUC in February to officially reverse its position on public funding of union ballots. This climbdown was overshadowed by the furore that surrounded another inter-union dispute that surfaced at the beginning of 1986 - the Wapping dispute. Here again the EETPU was at the centre of the row and once again faced expulsion from the TUC. Early in February the union was found guilty of five of the seven charges laid against it by the TUC over its conduct at the News International plant and threatened with expulsion if it did not mend its ways (see next chapter).

So the ballot money debacle ended quietly. The Wapping affair tended to distract attention from the fact that the Wembley principles were about to be openly ditched by the TUC, the key moves in that direction being the TUC Special Congress to discuss "positive rights" in February 1986 and the publication of the joint TUC/Labour Party policy statement *People at work: new rights, new*

responsibilities. The document was in effect a declaration of surrender in the face of the attacks on internal union democracy contained in the 1984 Trade Union Act, which were deemed to be too popular to abandon in the run up to the General Election. As the *Financial Times* commented:

"The Labour leaders were so set on keeping balloting that there was a belief in the unions that Labour would retain a wider membership franchise in union affairs with or without union agreement if necessary...The unions have little choice. Mr Kinnock is effectively facing them with an ultimatum: accept this, for if you do not, I am finished for this election, so is Labour and so are you. If you do, we stand a chance." (19)

However there was still some unease amongst sections of the trade union movement about this open capitulation to the Conservative philosophy of "ballot democracy" (and even as late as April 1986 the TUC was still for some reason issuing guidelines recommending that unions stick to existing policy rather than comply with the Tory anti-union law). This unease manifested itself at the 1986 TUC around a particular aspect of union democracy that some trade unionists still, it seemed, believed was sacrosanct.

The 1986 TUC

It was not the open abandonment of the Wembley decisions, nor the acceptance of the provisions of the 1984 Trade Union Act which stipulated that voting members of union executives must be elected by secret postal ballot that was the cause of unease in the run up to the Congress. What was now the focus of the ballot controversy was a motion submitted by the Communication workers (UCW) that, in line with the *People at Work* document, called for the endorsement of pre-strike ballots. (We are talking about a formal policy which endorses the use of pre-strike ballots not informal acceptance. The latter position had been endorsed by Willis as far back as July 1985 at the NUR Conference in Ayr, when he had said that the Wembley principles did not preclude pre-strike ballots). Late in

August the TUC leaders agreed a compromise in an effort, the *Guardian* reported, "to avoid an embarrassing situation for the Labour leader, Mr Neil Kinnock". The original UCW motion called for members to be given a "right to have an individual secret ballot before being asked to participate in industrial action". Under the amendment, engineered by Ron Todd of the T&GWU, a slightly more flexible approach to pre-strike ballots, so as to allow for spontaneous strikes for instance, was agreed upon. What was not in dispute was the principle of pre-strike ballots as Todd confirmed after the August meeting: "The amendment I sought to put forward questioned just one small facet of the UCW motion". (20) Todd, however, did not see his actions as a climbdown let alone a complete abandonment of opposition to the anti-union legislation. Instead he argued that the TUC/Labour Party proposals on ballots were different in kind from the Conservative provisions:

"The joint statement proposes that general principles should be laid down for inclusion in union rule-books based on a right for union members to have a secret ballot on decisions relating to strikes, and for the method of election of union executives to be based on a system of secret ballots.

This is not the same as the Tory legislation which would be scrapped. We are not talking of a Tory-style 'pre-strike ballot'. It would be a ballot *in relation to* a strike. This wording recognises the circumstances of spontaneous action. In particular, there will be no possibility of employers taking legal action on this issue." (21)

During the debate at Congress only the NUM and TASS opposed the pre-strike ballots compromise motion, arguing that any state interference in the internal affairs of trade unions should be fought. Significantly, the EETPU did not intervene in the debate. They didn't need to. For the speeches from left and right at the Congress on this issue were fully in accord with what they had been preaching throughout the period of TUC opposition to the Government's "ballot only" conception of trade union democracy.

That the Wembley principles had collapsed and the provisions of the 1984 Trade Union Act had been accepted was only seen as a defeat for union democracy by a few. The editorial in the *Guardian* the day after the debate typifies not only the view of the press and the political parties, but also the majority of the unions affiliated to the TUC:

"The outcome was decisive. No card vote was needed to show that defenders of the ballot had won. Had it gone the other way, Congress would have rightly been slated for ordaining a retreat from democracy." (22)

The substance of the compromise motion was eventually enshrined in the Labour Party's 1987 General Election manifesto, *Britain will win* (in Scotland, *Scotland will win*), where the Party promised to provide a:

"statutory framework of measures to underpin the participative rights of union members, for example by laying down general principles for inclusion in union rule books. These will be based on a right for union members to have a secret ballot on decisions relating to strikes, and for the method of election of union executives to be based on a system of secret ballots." (23)

Does the "triumph" of EETPU type "ballot democracy" (ie. a union democracy based largely on the secret postal ballot) mean that the classical mix of delegatory and representative democracy that has characterised the internal workings of trade unions for over a century is now on the wane or even finished?

The triumph of ballot democracy?

Secret postal ballots have long been a feature of trade union democracy, but they have never been its cornerstone. The secret postal ballot has traditionally been just one method out of many by which the rank-and-file can express their views, elect their leadership, and decide on particular courses of action that the

union should take. Secret ballots also take place at branch, District and Area level, and at the various conferences that the unions hold. In short, the ways of voting in trade unions are as complex and diverse as the history and traditions of each particular union, and this diversity is reflected in their rule books. Workplace union democracy also takes various forms, but a show of hands has been the traditional way of electing representatives and taking decisions relating to strike action. So prior to the introduction of the 1984 Trade Union Act, union democracy could be characterised as a classical mix of representative and "primitive" forms of democracy. (24) Have things changed?

Besides the unions' political funds, the 1984 Act honed in on two particular areas of union democracy - pre-strike ballots and the election of union executives. Before 1984, according to one survey of 102 unions, 65 had some form of provision for strike ballots, with 25 unions requiring a ballot of members before an official strike was called. By contrast, in 37 unions the responsibility for calling national strikes rested with the national executive. Only 6 unions made provision for the use of postal ballots for the consideration of strike action, although a further 8 unions had provisions for the use of qualified postal ballot procedures. Another pre-1984 survey also highlights the various provisions for local and national industrial action that are set down in union rule books, but states that "the number of unions requiring ballots before calling industrial action...is small". (25) If we look at how unions elected their national executives prior to 1984 we find a similar mix of electoral methods. The 65 unions examined by Undy and Martin that used a membership vote to elect their executives accounted in 1980 for 61% of the TUC's membership. They comment:

"Among this group, 9 unions use a full postal and 6 a half postal ballot. This represents the largest number of unions using postal ballots in any of the elections discussed, and accounts for 2,080,982 or 17% of the total membership surveyed. Nevertheless, the branch vote is still the most frequently used method, with 13

unions using a ballot and 4 a show of hands. Among the 22 unions choosing their executive at the national conference, 19 hold a ballot and 1 a postal ballot. In this body of unions 6 allow their delegates to cast a block branch vote."

(26)

Tables 4 and 5 summarize the pre-1984 position with regard to those unions who were required by rule to use secret *postal* ballots as part of their internal democracy.

TABLE 4. Postal ballots and elections

<u>Office</u>	<u>No. of unions using postal ballot</u>
General Secretary	8
President/chairman	10
Treasurer	6
Full-time officers	5
Executive committees	15

TABLE 5. Postal ballots and decisions

<u>Decisions</u>	<u>No. of unions with rules requiring postal ballots.</u>
Reference back	-
National strikes	3
Local strikes	1
Rule changes	4

Source: R.Undy and R. Martin, Ballots and Trade Union Democracy, Blackwell, Oxford, 1984, p.173

As we can see only a small number of TUC unions were required by rule to use such ballots. With the implementation of the 1984 Act all this changed.

The 1986 report of the Government's Certification Officer showed that only 4 unions had failed to fully comply with the provisions of the 1984 Act requiring union executives to be elected by secret ballots. All four of the unions, the report states, "agreed to remedy the breaches in question". In other words, all trade unions had, or were in the process of, complying with the

internal balloting provisions of the 1984 Trade Union Act. The report also noted that there had been 40 applications for Government money for ballots, a rise of 14 compared to 1985. Of the unions, 15 were TUC affiliates, 13 of them applying for the first time. During 1987 42 unions applied for money, nevertheless the majority of TUC affiliates are still not claiming Government money for their ballots (the EETPU received £170,845.59 costs in 1987, second only in terms of amount to the AUEW). (27) On pre-strike ballots the 1986 ACAS annual report states:

"We reported last year that we had become aware of 94 such ballots in the 15 months to the end of December 1985, including some in unions that had long balloted their members before taking industrial action. 1986 saw a considerable quickening of pace; no fewer than 152 ballots came to our attention...By the end of 1986 the Service had therefore become aware of a total of 246 such cases, of which 189 resulted in a majority in favour of action, 54 against and three were tied." (28)

The ACAS report, like the report of the Certification Officer, also notes a willingness by trade unions to co-operate with the legislation:

"Over the year we noted that many were making amendments to their rules to bring them within the law and a number were making increasing use of postal balloting methods." (29)

This shift towards postal balloting was, however, not enough for the leadership of the EETPU. According to Chapple the amendments to the original Trade Union Bill proposed by Tom King, the Employment Secretary, amounted to a "Cheats Charter". (30) What infuriated Chapple and the union leadership so much was the following clause of the Bill:

"a presumption that ballots will be postal unless the union is satisfied that workplace ballots will in its circumstances meet all the requirements of secrecy, convenience and freedom from interference or constraint." (31)

Paddy McMahon, EETPU National Officer, made it clear in an article in *Contact* entitled NO WAY TO BEAT THE FRAUDSTERS, just what the implications of such "escape clauses" were:

"The 1984 Act makes 'workplace' and 'semi-postal' ballots legal. The supervision and conduct of such ballots will still be in the hands of the Left. There is ample evidence of discrepancy between such ballots and membership opinion. Are we being asked to believe that the 'red guards' seen on picket duty in the NGA and NUM strikes on our screens are as impartial in ballot distribution as the Post Office?

That such ballots, by their very nature, cannot be secret, or free from interference, and are wide open to malpractice should be self evident to anyone who has taken the trouble to study the matter at first hand." (32)

Only by a system of secret postal balloting supervised by the Electoral Reform Society could full union democracy be secured, argued the EETPU. With the publication in February 1987 of the Government's Green Paper, *Trade Unions and Their Members* (which became the Employment Bill in October 1987), it seems almost certain that the independently supervised full secret postal balloting system, for the election of all members of union executives, that the EETPU has been arguing for since 1962 will now be implemented. For the Green Paper concludes:

"The Government considers that there is justification for requiring unions to use fully postal voting for elections to the principal executive committees and for political fund ballots." (33)

Nevertheless, the full postal ballot will not be enforced for pre-strike ballots because: "it is sometimes much less suitable for strike ballots, for which the issues can be of immediate concern and speed of decision making of the essence", although further legal measures will be taken against unions that do not hold a pre-strike ballot, and it seems that the linking up of individual workplace ballots for strike action (although the workplaces belong

to the same company) will be outlawed. Moreover, "the right of the individual to choose to go to work despite a call to take industrial action is an essential freedom". So even where a majority vote for strike action in a single workplace, those who do not wish to strike would be given the right to continue working and would be legally free from any disciplinary action taken by the union. Even sections of the CBI thought that this latter proposal was a bit much and likely to discredit the Government's "ballot democracy". And at the Conservative Trade Unionists Conference held in November 1987, the vast majority of delegates voted against this clause of the Employment Bill.

Despite the shift to secret ballots that the 1984 Trade Union Act has caused, then, we can see that there has not as yet been a complete move to the secret *postal* ballot. Trade union democracy might be viewed by the general public, the Government, and by the majority of trade unionists, in terms of the secret postal ballot, but the reality, both in terms of the existing legislation and the actual practice of trade unionists, is a little more complex. Workplace secret ballots are still legal, and so there is still scope for collective discussion and debate.

More alarming still for those who view union democracy solely or largely in terms of ballots, there is evidence to show that trade unionists are still ignoring the law. The sobering fact remains, says an Institute of Personnel Management booklet, that

"a very high proportion of stoppages and overtime bans take place *without* a ballot. A survey in November 1986 reported that in a sample of 95 workplaces where industrial action had taken place within the past two years, only three reported having ballots beforehand!" (34)

Even more "sobering" is the ACAS Report for 1986. They report that the 152 pre-strike ballots that took place in 1986 remain small when compared to the 1,030 officially recorded stoppages which took place in the same year. (35) In other words, the vast majority of officially recorded stoppages still take place without any ballot being held beforehand. This does not mean, of course, that the membership of the unions involved did not vote on strike action,

but rather that they made their decisions at mass or section meetings by a show of hands.

The other problem with the pre-strike ballots, as far as the employers are concerned that is, is that they tend heavily in favour of industrial action. For example, ACAS records that of the 246 pre-strike ballots that they were aware of by the end of 1986, 189 went in favour of industrial action, although only in 20 cases did any industrial action follow. So the figures suggest that the mere threat of a strike may force an employer to reconsider his position. Or as ACAS puts it: "trade union officials are coming to see ballots before industrial action as a permanent part of the negotiating machine" (36) Seen in another light, this form of negotiating ploy could be said to increase the power of the officials over the rank-and-file while at the same time reinforcing the view that union democracy is all about secret ballots.

Ballot democracy versus oligarchy

Secret postal balloting, it is argued, is more democratic than other forms of voting because it enables many more union members to participate in their union's affairs. As a consequence the rank-and-file are able to exert a greater power and control over their union leaderships. This was the basis of the Conservative Party's claim that they were giving the unions back to their members, and it is also the claim of the EETPU leadership. If this is correct, we should see some undermining of what Michels referred to as the tendency of trade union leaders "to rule democratic organizations on oligarchic lines". (37)

Firstly, though, what of the claim that secret postal ballots increase membership participation/democracy. Undy and Martin write:

"If the concern is for the highest degree of participation, the workplace ballot should be encouraged....if the quest is for secrecy then postal ballots which do not require the voter's signature are probably the most effective.."

(38)

A pamphlet produced by the Labour Research Department confirms this view:

"There is a significant amount of evidence to show that more people get the chance to vote if the ballot is at the workplace. An analysis of the political fund ballots 1984-86 showed that those unions which co-ordinated their ballot in the workplace had turnouts on average 30% higher than those using postal ballots.

The EETPU is one of the unions whose voting system is favoured by the government but in the political fund ballot votes they came 28th out of 38 in terms of turnout. In fact only two unions using workplace ballots got less than a 50% turnout while only one postal ballot achieved the 50% plus figure - and it had a national membership of just over 1,000, so that it was hardly representative of unions as a whole. Five out of the six fully postal ballots occupied the bottom five places in terms of turnout." (39)

The EETPU's turnout of 46.5% in the political fund ballot was the highest in the union's history, but in comparison with other unions it was low. This low turnout cannot be explained in terms of its commitment to the retention of the fund, since the union campaigned as vigorously as any union for a YES vote. In the June 1985 edition of *Contact*, the front page, a full inside page article by Hammond, and the centre page spread were all devoted to the reasons why the political fund should be maintained. Neither were the leadership assured of the result they desired. A poll conducted at the end of February 1985 showed that only 36% of EETPU members would vote for the retention of the levy, while 50% said they would not. (40) So there was no complacency on the leadership's side. When the result was declared in August, 140,913 (84%) had voted for the retention of the fund and 26,830 (16%) against.

Clearly then workplace ballots were the main reason for the differing participation rates. If this is the case, why do the EETPU object to such ballots? We would argue that underlying the EETPU's (and the Government's) conception of union democracy is the belief that given the chance to vote by the "comfort of their own

firesides" the "apathetic majority" of union members will support "moderate" candidates for union office and equally "moderate" policies, and in so doing will isolate the "militant" minority of union activists. The EETPU and the Government might be surprised to know that their reasoning is based on sound Gramscian principles. One might almost say of the "active man-in-the-mass", wrote Gramsci:

"...that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with his fellow workers...and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed." (41)

Secret postal ballots tend, we would argue, to reinforce the dominant or "verbal" consciousness of trade unionists as they vote individually and in the isolation of their homes and away from the debate that can be generated around a workplace ballot. Or as the Green Paper put it: "there is...scope in a workplace ballot for unduly pressuring voters to influence their choice of candidate". (42) There is nothing hard and fast about this, as workplace debate can result in the election of supporters of the status quo just as much as postal ballots can; and postal ballots can, of course lead to the election of left-wing leaders. But, generally speaking, right-wing unions are the foremost advocates of the secret postal ballot, and left-wing unions of branch or workplace balloting.

In the summer of 1984, the EETPU and T&GWU exchanged heated views in the letters column of the *Financial Times* about the relative merits of workplace and secret postal balloting. The exchange had been sparked off by an article by Philip Bassett, who had suggested that the high turnout in the T&GWU election for a new General Secretary to succeed Moss Evans gave support to the argument that, "postal ballots...are not necessarily more effective than workplace ballots". (43) McMahon, for the EETPU, replied:

"At every stage in the election procedure in the Transport and General Workers' system it is wide open to abuse.....Comparing such workplace elections favourably against the postal

balloting system in the EETPU, where the only factor taken into account is the alleged higher turnout in the former, without regard to any of the other essential considerations, is misleading in the extreme." (44)

Referring to the 30% turnout in the EETPU election for General Secretary, McMahon made his point even clearer in a further letter to the *Financial Times*:

"We can be sure that the 30% membership votes counted actually voted. The trouble with the T&GWU election is that no-one can say with any certainty if even 10% actually voted." (45)

The EETPU seemed vindicated when early in 1985 a ballot-rigging scandal rocked the T&GWU. There were numerous allegations from within the T&GWU of alleged irregularities in the election of the new General Secretary, Ron Todd. This was the same election that had sparked off the EETPU/T&GWU correspondence in the *Financial Times*. McMahon's point seemed graphically confirmed. Editorials were now appearing in *The Times* on the subject. Bernard Levin was deeply concerned about the corruption of Rousseau's principle of the General Will and the prospect of the "ballot riggers" repeating their performance in the proposed re-run election. Levin's main concern was the same as McMahon's:

"...as an indictment of the Government's failure to legislate for direct postal ballots, and of its refusal to listen to those who pointed out that workplace ballots would be rigged in one way or another (or both), it could not be more complete or more instructive." (46)

Todd doubled his majority in the re-run election. This did not satisfy the EETPU. Chapple, writing in his weekly column for the *Daily Mail*, expressed the general attitude of the union to Todd's second victory:

"Well, it's over. Communist backed Ron Todd has won the second cardboard box election...And that, say most people, is that. Maybe last year's ballot was rigged, but now it's all OK

and above board. Me, I'm not so sure.....Throughout the latest ballot I've continued to receive letters of complaint from individual T&GWU members about the way the election was being run....." (47)

So, according to the EETPU, any claims that workplace ballots allow more union members to participate in the internal democracy of their unions are not to be taken seriously because the whole system is open to corruption anyway. There is no escape from this logic, but two things are worth noting. Firstly, in its Green Paper, *Trade Unions and Their Members*, the Government itself says of the T&GWU affair, and the more recent CPSA "ballot rigging" allegations, "in neither case were claims of widespread ballot rigging upheld". The Green Paper, along with other studies, also notes that the postal balloting system is open to corruption; for example, by withholding ballot papers from those entitled to vote and "by manipulating the membership register". (48) Secondly, the EETPU are quite prepared to accept the results of workplace ballots in other unions when they agree with the results. There was not a murmur from the union over the "suspiciously high" workplace returns in the political fund elections.

Purged of corruption as it is supposed to be, does the electoral system used by the EETPU allow the rank-and-file any more control over its own bureaucracy than in unions where such a system is not employed? The simple answer is no, quite the reverse. To reiterate some of the points made in previous chapters. Firstly, there are very few occasions on which the rank-and-file can actually vote, since all the full-time officials are now appointed, and only the Executive Council is elected. Ironically, then, given all the talk about secret postal balloting, elections are not a major feature of EETPU internal democracy. Secondly, the other forums for discussion in the union, (the branches, the BDC, the Industrial Conferences) are just that, forums for discussion, they have no constitutional authority that binds the leadership to their decisions. Other unions, which combine postal and workplace balloting, which have constitutions that make conference decisions binding, and which elect union officials, are far more likely to be open to rank-and-file pressure on the leadership. It is no accident

that the only trade union in Britain which has not seen major shifts from left to right and from right to left on its leading body in the past 25 years is the EETPU. Postal balloting in the EETPU far from increasing democracy in the union has led to, in the immortal words of Lord Hailsham, an "elective dictatorship". The veneer of democracy that postal balloting allows distracts from the very undemocratic nature of the rest of the union's internal structure.

In Michelian terms, the sole reliance on secret postal balloting in the EETPU has strengthened "the authoritative character of the leaders and their tendency to rule democratic organizations on oligarchic lines". Where postal balloting is the cornerstone of a union's democracy then, we would argue, that oligarchic control is likely to be increased and the democratic countervailing tendencies severely decreased. Fairbrother, writing of the EETPU and AUEW, makes the point very clearly:

"In both these unions the introduction of postal ballots has provided for their effective demobilisation as collective organisations. At all levels of each union there has been a gradual erosion of the institutions for the collective participation and engagement of members in union activity. Even the sovereignty of conference, the occasion when representatives engage in collective decision-making, has been questioned. In short, the introduction of postal ballots is a part of a process of undermining collective organisation and action." (49)

This erosion of rank-and-file organization has important implications for our assessment of the Michels/Gouldner thesis. For Hyman's description of Michels' model as "overdetermined" was premised on the fact that Michels failed to take account of such countervailing pressures as "shop-floor trade unionism" and "workplace organization", which acted as conduits for rank-and-file militancy in the 1970s. Because of these forms of organization, writes Hyman, "the rank-and-file may be able to exert considerable influence over (or act independently of) leadership policies and

actions". (50) With the waning of rank-and-file militancy and organization (in comparison to the '70s) in the 1980s, and the defensive nature of that militancy when it does explode, we see the Thatcher Government's largely successful attempt to substitute that surrogate for union democracy - the secret postal ballot. The countervailing force of shop-floor trade unionism and the active union democracy that accompanied it now no longer exist as an effective check on the power of the union bureaucracies. Of course, this power to check and by-pass the union bureaucracies in the 1970s was used actively on relatively few occasions. It remained a potential power for most of the time, not least because workers could achieve their ends without coming into contact with their union leadership. On top of this, in the EETPU the forums within the union where the rank-and-file could organise to exert pressure on the bureaucracy have, as we have seen, been eroded to such a degree that they are now mere shadows of the organizations they once were in the 1960s. Not surprisingly therefore, it is in this union that postal balloting is most extensive and most vigorously defended.

However, the use of ballots in general as a means of maintaining bureaucratic control over the rank-and-file is not just the preserve of the right-wing EETPU. In 1987 the Yorkshire NUM forced the Frickley miners back to work with the argument that the result of the national ballot would decide how the union would fight the NCB's disciplinary code. The Frickley miners utilised a different form of union democracy, mass meetings and the spreading of the strike through picketing. At about the same time the T&GWU attempted to get Scottish bus drivers back to work before a delegate meeting that was previously arranged to decide on that very issue. The various bus depots voted by a show of hands to stay out and then went on to picket out other depots. In both these cases we see the type of democracy that Hyman was referring to, and how, in a small way, it was used to exert rank-and-file control over the union bureaucracies.

Overall, though, we can say that there has been a general shift towards the conception of trade union democracy championed by the EETPU, or, more accurately, a shift towards the balloting methods employed by the EETPU. Even so, the secret *postal* ballot

has still not been universally adopted, and as the number of industrial disputes that have taken place without pre-strike ballots highlights, the shift in this particular area is liable to prove very fragile given an upsurge of trade union militancy. So although the shift towards "ballot democracy" has tended to reinforce the oligarchical tendencies in trade unions, the countervailing democratic tendencies are still clearly present and active.

CHAPTER TEN

THE EETPU AND THE WAPPING DISPUTE

The EETPU's response to the "crisis" of trade unionism that we discussed in the previous chapter could not be better highlighted than by the Wapping dispute. The dispute not only showed how far the union was prepared to go to break into new areas of employment in an attempt to arrest the decline in its membership, but the type of agreement that it was prepared to negotiate with News International (NI) also demonstrated quite clearly the nature of what was being called its "new unionism", and what we would call its old fashioned business unionism. Moreover, because of the secrecy surrounding the union's operation at Wapping there was absolutely no consultation with the membership at any level about what was going on (even the members recruited to work at Wapping). Secret operations were totally incompatible with any form of internal democracy. It was only when the union's actions became public knowledge that the leadership issued a circular to all branches stating its case. This would seem to confirm Michels assertion that "every system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy". (1) Yet, as one commentator sympathetic to the EETPU remarked:

"There is no doubt that the EETPU's close involvement with the recruitment of labour for the Murdoch Wapping plant set back the EETPU's drive within the TUC for the 'new unionism'. And privately electricians' leaders recognise that." (2)

Such a "set back" suggests that there were forces operating against the EETPU "oligarchy". In this chapter we shall examine the union's involvement with NI and the actions of those forces that set the union back - the TUC, the internal opposition and, most damagingly of all, the EETPU members within the Wapping plant itself.

On 5 February 1987, the Executive Council of SOGAT '82 voted by a majority of 23 to 9 to call off the year long dispute at Rupert Murdoch's News International plant at Wapping in the East End of

London. The following day the other main print union involved in the dispute, the NGA, also ended its support for the strike. Nevertheless, the picketing of the Wapping plant by a small number of the 5000 sacked print workers continued, and at the weekend the familiar demonstration of about 2000 print workers and their supporters gathered outside the plant. It was a bitter dispute, which ended with those workers that were still on strike accusing the leadership of the print unions of leading them into a dead-end with a strategy that was centred on a public boycott of News International's papers and a desire to win over public opinion, and, when that failed, of "selling them out". For its part, the print leadership could point to the ineffectiveness of the "alternative" strategy of mass pickets in stopping the distribution of the "scab" papers, as well as the scenes of violence which "alienated" public opinion. Neither side seriously considered pulling the rest of Fleet Street out on strike. Of course there were a host of other factors that worked against the print unions: in particular, the use of the law to restrict the pickets to 6 "official" strikers; the constant threat of sequestration hanging over the union funds; the massive police operation which ensured that Rupert Murdoch's papers could leave the plant; and above all, perhaps, the lack of solidarity from other trade unionists - the T&GWU drivers who crashed through the picket lines, the SOGAT members who distributed the "scab" papers, and the trade unionists who continued to work behind the barbed wire at Wapping.

Of all the trade unionists who worked behind the wire, the EETPU members were the most vilified by the strikers, the print unions, and other trade unionists. The EETPU was castigated as the "enemy within", the fifth column of open collaborators who blatantly ignored the unwritten, as well as some of the written, principles upon which trade unionism was founded. It was they, it was claimed, who had conspired with News International to replace the sacked printworkers with their own members. Let us see how true these accusations are.

Chronicle of a dispute foretold

That a showdown between the print unions and the newspaper owners was on the way had been glaringly apparent since the defeat of the NGA in December 1983. Then, Eddie Shah, owner of the *Stockport Messenger*, employed non-union labour to work on new technology. Using the Government's anti-union laws, and after a major climbdown by the TUC, he forced the NGA to back down over the issue. Shah's victory showed that the powerful NGA could be beaten, and by a small employer at that. The following year there were a host of other disputes and compromises centred on the introduction of new technology. A disturbing feature of many of these disputes was the inter-union conflict over the jobs remaining after the new technology was introduced. In July 1985, the EETPU negotiated an outline single-union, "strike-free" deal with Shah, in preparation for the launch in 1986 of his new daily paper, *Today*. The *Times* reported on the significance of the deal:

"The 'no-strike' outline deal....will prove to be a watershed in the history of the British newspaper industry...The agreement not only excludes traditional print unions, except for journalists, but also cuts a swathe through the time-honoured practices on national newspapers of strict job demarcation, high manning and tight union control of recruitment.

Meanwhile Fleet Street's newspaper proprietors have already made discreet inquiries about the new agreement, especially those planning new publications on greenfield sites, where the EETPU can sign accords without foul (sic) of the Bridlington rule." (3)

Reporting on Murdoch's possible interest in the Shah deal, the *Economist* said that he too was planning a new national daily and "is already talking to the EETPU". (4) Murdoch was also talking to SOGAT, who in July 1985 offered him a deal similar to the one that the EETPU had negotiated with Shah, in this case for the production of the *Sun* and the *News of the World* at Murdoch's new plant at Wapping. (5)

So, Murdoch's plans to move to Wapping and produce a Scottish edition of the *Sun* from Kinning Park in Glasgow had been known to the print unions for some time. As early as October 1984 the unions had discussed with Murdoch the various stumbling blocks to Wapping. However,

"By Christmas that year, Murdoch was frustrated. He had failed to reach agreement with the print unions...Around this time, an executive in London picked up on a phrase Murdoch had used one Saturday night in Gray's Inn Road. It was about making a 'dash for freedom' " (6)

Murdoch's "dash for freedom" was to be facilitated by the EETPU. Early in 1985 NI began secret talks with national officers of the EETPU about the manning of the London and Glasgow plants. But none of this was to become totally clear until October 1986. In the meantime, although he had already decided on his future course of action, Murdoch continued his talks with the print unions.

However, Murdoch's real intentions for the Wapping plant were revealed for the first time in September 1985, when *Socialist Worker* published the following exclusive story:

"A local office of the EETPU is being used to recruit workers for Rupert Murdoch's new printing plant in Wapping, East London. There are fears that this force could be used to replace existing printers at the *Sun* and *News of the World*...

Ginger Pearse, the Southampton EETPU branch chairman, told *Socialist Worker*: 'Men are queueing up in the area office. It's a recruiting centre. Over 500 people have been interviewed and recruited but our branch has not been informed about these jobs, nor, as far as I know, have any other branches in the area'

The story goes on to describe the role of EETPU officials in the recruitment process:

"Electricians' union officials are not only recruiting labour for Rupert Murdoch's Wapping

presses, they are vetting applicants for the job. People seeking work at Wapping must first apply through the EETPU Southampton office, where they must join the EETPU if they are not already members...

Those picked by the Southampton office must then travel to London for a second interview. This takes place at South Bank House...Black Prince Road, near Waterloo station. One of the first questions asked is: 'Are you prepared to cross picket lines?' Successful candidates proceed to a third interview...where they meet members of the Murdoch management team.

Those offered jobs will receive £12,000 during a three month training period, rising to around £16,000 when training is complete. In addition, six weeks holiday, a free canteen and private health care have been offered..." (7)

A similar process of recruitment took place for the Kinning Park plant in Glasgow, with local EETPU official Pat O' Hanlon actually sitting in on the management interviews. (8) The writing was clearly on the wall, but the print unions still thought they could come to a deal with Murdoch. Murdoch, however, had no intention whatsoever of coming to a deal. As a letter from Geoffrey Richards, News International's solicitor, leaked to the *Morning Star* in February 1986, revealed, the company's aim all along was to get rid of the 5000 workers without paying redundancy money. (9)

Murdoch's strategy, then, was to make the print unions an offer that they had to refuse. A leaflet produced by the print unions at the height of the dispute lists the 12 points of a proposed agreement that Murdoch presented to the unions on 21 November 1985:

- "1 No recognition of chapels or branches, and no negotiations at local level.
- 2 No strikes 'or other industrial action' for any reason whatever'.

3 Immediate dismissal for anyone taking part in a strike or industrial action - with no right of appeal.

4 Union officials have 'a special duty to enforce this section' of the agreement.

5 No closed shop.

6 Union representatives can be removed from office by management issuing a written warning.

7 No union recognition for supervisors and management grades.

8 Complete flexibility of working with no demarcation lines.

9 No job security - complete freedom of management to change methods of working.

10 No minimum staffing levels.

11 Management's 'exclusive right to manage'...to select people for jobs, 'classify and reclassify' people, 'hire, promote, demote and transfer employees as required'. They will also 'suspend, discipline, dismiss, lay off employees from work' as they see fit.

12 Legally binding contracts.

'Would you give your management this agreement?" (10)

Incredibly the print unions organized no resistance to NI, believing that they could still strike a bargain with Murdoch over the production of his existing titles, and what turned out to be the bogus new evening paper the *London Post*, at the new Wapping site. Murdoch himself later admitted that if the print unions had come out on strike before Christmas, when preparations were less advanced at Wapping and pre-Christmas advertising in his papers was heavy, then it would have been effective. (11)

Meanwhile Murdoch continued his preparations at Wapping and set a Christmas eve deadline by which time negotiations on the November agreement had to be complete. The deadline passed and there was no settlement. On 19 January, a TUC delegation headed by Norman Willis, presented a draft agreement, agreed with the print unions, to NI that gave Murdoch practically everything he wanted,

including binding arbitration and a "strike free" clause and a "common commitment to profitability, efficiency, harmonious relations, productivity and flexibility, and job security". (12) What the print unions were prepared to offer NI, in other words, was a deal that was very similar to the ones that the EETPU had been signing for the previous five years. The biggest shock for the print unions was that Murdoch rejected their unprecedented offer. (13) The die was cast - the unions had no option but to fight News International.

On 24 January 1986, printworkers at *The Sun*, *News of the World*, *The Times*, and the *Sunday Times*, came out on indefinite strike following overwhelming majorities in secret ballots (82% of SOGAT members balloted voted for strike action: 3,534 to 752, and 843 to 117 in the NGA). The next day the first lorries came down the floodlit ramp at Wapping. There were technical hitches, but 3 million copies of the *News of the World* were printed at Wapping and 750,000 at Kinning Park (2 million down on the Fleet Street run). Wapping also produced 1.2 million copies of the *Sunday Times*, only 150,000 down. (14) And these first ever non-union national newspapers were produced with the full support of only one trade union - the EETPU.

The enemy within

Knowledge of the EETPU's recruiting drive for the Wapping plant was made public after Ginger Pearse, the branch chairman of the Southampton EETPU, addressed a meeting organized by SWP Fleet Street print workers in September 1985, and in the subsequent story that appeared in *Socialist Worker*. Two weeks after the meeting Pearse was invited by NGA General Secretary Tony Dubbins to the union's regional office in London. Pearse passed on all he knew about the number of people going to London, the jobs they were doing and the way they had been recruited. A similar process of recruitment was revealed in Glasgow when Jimmy Hay, a maintenance engineer and AUEW member who had been unemployed for two years, left his job at Murdoch's Kinning Park plant after less than forty-eight hours and informed his District Secretary about the type of work he was expected to do. There were no exact numbers

given of how many EETPU members were recruited for the Wapping and Glasgow plants, but the figure that was most often mentioned was 500. What was clear, however, was that the Area Secretary of the EETPU in Southampton, Mick Scanlon, and an EETPU full-time official in Glasgow, Pat O'Hanlon, had acted as recruiting agents for News International and even attended the vetting interviews. It was on the basis of the Southampton and Glasgow evidence that the print unions along with the AUEW lodged, on 11 December 1985, a complaint to the TUC against the EETPU. On 22 January 1986, the print unions made a formal complaint to the General Council of the TUC about the conduct of the EETPU. On 5 February, the EETPU were brought before the GC to give an account of themselves.

The EETPU's response, as we shall see, was to deny any knowledge of the activities of their local officials. Even at the time this seemed very unlikely in such a highly centralized union as the EETPU, but this story was eventually blown apart with the publication in October 1986 of Linda Melvern's book *The End of The Street*. Melvern revealed that in April 1985, Tom Rice, National Officer of the EETPU in charge of the print industry, travelled to the USA with Christopher Pole-Carew, the pioneer of non-union papers in Britain and the man who was overseeing Murdoch's Wapping project. There they were shown round a series of newspapers by John Keating, technical director of Murdoch's News America, all of which had the type of working practices that NI wanted to introduce at Wapping. Keating and Rice apparently hit it off, for on subsequent visits to London Keating visited Rice at his home and was shown around the EETPU headquarters and their training school in Kent. Melvern writes:

"This American tour, one executive explained later, was crucial in the planning of Wapping. It had been organised to give Rice a 'general understanding of the modern printing industry'. Another said it was to give Rice an 'overview of the equipment'. From the time of the American visit, Rice and Pole-Carew had regular meetings, generally in anonymous London Hotels, to discuss manning and shift patterns needed for Wapping." (15)

At the TUC disciplinary hearing on 5 February 1986, Rice denied that he or the EETPU had had any illicit connection with Pole-Carew:

"There is no connection with Pole-Carew. All of the unions who associate in the industry were concerned to learn from the press some time in the middle of the year that this person had emerged within the Murdoch empire. All of the unions were asked questions about him and sought to find out information. He did attend one meeting at the request of the unions and explained his role. We, the EETPU, had no contact with Pole-Carew." (16)

Melvorn's book also includes some of the minutes of meetings about Wapping held by News International directors throughout the summer of 1985. One such meeting, on 21 May 1985, provides further evidence of EETPU collusion with NI:

"At the May meeting, Geoffrey Richards, the lawyer, had told executives that any ideas would be 'welcomed on the draft agreement between LP and the EEPTU (sic). This was also mentioned in the agenda of the next meeting: 'London Post/EEPTU draft agreement'." (17)

The General Council meeting of February 1986

In the run up to the TUC meeting the EETPU could hardly be accused of keeping a low profile. Besides constantly declaring that they were unwilling to rule out a single-union, "strike-free" deal with News International, the union announced in early January that they were close to reaching a final agreement with News (UK), Eddie Shah's publishing company. They also risked further TUC disciplinary action when they went ahead with a joint energy seminar with the breakaway Union of Democratic Mineworkers. The NUM decided to lodge a complaint against the EETPU under the TUC's Rule 13 on affiliated unions:

"...it appears to the general council that the activities of the organisation may be

detrimental to the interests of the trade union movement or contrary to the declared principles or declared policy of congress." (18)

And it was under this catch-all disciplinary rule that the print unions were going to press their case against the EETPU, which, if successful, could lead to the eventual expulsion of the union from the TUC.

The print unions' complaint was investigated by the GC of the TUC in a 6 hour long meeting on 30 January 1986. Eric Hammond did not attend the meeting because, so he wrote to Norman Willis, he "feared for his safety". SOGAT and the NGA had prepared a 30 page confidential submission detailing their evidence against the EETPU (it must be remembered that Melvern's disclosures were not known until October 1986, eight months after the TUC hearing and a month after the TUC Congress). Their evidence concerned the recruitment that had taken place at Southampton and Glasgow and leaked manning lists from Wapping. The manning lists from Wapping showed that there were considerably more than the 50 electricians that the EETPU maintained were working in the plant as part of the contract to set up machinery. The evidence also showed that the EETPU were still recruiting people through their local offices, despite Tom Rice telling the print unions as far back as 30 September 1985 that all recruitment had stopped. After hearing the evidence the GC ruled that the EETPU's activities were in contravention of Rule 13. A second meeting was arranged for 5 February, where the EETPU could defend itself against the charges the GC had drawn up.

There were seven specific charges levelled against the EETPU at the meeting on 5 February:

- 1 that they had refused to co-operate with the print unions in making a joint approach to News International and thereby jeopardized the prospect of an all union agreement.
- 2 that they were imperilling the jobs and conditions of other unions' members by helping to produce NI titles.
- 3 that they had helped to recruit workers for the new plants, who took over production jobs previously held by members of other unions.

4 that they helped News International produce a special *Sunday Times* supplement from its Wapping plant on 19 January.

5 that they entered an agreement or arrangement with News International without the consent of other print unions, and contrary to TUC advice.

6 that they had helped with recruitment in exchange for a single-union deal.

7 that they continued to recruit workers for the new plants after giving assurances that they would not.

Eric Hammond, accompanied by Tom Rice, national officer for the print industry, Tom Breakell, the union's President, and Michael Short, the union's lawyer, conducted the hour long defence of the EETPU. In his opening remarks to the General Council Hammond referred to the "notoriety" of the print industry and its resistance to technological change, arguing that it was better to negotiate the introduction of new technology instead of having it imposed. Hammond then turned to the specific allegations about recruitment in Southampton. He said that the national office of the union only knew of the recruitment when Rice reported to the Executive Council on 29 September 1985. From then on the Southampton office gave no further assistance in the recruitment of labour for Wapping. As for the discovery of a Southampton office compliment slip attached to an application form for work at Wapping and dated 8 January 1986, Hammond told the GC that Vivian Seaman, the office secretary, denied that it had been attached by her, claiming that someone else had attached the slip and added the date to "create a misleading impression". Rice had also informed the print unions on 30 September that to the best of his knowledge the Southampton EETPU members working at Wapping were engaged on normal contracting work, installing and commissioning equipment. Hammond dismissed the Glasgow accusations in a similar fashion, saying there was nothing secretive about the activities of their local official, but adding:

"Mr O'Hanlon's activities were carried out on his own initiative and without any consultation with or encouragement from the union's head office". (19)

As to the number of EETPU members working at Wapping Hammond told the TUC he had no idea how many there were. He had asked Rice on 23 January to go to Wapping and find out, but the dispute had started the next day and such a visit would have been misunderstood. However the EETPU had made some "informal enquiries", and in addition to the "approximately 80 members" from Southampton, he believed that about 100 electricians were in the plant, employed by sub-contractors, "who had carried out installation and commissioning work who may have been recruited by London Post (Printers) Ltd". This, he said, had not involved the EETPU in any way. Hammond concluded on this subject:

"There is no way of knowing....whether all of those 180 are members of the union or indeed whether there are other employees at Wapping who, may, for example, have been recruited by word of mouth". (20)

Hammond then turned to the allegation that he considered to be at the heart of the matter:

"The EETPU wishes to state...as categorically as possible that it has not entered into or continued any agreement, arrangement or understanding with News International covering all or part of the operation or groups of employees at Wapping....

Perhaps there was a plot: but I tell you unequivocally that we had no part of it, no knowledge of it." (21)

In the light of Melvern's subsequent revelations this was clearly untrue.

An adjournment followed in which the General Council members studied a 32 page document with 16 appendices that the EETPU had submitted to bolster its defence. In summary the document said:

"The EETPU had only negotiated over the start-up of the *London Post*, the postponed new evening newspaper to be published by NI, and not over the group's existing four titles.

- It had not negotiated in contravention of existing spheres of influence.

- It had not entered into any agreement with NI at Wapping.

- It had no representatives or organisation at Wapping. Some 180 electricians are at Wapping, some of whom it believes are EETPU members. Members of other print unions are also there.

- NI titles are only printed at Wapping because of the strike by the main print unions.

- The local officers at Glasgow and Southampton recruited labour for the plants on their own initiatives, and did so only for the installation and maintenance of machinery.

- the union is not responsible for the actions of its members at Wapping." (22)

The document was also highly critical of the actions of the other print unions in the whole affair. The EETPU said that the print unions had helped to create a "jungle" in Fleet Street over the past 25 years. More specifically, the document said that the joint-union approach to NI was not observed by the print unions themselves, for in November SOGAT had wished to negotiate separately with NI. The document ends:

"Is the general council satisfied that the activities of the EETPU are as detrimental to the interests of the trade union movement as those of SOGAT and the NGA have been over the last 25 years or even in respect of the negotiations of News International? " (23)

During the cross-examination of Hammond it was, surprisingly, the right-wing General Secretaries that pressed him hard on such things as recruitment. For example, Roy Grantham, the General Secretary of the white-collar union APEX, said:

" '...we have been told by you today about the four officials who were party to such recruitment by two plants owned by the same company. Were you saying you had no understanding or agreement in prospect of any kind? It seems very strange.'

Hammond: 'You can put what description you like on it; that is the fact of the matter. We have no arrangement, no understanding, and nor are we seeking one at this moment'." (24)

Ron Todd pursued the point:

" 'The question I would like to know is in August, September, October 1985, whilst there may have been no agreement or no joint understanding, was there knowledge that people were involved in the knowledge of News International intentions...?'

Hammond: 'No there was not...There are things that happen in big organisations which you do not know about. What we are making clear is that as soon as they were complained of we took steps that were necessary to put a stop to it'." (25)

With the cross-examination complete the EETPU delegation left, leaving the General Council to consider the 7 specific charges individually. The EETPU was found guilty of five of the seven charges. They were found not guilty of the charge that they helped in recruitment in exchange for a single-union deal, and not guilty of continuing recruitment after 30 September 1985. The General Council then had to, in the words of Rule 13, "direct the organisation to discontinue such activities forthwith and undertake not to engage therein in the future". There followed a long and heated debate on the GC about the wording of one of the directives that was to be issued to the EETPU. The problem was that if the GC ordered the EETPU to instruct its members working at Wapping to stop work under pain of suspension, they would be asking the union

to act unlawfully under the Government's anti-union legislation. The "softs" on the GC wanted the directive to read that the EETPU should "inform" their members they were engaged in printers' work. The "hards" wanted the EETPU to tell their members at Wapping to "refrain" from undertaking work usually done by printers. To "inform" or tell them to "refrain", that was the question. Eventually the "softs" narrowly won the vote by 15 to 14. (26) Six directives were finally agreed upon by the General Council. The EETPU were directed:

- 1 Not to facilitate further in recruitment of staff for News International.
- 2 Not to recruit into membership of the EETPU any persons employed by News International.
- 3 To inform their members at the Wapping and Glasgow sites of News International that EETPU members are engaged on work that is normally done by members of other print unions.
- 4 Not to enter into any agreement nor to continue any non-contractual arrangement with News International with out the agreement of the print unions or the TUC
- 5 Not to enter into any unilateral negotiations with News International...
- 6 Not to enter into a sole negotiating agreement, union membership agreement or any other form of agreement in any circumstances except as provided for by the TUC. (27)

On 11 February the Executive Council of the EETPU decided to accept the TUC's 6 directives and so, once again, avoided suspension from the TUC.

Victory or defeat for the EETPU?

Both left and right on the TUC General Council agreed that the EETPU had colluded with News International and supplied EETPU members to do work previously done by print workers. The acceptance by the EETPU of the TUC directives seemed to put an end to the matter, but what had changed? For the only directive that could

have challenged the union's role at Wapping would have been one that forced them to instruct their members not to engage in work previously done by printers. Certainly, the TUC directives hampered any future plans that the EETPU might have for the plant, but they did not do anything to stop EETPU members from continuing to work at Wapping and Glasgow. They were, as Peter Paterson wrote in the *Spectator*, "footling directions" that "Mr Hammond would find no difficulty in complying with". Paterson went on to give his analysis of the February GC meeting:

"So what happened at the trial of Mr Hammond was not so much a lack of will on the part of the TUC as a telling example of how life has changed for the trade union movement. The reasons are many: the TUC is hard up and could scarcely afford to lose the contributions of the EETPU; it feared that suspension might provoke Mr Hammond into establishing a rival trade union organisation, using the Nottinghamshire miners, rebellious railwaymen, a sprinkling of no-strike teacher unions and other components of an alternative movement which has been developing in recent years: allies of the electricians from within the TUC's ranks, most notably the engineers, might also have joined them out of anti-Left solidarity; and the calculation was made that an electricians' union on the loose might win more members than it lost.

Overriding any such considerations, however, was fear of the law. No one was certain that, if put to the test, the TUC's constitution could withstand the scrutiny of the courts. And Eric Hammond made it abundantly clear to his judges that were they to opt for suspension he would have no hesitation in mounting a legal challenge at once. So, in the end, the fate of the EETPU was not decided in the time honoured

way by a bunch of union leaders.....but on what
their legal advisors told them to do." (28)

Paterson was essentially correct in his assessment of the reasons why the TUC did not prosecute the EETPU with any great vigour. As he points out, this was in stark contrast to 1971 when the TUC suspended and then expelled more than 20 unions for registering under the Industrial Relations Act. Now obedience to the law was the major concern of the TUC. For, as we have seen, in the course of 1986 the TUC were preparing to drop their formal opposition to the Tory anti-union legislation: they had already dropped any action against the EETPU for accepting Government money for ballots in December 1985; in March a special conference was held which jettisoned the Wembley principles; and in July the new position was codified in a joint TUC/Labour Party document - *People at work: new rights, new responsibilities*. At the 1986 TUC this "new realist" stance was endorsed by Congress and eventually ended up in the Labour Party manifesto of June 1987. In these circumstances, the TUC was hardly likely to pressurize the EETPU into breaking the law by instructing its members not to carry out printers' work. The "footling directions" were designed to scold the EETPU, not to seriously challenge its role in the Wapping affair.

How far the EETPU felt scolded can be gauged from Hammond's comments on the February GC meeting in the April edition of *Contact*:

"I totally rejected the contention that we colluded with News International and were therefore responsible for the unemployment of Fleet Street workers. I said the immediate responsibility for that lay with the bad judgement and incompetent leadership of SOGAT and the NGA..." (29)

That the TUC had let the EETPU off lightly was felt by many trade unionists. It seemed as if the EETPU were the victors, not the print unions. This unease surfaced at the 1986 TUC Congress.

The 1986 TUC Congress

On 28 August the GC of the TUC voted by 30 votes to 12 to ask the NGA to withdraw its motion on the News International dispute, and if the NGA refused to withdraw, then the General Council would oppose the motion. The NGA motion rejected the GC's decision in February, on a 15-14 vote, not to issue a directive to the EETPU requiring them to "inform their members to refrain from undertaking work normally done by members of other print unions". (30) Again, as in February, the main stumbling block to TUC support for the NGA motion was the fear of an injunction - as an NGA briefing paper to the delegates pointed out:

"The incredible point is, that the injunction was not one from an employer, but the threat of one from the electricians' union. It is disgraceful that we find ourselves in a situation where a TUC affiliate found guilty of acting in a manner detrimental to the trade union movement can use the threat of Tory legislation to stop the TUC taking action against them."

The NGA paper called the General Council's position contradictory, for it had already issued an "unlawful" directive when it requested all affiliated organizations not to cross official picket lines at Wapping:

"Any union carrying out this directive could equally be in conflict with the Tory legislation." (31)

Speaking during the debate on the motion Tony Dubbins, NGA General Secretary, modified his union's position in the light of the talks that were then going on with News International. He said that his union was not looking for the expulsion of the EETPU from the TUC, but that they should be told to act as "good trade unionists". He made it clear that he did not expect the TUC to issue a directive to the EETPU instructing their members to stop doing the jobs of other print workers, until, and if, the talks with NI collapsed. Brenda Dean, General Secretary of SOGAT '82, said: "Not to mince words, without the EETPU, Wapping would not

have happened". Hammond, amid shouts of "scab" from sacked printworkers in the public gallery, repeated his union's position - that there was no plot and that the bad judgement of print unions themselves was the cause of the mess at Wapping. Hammond also claimed that the EETPU's presence at Wapping had enabled them to get peace talks restarted, which would not have happened if his members had been out on strike. Norman Willis, arguing against the motion, admitted that the EETPU had acted wrongly:

"There were things that went on there that I regard as unacceptable and the movement would regard as unacceptable. I could see how some of these things arose out of bad practice, and I fear also arose out of bad people, but how do you build on that?" (32)

Nevertheless, he didn't believe the debate would help the negotiations that were then taking place with NI, and he urged the delegates not to press the motion.

To the surprise of many, the NGA motion was carried by 5,823,000 votes to 3,132,000. But as Peter Kellner reported in the *New Statesman*:

"After the debate Willis made it clear to anyone who would listen that he does not intend to do anything as a result of Monday's vote. If there is to be an early end to the dispute, it will be as a result of the negotiations that restarted last week. The TUC debate was irrelevant: the best that can be said is that it did no harm." (33)

Negotiations between the unions and NI did not lead to a settlement of the dispute. The question now was, what action would the TUC take against the EETPU? Congress had censured the General Council for not issuing a firm directive in February, as the "hards" at the meeting had pressed for, that would require the EETPU to "inform their members to refrain" from doing work normally done by printworkers. In plain English, this was interpreted to mean that, providing the talks broke down, the GC would review its February decision and instruct the EETPU to tell its members at Wapping and Glasgow to cease work. However, Willis argued that

decisions made by the GC under disciplinary procedures could not be re-opened. So the print unions next step was to try and get the case re-opened.

Their case was bolstered considerably at the end of October by the publication of *The End of The Street*. Melvern's book totally discredited the position the EETPU leadership had been holding till then, namely, that there had been no collusion at a national level between the union and News International. On 20 November the *Guardian* printed further evidence unearthed by Melvern that showed how Hammond himself had full knowledge of and was involved in Murdoch's plans for Wapping. Melvern had obtained the minutes of a phone call from Murdoch to Pole-Carew, the overseer of the Wapping operation, dated 31 May 1985:

"According to the minute 'KRM' (Mr Murdoch's initials) 'telephoned to say that he had spoken to EH and all was satisfactory. EH was thoroughly prepared to go ahead and also accepted that should there be an emergency need to start without the *London Post*, this would be acceptable to him, even though he would prefer not to do it, given the choice'.

Two independent management sources have confirmed the existence of the minute and that the initials EH do refer to Eric Hammond...

Mr Hammond refused yesterday to make any comment on the minute. The union said that it would reserve its response to any questions raised at the TUC." (34)

Armed with this fresh evidence, the print unions intended to challenge Willis's position at a meeting of the GC on 26 November.

At the meeting the print unions argued that the General Council was bound by the decision of Congress to re-open the case against the EETPU, especially as subsequent events had proved that they had originally been tried on the basis of false evidence. Willis was unmoved:

"No one can be tried, found guilty, punished, and have directions given to them, and then be tried again and given something extra. That's

true whether you are running a club or the Old Bailey"

Did the new evidence that Melvern had uncovered not alter the situation? Willis strongly criticized the EETPU, saying that if the allegations against the union were accurate

"then I should regard the EETPU's conduct as despicable and contrary to just about every trade union principle I have ever believed in."

(35)

He was not, however, prepared to change his position, insisting that the Congress did not have the power to re-open proceedings of this nature.

Hammond told the meeting that the union had acted within the letter and the spirit of the directions issued in February. He accepted, however, that Rice had indeed travelled to the USA in April 1985 with Pole-Carew of NI, as Melvern's book had revealed. But he said that Rice's assertion at the February meeting that neither he nor the union had had any connection with Pole-Carew was taken out of context. In short, the union still categorically denied that they had given the go-ahead for NI to print its titles at Wapping using EETPU members. What about the phone memo which showed that Hammond had given Murdoch the go-ahead to print his newspapers at Wapping? Hammond gave no alternative explanation of this memo.

After a five-hour meeting, the General Council decided by 23 votes to 21 not to proceed with disciplinary action against the EETPU. As far as the TUC were concerned, the case against the Electricians' union was now permanently closed. The wishes of Congress, and the mounting evidence of EETPU collusion with News International, were brushed aside. Why? Because, as a *Guardian* editorial rightly stated, the General Council and its hapless General Secretary never wanted to try the EETPU anyway:

"The EETPU is much too large an affiliate and its harshly effective leader much too key a player within the corridors of non-power at Congress House for it and him to be dealt with peremptorily, nay expelled... What purpose would it serve the entire movement if the General

Council presided over a split in the national centre? What a pre-election gift to set before Queen Maggie! It may be fudge and mudge, brothers,...but at least it keeps the show on the road in the hope of better climes." (36)

Far wider considerations than the livelihoods of 5000 printers were pressing on the General Council when they made their decision - the future of the movement and the forthcoming General Election.

Nevertheless, the Wapping dispute continued, and around Christmas time yet another memo from Pole-Carew appeared like Marley's ghost to haunt Hammond and the General Council. This one, dated 19 August 1985, was addressed to John Cowley, News International's production director at Wapping. It discussed in detail pay rates for the new labour force recruited through the EETPU. It also stated that if employees at Wapping were not encouraged to join the EETPU other production unions "would then be able to challenge the EETPU's position regarding sole bargaining rights. That would not be at all clever". (37) Once again, further proof of the EETPU's detailed involvement with NI had been uncovered, but there was only a deafening silence from the TUC.

Endgame

The dispute was finally called off in February 1987, not by the striking printers who were prepared to continue, and who were not consulted at all about the ending of the strike, but by the leadership of the NGA and SOGAT who considered that any further legal action taken against them would destroy them. Throughout the dispute every newspaper employer took advantage of the print unions' dilemma to introduce new technology and get rid of "surplus labour". Over the previous 18 months there had been some 10,000 redundancies in the print industry, the vast majority of them in that supposed bastion of trade union strength and power, Fleet Street. Undoubtedly, the Wapping dispute broke the power of the Fleet Street unions. The irony is, that power was never fully utilised in the course of the dispute, not only to stop Murdoch in his tracks, but to stop the negotiating away of thousands of jobs by Dean and Dubbins. During the course of the dispute itself, for

example, the print unions agreed to 2,500 redundancies at the *Daily Express*, and 1000 jobs were negotiated away at the *Daily Telegraph*.
(38)

Although the strike was over, the dispute between the EETPU and the print unions and so, reluctantly the TUC, was not. In August 1987, the chairman of the Salaried Staff Council (SSC) which represents 1200 production workers at Wapping, Stephen Seaman, resigned from the company, accusing management of "reneging on virtually all the undertakings made to the workforce", and of having a "Ned Kelly attitude to the workforce". In his letter of resignation Seaman said:

"Industrial relations have become progressively Victorian and those promoted to positions of responsibility, increasingly primitive." (39)

Elsewhere he says this of the EETPU:

"I've learnt that the EETPU puts its PR image and its commercial success ahead of the interest of its members and the loyalty of its local staff. They wanted Wapping to get them into a new industry and also to give them an input into the docklands. They're much more interested in making themselves attractive to employers than to employees." (40)

Ironically, Seaman's mother was none other than Vivian Seaman, secretary to Mike Scanlon, the Southampton Area Secretary of the EETPU who played such a prominent role in recruiting workers for the Wapping plant. And thanks to his mother's influence Stephen Seaman played a major role in recruiting electricians for the Wapping plant in 1985. Of that recruitment he said:

"The Southampton office of the union was not acting on its own volition and the directive to start recruitment for a new 24 hour London newspaper at Wapping came by a telephone call from Mr Rice, the national officer for newspapers. At no time were people being hired solely for commissioning purposes, as Mr Rice claimed in public." (41)

On top of all this, on the eve of the 1987 TUC Congress, the *Guardian* obtained documents that appeared to show

"that Mr Tom Rice...has, in the words of the in-house leaders of the Wapping workforce, been 'in constant contact with management', in apparent defiance of the TUC instruction issued last year.

The documents indicate that national EETPU officials have had frequent meetings with management and staff representatives, have started a check-off system for payment of union subscriptions, have prepared the production workers' wage claim, have drawn up a draft recognition agreement between the company and the EETPU's white collar section...(42)

This was in direct contravention of the directive that the TUC issued in February 1986, which instructed the EETPU "not to enter into any agreement nor to continue any non-contractual arrangement with News International". What would the TUC do now that its own directives had been defied by the EETPU?

At the beginning of August 1987 the TUC's five-member F&GPC ruled out of order a motion submitted by SOGAT for discussion at the September TUC Congress. The SOGAT motion sought to commit the EETPU to hand over to the print unions any members it still had in the Wapping plant not working in electrical areas. The F&GPC argued that Congress did not have the power to determine membership disputes. To the relief of the TUC leadership then, the agenda for the 1987 Congress contained no motions referring to the News International dispute. But the eve of Congress revelations in the *Guardian*, and the setting up by the EETPU of a three-man investigative committee to examine the allegations, ensured that during the session on the General Council's annual report the Wapping dispute would be centre stage. And indeed it was. The TUC GC were censured for the second consecutive year for their handling of the NI dispute as delegates voted overwhelmingly to "refer back" (in effect reject) the GC's account of the dispute. Willis, after warning Congress that the print leaders' offensive against the

EETPU was heading the TUC into a "legal and constitutional morass", and reiterating his position that the EETPU could not be tried twice for the same offence, nevertheless warned that the GC "will have to do what they have to do if there is any flouting of their directions. Let no one, no individual and no union be in any doubt about that." (43) What this meant in practice was that the whole controversy surrounding the EETPU that the GC had thought closed in November 1986 when they voted not to proceed with disciplinary action against the union was now wide open again.

The dust had hardly settled on the storm that the *Guardian* allegations had caused at the Congress when a new problem faced the EETPU leadership. Late in September a ballot of the Wapping workforce showed only 140 in favour of representation by the EETPU, compared with 239 in favour of self-representation through the Salaried Staff Council, and 321 in favour of another trade union representing them. The SSC then approached the TUC asking them for assistance in unionising or re-unionising the Wapping plant. This was a bitter irony, for the whole reason for the EETPU's Wapping intervention was to recruit new members and gain recognition in areas of industry where it was weak.

Not long after this setback came yet another controversy, this time to do with the EETPU's internal inquiry into the *Guardian* allegations that the union had broken TUC directives on Wapping. In November the three-man inquiry team headed by Paul Gallagher, the union's President, cleared the union over charges that it had broken the TUC directives on Wapping. However, the report did acknowledge that there were a number of "errors of judgement" on the union's part, errors of judgement committed by Tom Rice, who had been the union's national officer in charge of the Wapping operation, but who had taken early retirement just as the report was released. The report admitted that, amongst other things, Rice had, in contravention of TUC directives, carried on recruitment at Wapping, drawn up a draft recognition agreement between the union and company, and through the SSC started a check-off system for the payment of union dues. In a letter to Willis, Hammond admits that "we did act in a way that could be interpreted as outside the spirit of the directives". He goes on to give reassurances that there would be no further breaches of the directives, "technical"

or otherwise. (44) So it was an admission of sorts that the union had breached the directives, and Rice had been ritually sacrificed to show the TUC that they took the matter seriously, and that, as far as the EETPU and Willis were concerned, was the end of the matter, once more.

The General Council, however, were not prepared to accept Hammond's undertakings, nor were they prepared to accept Willis's recommendation that no further action should be taken against the EETPU. Dubbins doubted the impartiality of the EETPU's internal inquiry and called for a full TUC inquiry into the EETPU's activities at Wapping. That didn't happen, instead the EETPU were called before the TUC's "inner cabinet" on 14 December to answer a number of key points on why the union had not followed the TUC's directives. From this meeting another meeting was arranged for the 30 January 1988, where the EETPU would be faced with some 300 questions concerning their activities at Wapping. Eventually, in March, the TUC proposed that the EETPU be suspended for three months, but even this proposed action was postponed when the EETPU threatened legal action if the suspension went ahead. At the end of April the TUC finally decided on a course of action: by 27 votes to 15 the GC decided to issue a "strong censure" against the EETPU. But by this time, the debacle over the proposed Ford plant at Dundee and the whole controversy over single-union "strike-free" agreements that was to emerge again in June, had raised once more the spectre of the EETPU either being expelled or splitting from the TUC. Consequently, the Wapping episode now seems to have come to an unsatisfactory end.

Internal opposition

The union's involvement in recruitment for Wapping served to revitalise some of the stronger pockets of organised internal opposition within the EETPU, as well as generating a wave of disgust among many non-committed rank-and-file members. After the union was found guilty on five of the seven charges levelled against it at the TUC meeting of 5 February 1986, the Southampton branch of the union held a meeting attended by a 150-200 electricians, printworkers and other trade unionists:

"As the meeting progressed and the speakers provided detailed information about the secret operation, the mood changed from curiosity to one of anger and frustration. 'It was vitriolic' said one member. 'I've never been so ashamed of my own union' said another EETPU member afterwards." (45)

But the branch came up against the minefield of the union rule book when it sought to express its protest in the wider labour movement. On 4 December they passed a resolution for the local Trades Council: "This branch of the EETPU disassociates itself from the workforce employed by the Wapping press." However, at the next branch meeting, on 19 December, full-time secretary Bill Luffman said he had been instructed by the Executive Council not to send the motion to the Trades Council because it was about an "internal problem". The other branch in the Southampton area, Hythe, had by February 1986 written twice to the EC asking for details of the Wapping recruitment. They received no reply.

Branch condemnation of the leadership's role at Wapping was fairly widespread in the union. For example, Manchester central branch passed a resolution condemning the Executive Council on 27 January 1986 and calling on EETPU members to withdraw from Wapping. In the same week the York branch passed a resolution calling on the Executive to "redress the shame placed on our union and commit the union once more to the basic trade union principles of solidarity with other workers". (46) The EETPU's largest branch in Scotland - the 4000 strong Glasgow branch - also passed a resolution in January alleging a conspiracy between the national leadership and News International, and reminding the Executive not to take their loyalty for granted. (47)

Glasgow's warning was echoed and expanded on by John Aitkin, leader of the Broad Left within the union in February 1986:

"If suspension goes ahead there is only one avenue available to us, and that is to look for support from the TUC for a nationally recognised parallel organisation.

If we are not careful we could see a fragmentation, with members of the union in

different industries diving into whatever union suits them best." (48)

Aitken's proposal was, frankly, nonsense. There was very little support in the union for a breakaway or "parallel organization", and a few weeks later, when *Flashlight* held a conference to discuss the February TUC directives, the idea had already been well and truly shelved. The proposal totally overestimated the strength of internal opposition to the leadership. What Aitken's suggestion did reflect, however, was that recurring desire of the Fleet Street electricians, of which he was one, as well as many other militants in the union, to break away from the right-wing leadership of the union as they had attempted to do in 1983 during the Fleet Street electricians' dispute. Now, in 1988, as the EETPU faces almost certain expulsion from the TUC in September, the formation of a breakaway union to be called the Electrical and Plumbing Industries Union looks like going ahead. But as we have argued here and in a previous chapter, such a breakaway would be a grave mistake on the part of the Broad Left leadership.

Opposition to the leadership's Wapping policy was quite widespread in the union then, but it was by no means as extensive as many of the activists thought. Barely a year after the TUC found the union guilty of actions detrimental to the trade union movement, Hammond was re-elected as General Secretary of the union by an increased majority over Aitken, and at the union's 1987 BDC the leadership's actions at Wapping were supported, although, as *Flashlight* reported, "not with the overwhelming support that he [Hammond] and his Executive would have liked." (49) So we are faced with a contradiction: the endorsement of undemocratic practices by democratic means. For by any measure of trade union democracy the EETPU's role in the Wapping affair was profoundly undemocratic. Not only were the machinations of the leadership with News International unknown to the membership of the union, but when they did become public knowledge the Executive Council repeatedly denied their involvement. Nor at the height of the furore did the union that prides itself on its ballot democracy attempt in any way whatsoever to consult its members about the course of action it should take over the issue. In short, the membership of the union

had no say at all in the course of action that its EC had embarked upon.

Inside the Wapping plant not only had the union allowed the management a free hand in maintaining a harsh industrial regime, as the revelations of Stephen Seaman testified to, but the elementary basis of any union democracy - a two-way relationship between the rank-and-file and their officials - was practically ignored by the EETPU. As Seaman reported, the EETPU members in the plant did not feel adequately represented:

"Tom Rice's favourite phrase when you brought him a complaint was 'You can tell the guys that but for the union, they would not have a job'."

(50)

In the end, though, the "guys" wanted a job but they didn't want the EETPU as their union.

The EETPU's collusion with NI is undoubtedly further confirmation that union leaders, as Michels argued, proceed with policies regardless of the wishes of the membership. In this instance the EETPU leaders had their actions retrospectively endorsed by the 1987 BDC. Even if this had not been the case, the BDC decisions are not binding, so the leadership could, as it has done on previous occasions, have ignored it. But, as we have seen, the Wapping debacle was more trouble than it was worth for the EC. The constant opposition to its actions from the print unions, the internal opposition, the GC of the TUC (despite its lacklustre approach), and finally the EETPU members at the plant itself, all contrived to prevent the EETPU leaders from doing exactly as they wished. Union leaders are, therefore, not free to proceed with policies unhindered, as their oligarchical pretensions are always held in check by a variety of opposing currents. We would argue then that the EETPU's role in the Wapping affair was a rather complicated and messy example of the relationship that exists between oligarchic and democratic tendencies in trade unions.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SINGLE UNION STRIKE FREE AGREEMENTS

In July 1988 the EETPU was suspended from the TUC for its refusal to withdraw from two single-union "strike-free" deals at Orion Electronics and Christian Salveson. That same month the result of an EETPU ballot overwhelmingly endorsed the leadership's defiance of the TUC disputes committee ruling on the two "strike-free" deals by 128,400 votes to 25,860 on a 43% turnout. The ballot paper proposed that the union should stay affiliated to the TUC, "providing...affiliation does not prevent the union entering into agreements consistent with the rules and policy of the union". So the EC successfully tied the whole question of their industrial strategy with that of internal democracy. They argued that the TUC had no right to interfere with the democratically arrived at policy decisions of the union. However, other trade unions have argued that the EETPU have completely ignored the democratic wishes of the majority of workers at some of the plants where they have signed "no-strike" deals. A further aspect of democracy that is raised by the union's "strike-free" deals is that of industrial democracy. From being an opponent of workers' participation in the 1960s and 1970s, the union now seems to be a firm advocate of it, as a central component of the "strike-free" package is workers' participation. These and other aspects of democracy will be considered in the following examination of the union's "strike-free" agreements.

At the last three TUC Congresses the clashes between the EETPU and its opponents have dominated the week's affairs. In 1985 the clash was over ballot money, in 1986 over the union's role at Wapping, and in 1987 over single-unionism and "strike-free" deals (and no doubt at the 1988 TUC the EETPU's expulsion will dominate the proceedings). The clash of 1987 arose from the same set of problems that served to fuel the previous ones - a decline in members and power due to unemployment, a hostile Government, and the changing structure of the economy, and attempts by the unions to adopt "popular" strategies which would enable them both to recruit new

members while staying loyal to the basic collective principles of trade unionism. Much to the disgust of many other unions the EETPU is all for "popular" strategies and membership recruitment, but it does not share what it would see as the "conservative" principles of the mainstream trade unions. The problem that causes for the other unions is that the EETPU, uninhibited as it is by "conservative" principles, is, it appears, able to expand and recruit in ways that are denied to them. The "no-strike" deals being the prime example. Unfortunately for the other trade unions, if they are to compete in the same market with the EETPU they will either have to adopt, in part at least, some of the EETPU's "radical" principles, or go all out to prevent the EETPU from pursuing its course of action.

Beyond all the rhetoric, the EETPU seems to be pulling the other unions in its direction and not the other way round. We have seen that happen over "ballot democracy", and the EETPU claims that it is the case in other areas such as "strike free" deals and single union agreements. At the union's 1987 BDC, Hammond said that the success of the EETPU's single-union deals had led to a "unwholesome hypocrisy" on the part of some other unions such as the T&GWU and GMB who had themselves signed such deals (the T&G had signed 76, and GMB 25, single union deals, according to Hammond). Of course, these unions would reply, quite rightly, that single-union deals are a far cry from "strike-free" deals, and that Hammond was deliberately conflating the two. Nonetheless, if we examine the union's "strike-free" deals the distance separating the EETPU from its rivals in practice is not as great as might be expected.

The EETPU's single-union, strike-free agreements

To date (July 1988) the EETPU has signed 26 single-union, "strike-free" agreements (with 10 more in the pipeline) covering less than 5000 workers (so they far from compensate for the 84,000 members that the union has lost since 1980). They form a minute part of the union's overall operations which cover some 336,115 members, and an even smaller part of the traditional collective bargaining system that still dominates in British industry. Why all the fuss then?

The heat generated over these deals is largely to do with how they are negotiated and in particular with one component of them - the so called "no-strike" provisions. While it is understandable that such provisions should cause such a furore in the trade union movement, the focus on the "no strike" clauses of the agreements distracts attention from the nature of the overall package that the EETPU has accepted, and, more importantly, the fact that many of the primary features of these packages are ones that are actively sought or accepted by other trade unions. Hammond, aware of this, is quick to defend the package and down-play the "no-strike" component:

"We insist on package deals in which employer and employee achieve a balanced trade-off of mutual benefit. We emphasise single-status conditions, providing monthly salaries, parity of working hours, holidays, pensions and other benefits, for technical, administrative and production workers alike. We ensure that valuable training and retraining schemes are linked to job flexibility. We gain from elected consultative bodies with access to the sort of company information which is still a closely-guarded secret in much of British industry. Our critics ignore all this. They concentrate on vehemently attacking the so-called 'no-strike' element. Yet this does no more than recognise that people go to work to earn a decent living, not with the aim of taking industrial action. Hence pendulum arbitration is a favoured method with which we achieve peaceful settlements if normal negotiations break down. An independent arbitrator decides in favour of the company offer or work-force claim. He cannot split the difference in the traditional inflationary way. The result binds both employer and employees. The right to strike has been put aside, not abolished..." (1)

Here Hammond identifies the four principal elements that make up the package - single-status, flexibility, participation and the pendulum arbitration/no-strike provision - if we add to these single unionism we have all the major ingredients of the package deals. We will deal with these 5 principal elements separately, although it must be remembered that these are package deals, so all the separate elements are interdependent. As the Sanyo agreement that the EETPU signed in 1982 puts it: "individual provisions cannot be acted upon without consideration of all other relevant provisions in the agreement." (2) Given this proviso, dealing with the elements separately will, hopefully, help us to understand more clearly not just the actual workings of the deals themselves, but also the general line of march of the EETPU's industrial strategy and the implications this has for industrial relations in general, and the union's conception of industrial and internal democracy in particular.

(1) Single-status

Single-status is the least controversial of the components that make up the "strike-free" packages, although it is the most highly prized by the EETPU. Roy Sanderson, the primary architect of the deals, argues that this particular feature of the agreements helps to create an "egalitarian factory, with everyone from the managing director to the janitor enjoying the same conditions of employment." (3) Typically this involves all employees - including management - addressing each other on a first name basis, all employees sharing the same restaurant (not canteen), all employees wearing the same uniform and so on. More substantially, it means that "white" and "blue" collar workers, as well as management, often share the same holiday entitlements, sickness benefits and access to, for example, private medical insurance

(2) Single-unionism

That multi-unionism is the norm in British industry today is not surprising. For at the turn of the century there were 1,049 separate trade unions in Britain. This figure only very slowly

declined so that by the end of the Second World War there were still 781 unions. Today there are 375 unions, of which 87 are affiliated to the TUC. Nevertheless, although estimates vary, a little over 50% of unionised British industry recognises only one union for its manual workers, though there is no evidence on the extent of pure single unionism, where only one union represents all employees, whether manual or non-manual. (4) So single-unionism as such is nothing new, and that is not what the ongoing row between the EETPU and the TUC is all about. It is about the so-called "greenfield" sites where new areas of employment are unionised for the first time, or where in existing multi-union plants one union gains recognition. The question at the centre of the row then, is which union has the "right" to organise these new sites, and which union should be accorded sole negotiating rights in a plant where more than one union already operates? Up until December 1985 the Bridlington principles that govern inter-union relations simply said that unions should "have regard to the interests of other unions which may be affected" when a single-union deal is signed. This was amended by the TUC's Employment Policy Committee at the end of 1985 to read that no such deals should be signed "in any circumstances" except by prior consultation and agreement with the other unions concerned. (5) The EETPU, it is claimed, has repeatedly flouted this ruling, and this is what all the fuss is about.

Four recent TUC disputes committee awards requiring the EETPU to withdraw from single-union agreements signed at Yuasa Batteries, Thorn EMI, Orion Electrics, and Christian Salvesen would seem to confirm the repeated claims made by other trade unions that the EETPU is ignoring agreed TUC procedures. The Yuasa Battery company, based in Ebbw Vale, South Wales, had recognised no union until the EETPU signed an outline single-union, "strike-free" agreement with the Japanese firm in November 1985. Leaders of the T&GWU in South Wales complained that although they had the largest number of members in the plant (it employed about 190) the EETPU were able to undercut them by offering the company a "strike-free" package. In its submission to the TUC the T&GWU said:

"The facts are quite stark and fundamental to the trade union movement. The actions of the

Electricians Union in this and other trade union disputes raised the question of how other unions could compete with the electricians for recognition when the union was prepared to undercut competing unions by offering a no strike agreement to employers.

The electricians were prepared to sign agreements containing pendulum arbitration before they had secured members within a plant or a plant had opened. By such actions, the electricians were denying individuals the fundamental right to withdraw their labour. The T&G would never enter into such an agreement with an employer." (6)

The TUC disputes committee finally arrived at a decision in April 1987. Under the terms of the decision, the EETPU was required to immediately exclude from membership the Yuasa workers it had recruited but who were previously in the T&GWU. The union was also ordered to withdraw from its sole recognition agreement with Yuasa and cease all formal and informal collective meetings with the company. It was further stipulated that neither union should approach the company for recognition for eight weeks. Once the eight weeks were over it was hoped that both the unions would approach the company to seek a joint agreement. Before the eight weeks were up, however, both unions were accusing each other of breaking the terms of the TUC's ruling. Amongst other things, the T&GWU claimed that Hammond addressed the night shift, while the EETPU claimed that the T&GWU were approaching the workers with pre-written letters resigning their membership of the EETPU. The dispute continues, and as yet neither union is recognised by Yuasa. (7)

In April 1987, the disputes committee upheld complaints from the AEU and TASS that the EETPU had signed a single-union deal with Thorn EMI in 1984 when it only had 6 members on the site, while they represented 200 between them. The dispute arose after Elco Plastics, a subsidiary of Thorn EMI, told the AEU and TASS that it was to relocate to a site three miles away in High Wycombe. The High Wycombe plant would also take in workers from a plant in

Gosport, Hampshire, where the EETPU had a substantial number of members. The EETPU argued that it had not broken the TUC rules as the High Wycombe plant was a "greenfield" site, and, further, that when its members were transferred there were no other employees on the site so they did not need to consult other unions. So the EETPU went ahead and signed an agreement with the company even though in the event only 6 (the AEU say 6, the EETPU 16) of its members had been transferred to High Wycombe from Gosport and despite the fact that the 200 other transferred workers voted against the EETPU deal. (8)

Even before the deal was settled at Orion Electronics, Port Talbot, in May 1987, the T&GWU had invoked the TUC's disputes procedure. Again the T&GWU claimed that it had won the support of most of the workers through traditional recruitment methods, and that in two separate stoppages (18 December 1986 and 12 January 1987), as well as in a petition signed by 79 of the 100 workers, the majority of Orion employees had pressed the company to recognise the T&GWU. But because the EETPU offered Orion management a "strike-free" deal they were granted sole recognition at the plant. It was only after management had recognised the EETPU that the workforce agreed to accept the EETPU even though at the time the majority were T&GWU members. It was an odd form of democracy. The TUC disputes committee upheld the T&GWU's claim and instructed the EETPU to terminate its deal with Orion. The EETPU has also been instructed by the TUC to terminate an agreement it signed in 1987 with Christian Salvesen, a distribution company, based in Warrington. But in both cases, as we now know, the EETPU has refused to obey and thus faces expulsion from the TUC. And it is not just at "greenfield" sites such as Orion that other unions are complaining of sharp practice from the electricians, the GMB was infuriated at the EETPU's attempts in 1987 to sign a deal with Matsushita in Newport even though the GMB has represented 600 workers at the plant for twelve years. (9) However, not all the complaints against the EETPU are upheld.

For five years the Hitachi television and video manufacturing plant in Hirwaun, South Wales, had been run as a joint venture with GEC. There were a number of unions recognised at the plant - the EETPU (716 members), AUEW (223), ASTMS (87), UCATT (87), APEX (60)

and TASS (15). In addition, the T&GWU (10) had unofficial "representational" rights, and there were 115 non-union workers. In 1984 GEC pulled out, and in the shake up that followed Hitachi was insistent that it would only recognise one trade union. In April 1984, the company informed the unions that it intended to sign a single-union deal with the largest union at the plant, the EETPU, and that recognition of the other unions would be withdrawn from 14 May. The other unions then made a formal complaint against the EETPU under the TUC's Bridlington principles, while the company delayed its withdrawal of recognition until 10 August. As the TUC machinery ground slowly on, Hitachi spelled out what the new agreement with the EETPU would entail: 508 redundancies, a 7% pay increase, single status, full flexibility, a company members' board, pendulum arbitration, no strikes and a single union. This agreement was rejected at a mass meeting of 550 Hitachi workers on 16 June. A month later, after the 500 workers who were to be made redundant had gone, the EETPU held a secret ballot of the remaining workforce on the company's agreement. The result was overwhelming - 87% in favour. The union and the company signed the agreement the same day. It came into effect on 8 August 1984 - and by the end of the week the other unions were out.

The EETPU claimed that they had not broken the Bridlington principles and that the only alternative to their "strike-free" package was a non-union plant. On 11 April 1985, the TUC made its ruling known to the union concerned. The EETPU was reprimanded, but it was not ordered to abandon its deal with Hitachi. Instead, it had to meet three points: new employees at Hitachi should be advised that they might join a union other than the EETPU; in the case of grievances at the plant involving a member of an ousted union, an official of the union concerned should be able to take up the issue with the company; and the EETPU should establish a body which would allow ousted unions to relay to the company through the EETPU their views. (10) The EETPU were naturally delighted by the verdict. In a report in the union's journal headed, TUC THROWS OUT ANTI-EETPU BID, Hammond described the result as

"a clear recognition that the complaints against us were ill-judged and ill founded. The findings fully justify our agreement which we

made to safeguard jobs for Hitachi employees and to ensure that the plant neither shut nor became non-union...And the company's recently announced programme of increased investment at Hirwaun underlines that we were right both in principle and practice." (11)

Hammond and other senior officials of the union then made a visit to the Hitachi plant, where he planted a flowering cherry tree to mark the occasion.

Others were not so happy with the verdict. The ousted unions were so disgusted with the TUC verdict that they took the unprecedented step of appealing against the result. They argued, unsuccessfully, that their negotiating rights had been thrown out and that the TUC's three point recommendation to the EETPU was impracticable. What the Hitachi deal did set in motion, however, were moves to tighten up the TUC rules governing single union deals, moves which were taken in the wake of the 1985 TUC, and which are still in the process of being taken under the rubric of the Special Review Body launched at the 1987 TUC.

But what of Hammond's claim that the success of the EETPU's single-union deals has led to a "unwholesome hypocrisy" on the part of unions such as the T&GWU and the GMB who themselves have signed such deals. As we have said a single-union deal is not the same as a "strike-free" deal". The question is, have other unions, like the EETPU, signed single-union deals at the expense of the negotiating rights of other unions? There is very little evidence that this is the case. As far as the EETPU is concerned, we are aware of only one recent case where the union was deprived of its negotiating rights. In cases brought against TSSA (the white collar railway union) the TUC disputes committee found that the union's rights had been infringed by TSSA when it signed a single-union deal with British Rail and London Regional Transport. (12) A case that was often cited by the EETPU is that of Norsk Hydro. The EETPU claimed in 1985 that the T&GWU had deprived it of recognition when they signed a single-union deal with Norsk Hydro, the Norwegian based multi-national, at Immingham on Humberside. On the surface it looked like the EETPU had a case, but in reality the deal was far more complex than the union was making out. The deal was rejected

by all the main unions on the site - AUEW, EETPU, ASTMS and the T&GWU - but was accepted by the workforce who individually agreed to changes in their contracts of employment. The T&GWU has still not officially signed the agreement, although the agreement is in operation. (13) Hammond's claim is without much substance then.

(3) Flexibility

It has been argued that the most concerted attack on shopfloor organization since the productivity offensive of the 1960s has come from the widespread introduction of flexibility. This, in John Atkinson's model, takes two major forms: numerical flexibility - the splitting of the working class into a "core" of skilled permanent workers and a "periphery" of less skilled, part-time workers; and functional flexibility - the reorganization of the workforce within a particular workplace. (14)

An indication of how far reaching the flexibility offensive by the employers has been can be gauged from a recent CBI analysis of 9000 pay settlements between 1979 and 1986. They report that 65% of bargained deals in unionised companies showed changes in working practices and 42% of non-bargained, non-union deals. But the survey also showed that industrial action was much more prevalent - almost twice as likely - in settlements which involved changes in working practices. So changes in working practices are not just costing the employers money - the CBI survey reports that the level of pay settlements in those companies which featured "improvements" in working practices were consistently higher over the period than those which did not - they are also being resisted by shop-floor workers. (15) Moreover, a recent study carried out by the Institute of Manpower Studies into changing working patterns in 72 large firms since 1980, noted that most respondents in manufacturing

"were doubtful if there had been a permanent shift in attitude on the part of their employees and thought that if there was a substantial reduction in the current level of unemployment or if there were a shift back in the bargaining power towards trade unions, they would have difficulty in maintaining the

changes they had achieved over recent years."

(16)

Even though trade unions are increasingly negotiating some form of flexible agreement with the employers, then, there is a significant resistance to these changes amongst rank-and-file workers (the Scottish Bus workers' strike of 1987, and the 1988 Ford Strike are two recent examples), a resistance, as the IMS study indicates, that is likely to quickly gain momentum if there is a shift in the balance of power in favour of the unions.

Flexibility is not only widespread, it has been negotiated by many of the same trade unions that have consistently denounced the EETPU's "no-strike" deals, central to which is flexibility:

"The no-strike deals are a red herring...What employers want, and what they are getting, is the right to introduce infinite in-plant flexibility....flexibility agreements are vital for the next generation of plants, not necessarily this one. These future systems will employ considerably fewer people with considerably greater skills; unions would be well advised to keep this firmly in mind before jumping at an apparently harmless deal." (17)

Barrie Sherman is right. Flexibility is the key way in which the British employing class hope to increase productivity. Of course, whether flexibility has increased overall productivity is questionable. (18) What is certain though, is that there has been a sharp shift in recent years towards formalised flexible agreements, and although they vary in detail they all contain the following broad features:

- (1) A break down of demarcations between different groups of skilled workers.
- (2) A change in sectional organisation.
- (3) Extension of shiftworking.
- (4) Greater management control of overtime.
- (5) Use of subcontractors/or temporary workers.
- (6) Long-term pay deals.

Management's attempts to introduce flexible working based on such formalised agreements is nowhere better illustrated than in

the "strike-free" agreements that the EETPU has signed with a number of companies:

Sanyo:

"All employees are expected to work in any job which they are capable of doing. In-plant training is provided, and job rotation is practiced throughout the company. There are no job descriptions, and all production, inspection and most clerical staff are paid the same job salary."

Inmos:

Unions and management agree to "respond flexibly and quickly to changes in the pattern of demand for the company's products and to technological innovation."

Toshiba:

"In reaching this agreement the trade union recognises and supports the complete flexibility of jobs and duties within the company, both within departments and between the various departments of the company, subject to individual skills and capabilities. In return the company recognises and accepts the need for training and retraining in the broadening of skills and in new technological developments as they affect the company's efficiency as a manufacturing operation."

A B Electronics:

"The maximum co-operation and support from all employees in achieving a completely flexible, well-motivated workforce, capable of transferring on a temporary or permanent basis on to work of any nature, that is within the capabilities of such employees, having due regard to the provisions of adequate training and safety arrangements" (19)

One of the EETPU's sternest critics, the GMB, has also signed a far reaching deal which involved dramatic changes in established

working practices. The GMB was the major signatory (the other unions were the EETPU, AEU, and UCATT) to the three year "enabling agreement" negotiated with Nabisco in Liverpool in July 1985. On flexibility the agreement is as radical as any of the EETPU's "no-strike" agreements. The *Incomes Data Services* report on the deal says that Nabisco now have "the freedom to plan ahead with the maximum flexibility on the balance of the future workforce and on production methods." And in March 1988, the GMB along with the AEU signed a three-year pay and flexibility agreement with the engineering company Albright and Wilson which will eliminate traditional demarcation lines between unions and trades. (20) Flexibility has also been at the heart of a number of single-union deals negotiated by the left-wing T&GWU in recent years. For example, at Continental Can, Wrexham, and at two Kimberly Clark plants in North Wales. (21) And in the public sector the left-led unions signed a flexible agreement covering 1 million manual workers early in 1987. (22) Generally speaking then, unions are not opposed to flexibility, but they are opposed to the forced introduction of new working practices (the General Motors and Ford's disputes of 1987 and 1988, and the Seafarers' strike of 1988 are examples of this). So the key component, as far as management are concerned, of the EETPU's "strike-free" deals - flexibility - is one that is accepted to a greater or lesser extent by all trade unions.

(4) Participation

The Bullock Report on industrial democracy was published in 1977. Its central concern was how worker representatives could establish themselves on company boards and become "worker directors". The Report was received with hostility by a very strange alliance of forces: the CBI, the Communist Party, the International Socialists, the left-wing AUEW and the right-wing EETPU, to mention but a few. By the summer of 1977, writes John Elliott, "the Bullock Report had only a handful of sincere committed advocates left." (23) But to look at Bullock in isolation is misleading. For during the 1970s a wide-ranging interest in industrial democracy (not just "worker

directors"), or workers' participation as it was more commonly known, took root in the labour and trade union movement. Many different types of industrial democracy - workers' co-ops, alternative plans, factory occupations, shop stewards' Combines - were identified by those involved as forms of workers' participation, or workers' control. And as Panitch writes, vastly different meanings were attached to these terms, "ranging in substantive content from revolutionary to reformist to corporatist conceptions". (24) Generally though, Elliott's broad definition of industrial democracy as "workers (normally through their trade unions) claiming rights to have a greater say over matters affecting their working lives" expresses well how most workers probably experienced and understood the idea of workers' participation. (25)

Of course, amongst some of the more politically conscious workers, for instance those who had come under the influence of the Institute for Workers' Control (IWC), workers' participation was to be encouraged not as an end in itself but as a transitional phase on the road to a "self-managed society of producer associations." Real participation for the IWC was

"when workers begin to get the upper hand, and consolidate their powers of representation, accountability, and veto irresponsible management prerogatives." (26)

For them the Bullock Report offered "an opportunity for a fundamental debate on the issues of industrial democracy" and workers' control. Such a debate took place a year after the Report was published between IWC supporters and Arthur Scargill. Scargill in his familiar brusque manner expressed what we might term the left-opposition's case against Bullock and the IWC path to Socialism:

"...workers' control means in effect the castration of the trade union movement, means in effect a total collaboration as far as the working class is concerned, and certainly in practice, will result in compromise with society as it exists." (27)

From the employers' point of view, Bullock, the notion of workers' participation/control, and the militancy of the trade unions and their so-called abuse of power in the 1970s were all of a piece. Not surprisingly then, when the Bullock Report was published it was naturally perceived as being part and parcel of the so-called growth in trade union power. That the American Chamber of Commerce could hint that US investment in Britain could suffer if the Bullock proposals were introduced only added to the "red haze" that surrounded Bullock. (28) That the unions were in fact either hostile or at best cool towards Bullock didn't seem to detract from the popular conception that Bullock was the thin end of a red wedge. The EETPU's response to Bullock was not unusual, but the reasoning behind it was determined by their whole approach to internal and industrial democracy.

As far back as the ETU's 1967 BDC the following motion was moved:

"This Conference urges that the union pursue vigorously the claim for direct representation for all members employed in local government and nationalised industries." (29)

The leadership of the union obviously took this motion very seriously, for not only did Cannon lead off the debate, but the EC also put forward a counter-motion in the form of a lengthy statement on workers' participation:

"If workers' representatives are involved too deeply in management and are performing the task of management properly they will inevitably be inhibited in their activities as trade unionists. In other words, if they act as managers they will no longer be acting as trade unionists.

If on the other hand, the worker representatives on a board of management are in the minority their position might be even worse. They will have no control over decision making but due to their membership of the decision making body could be inhibited in the use of their counter-vailing force as trade

unionists...This is not to say that we object to a Trade Union Official's being on a Board of Directors. The proviso must be, however, that he is not a representative of the workpeople in that industry.

All this does not however, mean that trade unionists and management should be regarded as breeds apart. It is perfectly right and proper that trade unionists and workers should be involved in the work of the industry or the enterprise in which they spend their working lives and earn their livelihood. The question at issue is the point at which 'involvement' becomes 'participation'." (30)

What the leadership were rejecting here was, to use Pateman's terminology, "full participation", where each individual member of the decision making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions. (31) They were not rejecting "involvement", or union officials being present on Boards of Directors, but they were certainly rejecting any form of participation that involved rank-and-file ETU members in the decision making bodies of companies. The objections the ETU puts forward could quite easily have been put forward by a left-wing critic of workers' participation. Especially when the EC statement goes on to describe how there is a "fundamental clash" of interests between workers and management, and how solutions cannot be found "by attempting to blur the lines of conflict." Cannon used a parliamentary analogy, arguing that just as a strong opposition in parliament is the best check on the abuse of power by Government and the safeguard of democracy, likewise, strong trade unions provide a basic and vital democratic function by checking the abuse of power by management. To get involved in management would simply diminish the "counter-vailing force" of trade unionism and thereby hinder the advancement of industrial democracy. But although these points are valid, the reasons for the ETU rejecting workers' participation run a little deeper.

There are at least two other reasons for the ETU rejecting workers' participation. Firstly, it is not unreasonable to assume

that the leadership feared not so much "involvement" in management leading to "participation", but rather "participation" leading to demands for "workers' control" and thus to an extension of industrial democracy. This is precisely the direction in which people like Ken Coates, Tony Topham and Ernie Roberts of the the IWC wished workers' participation to go. In 1968 the IWC produced a collection of essays under the title *Can the workers run industry?*, in which Coates and Topham, in their essay *Participation or Control?*, made a clear distinction between the idea of workers' participation as it was usually used, which was designed to head off growing working class demands for control, and those who saw it "as a step on the road to full democracy." (32) Workers' control was aimed at establishing control "over the unfettered decisions of the ruling party in industry, namely the employers and their managers." (33) It was this connection that might be forged between workers' participation and workers' control that the ETU leadership wanted to extinguish. This scenario was highly unlikely, but it was one, we would argue, that the leadership of the union took seriously, and one that ran counter to their entire philosophy. For Cannon's philosophy was very much in line with the "ruling party in industry", which in the late 1960s was concerned chiefly with pushing productivity bargaining and incomes control. Cannon was a foremost advocate of productivity deals and incomes legislation. He desired a strong market economy where efficient and productive unions could justly demand a bigger slice of the cake. There was no place for workers' participation in this scheme of things.

Secondly, workers' participation, and the radical seeds that it contained, was a diversion from the primary aim of building up a highly centralised union; the "New Model" union that Cannon and the leadership were then in the process of constructing. Workers' participation was a move towards de-centralisation not centralisation. Who would these directors be? More than likely shop-stewards. So precisely at the time when the leadership were attempting to rein in the activists, the idea of workers' participation opened up the prospect of hundreds of shop-stewards getting involved in areas of activity that were quite possibly going to be outside the direct control of the leadership.

Cannon and the EC won the day with their left rhetoric. So that the union's official position on workers' participation in 1967 was that the interests of their members could best be served not by participation, but by improvements in the "existing collective bargaining machinery", and by real consultation that "involves hearing the employees view before any decision is taken". (34) This position was unchanged ten years later when the union issued the following circular to all members:

"The conclusions of the Bullock Committee are not in line with the policy of this union, nor indeed with that of the TUC as expressed at Congress. The Terms of Reference and the composition of the committee made it inevitable that this predetermined result would occur. It will not solve the deep and underlying problems of Britain, nor will it advance the cause of genuine industrial democracy.

We do not align ourselves with those whose objections are based on opposition to any advance of workers' influence in decision making, nor those whose main concern appears to be the possible redundancy of 6,000 directors.

The real extension of democracy in industry will come through the natural extension of collective bargaining and not through the elevation of a few individuals to boards of management." (35)

The last point the circular made had a resonance far outside the confines of the Executive Council of the EETPU. For at a time when the Labour Government's Social Contract was denying free collective bargaining talk of industrial democracy sounded a bit hollow to many trade unionists.

With the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979, however, any dreams of industrial democracy quickly faded. The shift in the balance of power in industry during her first term meant, according to Elliott, the sweeping aside of "Bullockry...as an irrelevancy along with the participative debates and experiments of the 1970s." (36) Well, not quite. What we have seen in the Thatcher

years is the continuation, but not the growth, of a diluted form(s) of workers' participation - "descending participation", as Walker dubbed forms of participation that fell well short of "full participation". (37) The major form this watered down type of workers' participation takes today, as it did yesterday, is joint-consultation of some kind.

Joint-consultation is widespread in British industry. Millward and Stevens' recent survey, *British Workplace Industrial Relations 1980 - 1984*, provides new evidence of how extensive consultation committees are. In 1980, 34% of all the establishments they surveyed reported the existence of Joint Consultation Committees (JCCs); the figure was still the same in 1984. The public sector even saw a rise in such committees, from 42% to 48%. In the private sector, however, the number of JCCs has fallen; in private manufacturing from 36% to 30%, and in private services from 26% to 24%. But as the authors of the survey point out, the fall in the private sector is more to do with the impact of the recession than the abandonment of consultative machinery. (38)

Ironically, descending forms of participation such as "job enrichment" and joint-consultation, or "involvement" as the ETU put it in 1967, and which have always been favoured by the union, are now, with the "strike-free" deals, dressed up in the more radical sounding notion of participation. Sanderson, in language that would not have been too out of place at an IWC conference, says that the only casualty of the "strike-free" agreements "is managerial privilege and prerogative", because they not only "enhance the individual and collective rights of the workers concerned" but they also give "the workers a real and genuine say in how the company is run." (39) Now that there is no threat of the type of workers' participation hoped for by the IWC, the EETPU is now advocating participation. But whereas in the 1960s and 1970s it opposed workers' participation with the radical rhetoric of free-collective bargaining, today it masks what is little more than joint-consultation with the radical rhetoric of participation. But the following statement from Hammond illustrates quite clearly what the EETPU understands by participation:

"Every agreement, no matter how primitive, is designed to avoid conflict...but we've gone

further. We've made them more sophisticated and say number one is status, number two is involvement and participation so that people feel part of the enterprise, so that they're given information that they can have some say in the enterprise before decisions are taken".

(40)

Philip Bassett writes glowingly of this aspect of the EETPU's "no-strike" deals:

"...what the strike-free agreements offer - real involvement, real information, real participation - runs against the tide. Central to them all is a form of joint council which reaches decisions on a wide range of employee-related issues, on the basis of the provision of the fullest possible information, which if accepted by the company (and the strong moral force of decisions reached in this way certainly predisposes the company to accept them) becomes company policy." (41)

Bassett uses the example of the Company Members Board (CMB) at Hitachi to illustrate his thesis, quoting extensively from the minutes of a CMB meeting in 1985, minutes that are circulated to all employees. Yet, practically every issue raised at the meeting was to do with company efficiency:

Training: "Concern was expressed at the lack of training for new Company Members, and it was felt that this was contributing to the number of rejects currently being experienced in production...."

Discipline: "... the CMB were concerned with the way in which the disciplinary procedure was being administered - mainly that the administration was not uniform from department to department..."

Production Efficiency: "While the CMB agrees that Members need to increase their efficiency, they also felt that other factors affected

efficiency, and were not considered sufficiently when measuring efficiency."

Material Shortages: "Material shortages such as the one currently experienced on tubes, were felt to play a large part in falls in efficiency..."

Design: "It was felt that new models were put into pre-production on the lines before they were ready. This has led to modifications being carried out at the same time as production.

This does not help efficiency."

When it comes to issues directly affecting the workers, however, the same minutes note a reluctance on the part of management to be as forthcoming as they are on efficiency:

"...when problems were pointed out to the CMB as the result of shop stewards and representatives meetings, the company frequently replied that it knew of the problem and was taking steps to deal with it. It was felt that the company should have brought these problems to the CMB....This complaint was answered by management, pointing out that significant improvements have been made in the terms and conditions of employees..." (42)

Bassett, echoing the EETPU's own views, claims, then, that this form of joint-consultation allows "workforce representatives...a genuine say in how the company operates, not just at the level of their own effort, but beyond it, on policy." (43) This eulogy is very questionable. Joint-consultation rarely, if ever, gives workers an equal say in the decision making process of the company - "full participation" - it allows them at best to influence management decisions - "partial participation". In the latter case, as in most cases of the former, the structure of authority in the workplace is left intact:

"Whatever the joint consultation process might do for those few who as representatives actually took part, there seemed no reason to suppose it would transform the perceptions and

motivations of their constituents, whose jobs and subjection to hierarchical authority and control remained unchanged." (44)

The point Fox is making here is especially true of the companies that the EETPU has signed many of its "no-strike" agreements with. Here is a report on the same Hitachi factory in South Wales where Bassett tells us worker representatives have a genuine say in how the company operates and where Sanderson tells us that dignity and democracy have been brought to the workplace:

"The logic of good industrial relations falls into place once you accept that the Line Is God; the Welsh recognise that, now that it's been pointed out to them, and are rather shame-faced about their previous slack practices, when the plant was run by GEC.

'They used to eat bacon and eggs on top of the sets being assembled. That appalled the Japanese', says Tony Pegge, deputy personnel director. Other workers used to turn up 'in carpet slippers with bobbles on'. And once when an employee collapsed and died in the workplace, the entire factory took the day off in respect."

Since Hitachi took over the plant in 1984, however:

"You can be disciplined for turning away from the assembly line to talk to a colleague, or for smoking in the lavatory. The mindful, disciplined concentration from clocking-on to finishing time (excepting break periods) demanded by the Japanese clearly has come as a body-blow to the gregarious workforce.

Mrs Carol White, deputy convenor of the EETPU branch says that, by comparison, discipline is very strict under Hitachi. 'But Toshiba's agreement is stricter than ours.'" (45)

Toshiba is the other example Bassett gives in his favourable account of the participatory component of the EETPU's "no-strike" agreements.

In May 1986 the workers at Hitachi voted for a 3% pay increase (the underlying annual rate of pay increases since July 1984 had been 7½%) and a "merit review" based on an index which monitors conduct, time-keeping, performance and accuracy of work. Two packages were presented to the workforce by the CMB, both of which contained the new merit review. From a total workforce of around 720, below middle management level, the total number of votes cast was 589, from which 557 showed in favour of the 3% offer. The alternative offer would have given an additional 1% in return for the abolition of a total of 35 minutes a week allocated for "personal needs". The attempt to buy "bell-to-bell" working was suggested by the EETPU and was fully supported by Hitachi. One report on the settlement noted:

"Both the company and the officials of the EETPU confess a degree of incomprehension at the continued adherence of employees to such 'traditional' practices, weighed against other benefits provided." (46)

If we recall Elliott's broad definition of industrial democracy as "workers claiming rights to have a greater say over matters affecting their working lives", then the Hitachi workers decision is not so incomprehensible.

We have said that the major form of participation now taking place in British industry is that of joint-consultation. The form this consultation will take will naturally vary from workplace to workplace. In the case of the EETPU "strike-free" agreements JCCs appear under different guises - a Company Members Board at Hitachi, an Advisory Council at Inmos; a Company Advisory Board at Sanyo and Toshiba; a Joint Negotiating Council at A B Electronics - but all operate on the same principles as the Hitachi CMB. Yet in the context of such strict and authoritarian shop-floor regimes, it seems a little odd to talk of challenging managerial privilege and prerogative let alone of bringing dignity and democracy to the workplace. If we are to characterise the JCCs as representing some form of workers' participation, however low down Walker's descending scale they may be, then we have to consider what the workers are being consulted about. The trouble with accounts such

as Bassett's, are that they concentrate on the "workers having a say" without questioning what they are having a say about.

At Hitachi, as Bassett's own example shows, discussion on the CMB was completely dominated by production and efficiency. This is hardly surprising, for the package deal that the EETPU had signed was designed to break down "traditional" attitudes to work, so that grievances that might have been "normal" at any other plant are automatically ruled out of court at Hitachi. So it is the unevenness of discipline from department to department that is complained about, not the discipline itself. It is the lack of training that is complained about, not the whole idea of flexible working. It is not the speed of the line that is questioned, but the material shortages that are holding up the line. In short, the options for discussion are company orientated in the extreme, the agenda for joint-consultation is determined by the needs of the company which are not seen as distinct from those of the workers. This, ironically, is precisely what Cannon warned against in 1967 when he said that solutions cannot be found "by attempting to blur the lines of conflict".

Things have changed. John Grant, a leading EETPU official, writing in *Contact* about the success of the Toshiba agreement, states concisely the EETPU approach to consultation:

"The new emphasis was firmly on co-operation and consultation not conflict. Workers are expected to identify with the company's objectives - especially to turn out products of the right kind, at the right time and at the right price." (47)

This view of participation hardly squares with Bassett's talk of "real involvement" and "real participation", but it does sound very similar to Verba's concept of "pseudo participation", which involves no genuine control, even of a partial kind, by workers in the actual processes of decision making. Rather by creating a feeling of participation workers are persuaded to accept decisions that have already been made by management. (48) The objective, then, of the various JCCs that the union is involved in is to create an "enterprise culture" (so well described by Grant) where

the workers feel that they are having a "genuine say" in the formation of company policy.

(5) Pendulum arbitration - No-strike provisions

This is the most controversial aspect of the agreements, and probably the most misunderstood. The first thing to be said is that the deals are not legally binding, and nor do the EETPU wish them to be. If there is nothing legally binding about the deals and consequently the "no-strike" provisions, then what is actually meant by a "strike-free" agreement? The answer is, that the anti-strike element of the overall package is centrally bound up with binding pendulum arbitration. The Toshiba agreement puts it like this:

"...In this agreement and through the mutual support and encouragement of the Company Advisory Board System both the company and the trade union recognise this approach provides for the resolution of conflicts of interest between the company and its employees through consultation, negotiation and arbitration rather than the traditional processes of industrial action...

If the matter is not resolved a joint reference shall be made to an independent arbitrator...The terms of reference of the arbitrator will be to find in favour of either the company or the trade union. A compromise solution shall not be recommended. Both parties agree to abide by the decision of the arbitrator." (49)

Similar clauses are contained in all the EETPU's agreements. The Sanyo deal "precludes the necessity for recourse to any form of industrial action" and says that arbitration "will be final and binding and will represent the final solution to the issue". At Inmos the parties agree to "avoid any action which interrupts the continuity of production", and, "accordingly, the union and the company undertake not to involve members covered by this agreement

in external industrial relations matters". Optical Fibres takes a similar line, pledging both sides to "avoid any action which interrupts the continuity of production", as does Xidex: "A fundamental understanding is that during any phase of this new procedure, all normal working practices are observed and maintained". (50) Third party arbitration is not unusual in British Industry, but there is an expiry date when if all else fails traditional industrial action is sanctioned or taken. With binding pendulum arbitration there is no such break down point, a resolution is always achieved. Well this is the theory, but in practice things have not worked so smoothly.

Most disputes, whether they be over pay or conditions, do not reach the pendulum arbitration stage, they are settled long before that stage is ever reached. So although the first "strike-free" agreement that the union signed was with Toshiba in Plymouth in April 1981, it was not until 12 March 1986 that the first ever British pendulum arbitration award in a "strike-free" deal was delivered; and it was delivered in favour of the EETPU. The details of the dispute between the EETPU and Bowman Webber, a small firm employing 125 workers in Essex, are long and complicated, but by the time they reached the pendulum arbitration stage the major issue at stake was the difference between the company's offer of £151.91 a week and the union's claim of £160.31 a week - £8.40. What is of interest here though, is that before the award was declared in March there had been a strike at the factory. It started in January over the imposition of double day-shift working and the dismissal action against three workers, one the EETPU shop steward, involved 50 workers and lasted 10 ten days. So much for "strike-free" deals. (51) More recently there has been a strike at the Hitachi plant in South Wales. The action - a sit-in for over an hour in the company's single-status canteen - came after the company refused to act on the recommendation of the Company Members Board that the workforce should receive an 8% increase in their basic rate. The very next day Hitachi put forward an increased offer of 5.5% on basic rates, plus a further 1.5% for merit increases. This offer was then rejected by the workers in a ballot by a margin of 3 to 2. Only then did the company and the union go to ACAS for a binding arbitration decision. (52)

Strike-free deals do not prevent strikes then, they just make them much more unlikely as the long disputes procedure tends to dissipate and contain any immediate anger at the company's actions. What is more, it seems highly unlikely that any strikes that do occur will be made official, as a binding pendulum arbitration award is the final stage in the resolution of any conflict. Knowing in advance that no official backing for a strike will be forthcoming again makes the recourse to strike action by the workers less likely. Such a procedure naturally enables the full-time officials of the EETPU to have a far tighter control over the membership than is usual in "normal" collective-bargaining situations. For example, at the Xidex factory in South Wales, the EETPU members three times rejected, once by a ballot majority of more than 2-1, various company and ACAS pay offers. Nevertheless, Wyn Bevan, the EC member for the area (leader of the 1977 Port Talbot strike and one time prominent oppositionist), went ahead and unilaterally accepted one of the offers, arguing that the terms of the "strike-free" agreement with Xidex empowered him to take a final decision on such issues in the "best interests of the members". Some forty members of the EETPU, including the convenor and branch secretary, then left the union in disgust and formed a branch of the T&GWU. The comments of Bryan King, the former EETPU branch secretary, give an indication of how far union democracy has been advanced at Xidex by the "no-strike" agreement:

"It has meant that I have no right and no say in what I'm going to accept or receive in future years. They've taken away my right as an individual to speak and stand up and say I don't want this I want something else." (53)

For its part the EETPU claims that there is nothing new about their "no-strike" deals and that moreover other unions are also signing them. *Contact* carried the following in its September 1984 edition:

"Even binding arbitration, misleadingly referred to as 'no-strike' clauses, is by no means unique though the EETPU is pioneering its wider and more beneficial application. It operated at the former Upper Clyde

Shipbuilders, there are several industry-wide agreements of this kind and the Civil Service unions put up a 'no-disruption' option to the Prime Minister during the GCHQ fiasco. Moreover, Mirror group newspaper unions were ready to make the same bargain to try to prevent Mr. Robert Maxwell's company takeover."

(54)

Since 1984 the AEU has also signed a number of "no-strike deals, most notably with Nissan. However, the AEU is not an opponent of such deals, unlike the GMB. Surprisingly, then, in June 1987 it was reported that the

"General Municipal and Boilermakers Union, which has voiced strong opposition to the growth of strike free agreements, yesterday admitted that its white collar section had signed what amounts to a strike free deal at a South Wales factory."

David Plant, the national industrial officer of the GMB's white collar section, MATSA, said of the deal with Pirelli:

"It does constitute a no-strike deal. The final stage of the disputes procedure, whatever the issue, is final binding arbitration." (55)

And in May 1988 the TUC disputes committee ordered the GMB to withdraw from a "strike-free" agreement it had negotiated with BICC Cables. (56) So the EETPU's allegations are not completely without foundation.

Opposition and democracy

"There's no opposition among rank-and-file members to this type of agreement. There might be among activists and leaders and academics and reporters. But there's not among rank and file members, none whatsoever."

Roy Sanderson. (57)

Opposition to the strike-free agreements has come from three sources: firstly, from some of the workers covered by the deals themselves; secondly, the organized opposition inside the union; and, thirdly, from other trade unions and the TUC. We have already noted the outbreaks of opposition to the working of agreements at Bowman Webber, Hitachi, and Xidex, but that is not the same as rejection of the deals in principle, the union might argue. Yet when Hitachi were spelling out the details of the proposed new deal to their workforce in 1984, the *Incomes Data Services* could report that "there has been considerable opposition from the workforce to Hitachi's terms. A mass meeting has rejected the document [*A New Future at Hirwaun*]" (58). So rank-and-file opposition to the deals is not totally absent, as Sanderson would have us believe. Moreover, it has to be remembered that, as Hammond himself admits, the "strike-free" deals were in the main signed with companies *before* the workforce had actually been hired, so they were thus presented to the new workforce as an accomplished fact. They were presented to the workers as the best that they could possibly get from the companies, the alternative being non-union plants and the loss of the benefits that the packages contained. But as the case of Orion illustrates, there was an alternative - traditional union organization - an alternative that was acceptable to the workforce in this case (and others) but which was ignored by the EETPU. Finally, when Sanderson says that there is no opposition to the agreements from the rank-and-file, he is certainly not including the rank-and-file of those trade unions that have been denied negotiating rights as a result of some of the EETPU's single-union deals.

When the BDC of the EETPU met in Blackpool on 7 November 1983, the union had already signed 4 "strike-free" agreements. On the third day of the Conference, the following motion (motion 110) from the Wells Branch of the union was debated:

"This Conference is alarmed by the recent statements from the Tory Minister Tebbit that workers in essential services should be denied the right to strike.

Conference is also alarmed at the number of employers seeking 'No Strike' agreements.

Conference believes that the basic right to strike is a most cherished Trade Union right, which must never be negotiated.

Conference therefore calls on the Executive Council to vigorously defend the right to strike in all negotiations with employers, private and public." (59)

It was evident from the debate that followed that the details of the "no-strike" agreements were not known to the delegates. The mover of the motion, M Solomons, and many of the speakers that followed, referred in general terms to the right to strike, and Solomons briefly mentioned the Toshiba agreement which he understood had "an anti-strike clause in it". Solomons also drew the parallel between the union leadership's support for *Solidarity* and its own position: "Are we to support the right of *Solidarity* to strike and then do a political somersault?" (60) Surprisingly though, the leadership of the union gave motion 110 qualified support, as Hammond explained:

"We are supporting Motion 110 with reservations and these reservations concern what has been said about so-called 'no-strike clauses'. In reality, there can be no such thing, certainly not in a free society like ours. Can anyone really believe that anyone could stop people striking if they wanted to? In the agreements we have at Toshiba, Sony and Inmos, we have agreed to a procedure which has as its final stage arbitration, which is, as is normal with many arbitration procedures, binding on both parties. But the workers are not chained to their place of work. If they choose to strike nobody can prevent them...

What you should be asking yourselves is why do we prefer agreements based on arbitration as a final stage, and so greatly reduce the likelihood of strike action. I will tell you why....They benefit nobody but our competitors and the unemployment statistics...even in

successful strikes those involved rarely gain a sufficient improvement in their pay to make up what they have lost whilst being on strike.

Secondly, the type of industry where we have negotiated these agreements cannot survive unless productivity is kept going continuously and at a high level." (61)

After explaining the benefits that were involved in signing such deals, Hammond urged delegates to support the motion, while bearing in mind the reservations he had raised. On a show of hands motion 110 was carried by the Conference.

Officially then the union now had a policy that "advised" the Executive Council "to vigorously defend the right to strike in all negotiations with employers". How this was squared with the signing of "no-strike" agreements was simple: the EC said that there were no legally binding clauses in the agreements that outlawed strikes, merely a process of arbitration that made them more unlikely. As the Sanyo agreement put it, "this agreement...precludes the necessity for recourse to any form of industrial action". (62) If the agreements did not contain legally binding "no-strike" clauses the "right to strike" was not threatened, and therefore the leadership could quite legitimately support the motion from the Wells branch. On the other hand, the insertion of clauses in the agreements such as the Sanyo one hardly squared with a policy of vigorously defending the right to strike.

It is worth stressing, however, that at this juncture the "strike-free" agreements were not a big issue for the organized opposition in the union. *Flashlight* did not mention the deals at all in either its pre-Conference issue nor in its post-Conference edition. It was only during the course of 1984, as the attention the "strike-free" agreements were receiving increased, that *Flashlight* turned its guns on the deals. (63) By the time of the next BDC in July 1985 it might have been expected that *Flashlight* would have made a major issue out of the deals, but it didn't. The pre-Conference issue only mentioned the "no-strike" agreements in passing, in an advert for *Flashlight* itself. This is surprising, because it was obvious that there was going to be heated internal debate and a lot of publicity surrounding this aspect of the

Conference. A brief look at the Agenda for the 1985 BDC was a clear enough indication that the agreements were going to be a central issue for debate. There were 2 motions supportive of the agreements, from the Inmos and Toshiba branches, and 6 motions critical of the deals. On the eve of the Conference, Hammond raised the temperature by announcing that the union had already signed 14 deals, that another 4 were in the pipeline, and at least another half a dozen were being sounded out by his officials. *Flashlight's* "pre-Conference comment" ignored all this and instead argued that it was time that " a fixed date for holding...our Union's biennial conference was put into the rule book". (64) The two central issues of the Conference - the acceptance of Government money for ballots and the "strike free" deals - were not mentioned at all. It was a missed opportunity to say the least. Nevertheless, these issues were discussed at the Conference, and leading oppositionists were in the forefront of the attack on the leadership.

Two motions on the "strike-free" agreements served as the focus for the battle between the EC and its supporters and the opposition forces in the union. The EC supported motion, that was submitted by the Inmos Branch, read as follows:

"This Conference welcomes the Union's radical approach to industrial relations, embodied in its industrial agreements in the electronics industry which include pendulum arbitration, harmonised conditions of employment and extensive workforce participation.

Conference declares its support of such principles which represent a bold initiative in seeking to change the adversarial tradition of British industrial relations." (65)

Wyn Bevan put forward the case in support of the Inmos motion. Bevan argued that the deals offered union members single status, a "genuine say" in how the companies they work for are run, flexibility and job security. On the "no-strike" provisions of the deals he said:

"A method of resolving disputes without striking makes sense. A strike-free society would make sense and agreements which can move

towards that end should be our aim....[but] any employer who wants to strike a deal including pendulum arbitration must accept the total EETPU package..." (66)

The *Financial Times* reported that "impassioned support for the controversial agreements" came from EETPU branches where the deals were in operation. Joan Griffiths, senior steward at Toshiba's plant at Plymouth, said the new attitudes had "brought a breath of fresh air" into industrial relations, and that the union at Toshiba was far from passive and compliant:

"Of course we have our problems, but we are able to overcome them without manning the barricades. It's not the Garden of Eden but it's not a bloody battlefield." (67)

Opponents of the agreements supported the following motion from the Falkirk, Dundee and Wallasey branches:

"This Conference is concerned at the increasing practice of our national negotiators to conclude 'No Strike Agreements' in industry today. We call for an immediate end to this trend and that we revoke all such agreements already signed.

It is our opinion that such agreements remove a fundamental right from our members and creates an attitude not conducive to struggle at shop-floor level. This is a denial of basic trade union principles still valid today." (68)

The motion failed, but as the *Guardian* reported, "the majority against the motion...was surprisingly small". This was not the *Daily Telegraph's* view however: "Both votes by a show of hands from the 900 delegates were sufficiently decisive to make a count unnecessary". (69) It is one of the continuing ironies of EETPU democracy that the only place where "a show of hands" is encouraged is where an EC member presides over the count.

Rank-and-file opposition to the deals does exist then, but it is very weak, which in itself is a reflection of the weakened state of the organized opposition in the union, especially the Communist

Party. The weakness of the opposition should not be exaggerated of course. They still fare relatively well in elections, but at branch level they are not as strong as they were in the 1970s and early 1980s. So at the 1987 BDC, only 50 of the 900 delegates opposed the EC's Wapping policy and the negotiating of "strike-free" agreements. But opposition to the union's industrial strategy outside of the EETPU seems to have been more successful.

Following the adoption of a composite motion at the September 1985 TUC Congress which criticised the behaviour of the EETPU at Hitachi, the TUC General Council amended the Disputes Principles and Procedures in December. They now read:

"No union shall enter into a sole negotiating agreement, union membership agreement or any other form of agreement in any circumstances, including a takeover or change of ownership or some other reason where another union(s) would be deprived of their existing rights of recognition or negotiation except by prior consultation and agreement of the other union(s) concerned..." (70)

This effectively outlawed the single-union, "strike-free" packages on sites where other unions had a presence. Since the amendment to the Bridlington Principles was passed the TUC has been far more diligent in policing the single-union deals, as we have seen in the earlier part of this chapter. What the TUC had not outlawed though, were the "no-strike" clauses contained in the EETPU deals. But by May 1988 the Special Review Body had drawn up a code of practice, the key section of which said that "unions should not conclude agreements in exchange for recognition which specifically remove, or are designed to remove, the basic democratic lawful rights of a trade union to take industrial action." Late in June the TUC hardened its stance when it agreed (by 9 votes to 7) on a revised code of practice which would not just "advise" affiliates not to negotiate "no-strike" deals in exchange for recognition but would tell them not to reach such agreements. (71) However, since the union is set to be expelled from the TUC, the code of practice is going to make no difference to the main signatory of the "no-strike" deals - the EETPU. TUC

opposition has been effective in that it has eventually disciplined the EETPU, but they are now it seems going to be faced with a "rogue union" outside of their discipline. In these circumstances the TUC's campaign of non-cooperation with the EETPU (for example, EETPU officials were excluded from a meeting of the TUC and the Health and Safety Executive which met to discuss the Piper Alpha disaster), as well as the union's intention of signing of 10 more "strike-free" deals in the near future, is almost certainly going to be the source of further conflicts between the two bodies.

We have said that the union's "strike-free" industrial policy has been endorsed by the 1985 and 1987 BDCs and by the 1988 ballot on continuing affiliation to the TUC. It could be argued that the Conferences were unrepresentative, or that the ballot paper was so worded that it avoided a direct "Yes" or "No" on "no-strike" deals and TUC membership (and that anyway 200,000 EETPU didn't bother to vote at all). While these objections have substance, they are also ones that could be levelled to a greater or lesser extent at any trade union. The plain fact is that the EC's "strike-free" strategy has been democratically approved by the majority of EETPU activists and "passive voters". The EC of the union argues, then, that not only do the agreements extend democracy at the workplace but that in carrying out their "strike-free" strategy they are carrying out the democratic wishes of the members. Democracy, therefore, is being extended and put in practice by the "no-strike" agreements.

Against this line of argument, we would argue that while it is true (as it was with the union's Wapping policy) that the membership have endorsed the EC's strategy (and therefore it can be considered democratic), that nevertheless the way the agreements were negotiated, the way many of them have operated, and the "enterprise culture" which they all seek to establish have led to a weakening of union and industrial democracy at the plants concerned. Firstly, there was nothing democratic about the way the deals were negotiated. They were mostly signed before the sites were built and any members were recruited to the EETPU. In a number of cases (for example, Orion, Thorn EMI) the EETPU has ignored the wishes of the majority of workers on the sites and unilaterally concluded "no-strike" agreements. Secondly, as the Xidex pay

negotiations show, the "no-strike" clauses (binding pendulum arbitration) enable the EETPU officials to quite legitimately evade union democracy. Thirdly, the participatory component of the "strike-free" packages does not extend shop-floor democracy, quite the reverse. For the factories that are covered by the agreements on the whole have far stricter regimes than traditionally organized workplaces. So the workers at Hitachi, South Wales, have far less control over the work process than their counterparts in similar sized establishments. Moreover, as Cannon and the ETU argued in 1967, industrial democracy can only be safeguarded and extended by the "countervailing force" of trade unionists uninhibited by too deep an involvement in the tasks and aims of management. This is the reverse of what is happening at the "strike-free" plants, where participation is used to "blur the lines of conflict" between workers and management in an attempt to construct an "enterprise culture" where the aims and goals of the company are paramount.

We can only draw the conclusion, despite membership endorsement for their actions, that the "strike-free" agreements have, in the words of Michels, strengthened the "authoritative character of the leaders and their tendency to rule democratic organizations on oligarchic lines." (72) But there is a twist at the end of the tale. The EETPU now faces expulsion from the TUC for refusing to abide by the democratic decisions of its disputes committee (which incidentally was made up of three leading "moderates", Albert Williams of UCATT, Leslie Christie of NUCPS - executive and support grades in the civil service - and Muriel Turner of the ASTMS. This refusal, and the expulsion that is likely to follow, might well lead to the union having great difficulty in securing further "no-strike" agreements as managements distance themselves from a potentially troublesome union. (73)

CONCLUSION

There is a vast literature dealing with the government and internal democracy of trade unions. (1) Some writers have presented exhaustive accounts of union affairs, detailing the formal aspects of union decision making and membership participation. (2) Others have employed a variety of models and methods in order to examine union democracy more directly. (3) Many have seen union democracy as being analagous to parliamentary or state democracy in some way. This model usually concentrates on the constitutional and electoral processes of a trade union which make it possible for an opposition to replace the incumbent leadership. (4) The parliamentary model has been criticised for oversimplifying the nature of union democracy: one writer has stated that the cornerstone of union democracy is the voluntary nature of union organization, whereas state democracy is compulsory (i.e you must pay taxes and so on). (5) Yet others have constructed models of union democracy based on conflict and control that compliment many Marxist writings on the divorce of the trade union bureaucracies from the members they are meant to represent. (6) We have profited from these and many other works, although we have followed no one single approach in our study of the Electricians' union. Rather the study has been informed by two broad theoretical approaches, one implicit and one explicit.

Implicitly we have argued that the union's democracy has been shaped and reshaped by a combination of internal and external factors: union democracy cannot be understood by just examining its formal decision making process, but rather the political and industrial factors which have shaped the actual democracy of the Electricians' union have to be considered. The objective then has been to explain some aspects of the union's internal history and the leadership's approach to democracy with reference to the wider political and industrial context. The explicit theme in the thesis has been what we have referred to as the Michels/Gouldner debate: the constant tension in trade unions between oligarchic and democratic tendencies. The intention here was not just to go through once more the classical debate about Michels, but to examine the debate in the light of the actual workings of the

Electricians' union. What follows is an attempt to show how far these two theoretical themes have illuminated particular aspects of the workings of democracy in the union. Finally, a more general comment on the future of democracy in the EETPU will be offered.

Political and industrial factors shaping democracy in the Electricians' union

In Part One we argued that the ballot-rigging scandal of the 1950s could not be understood simply in terms of an electoral process that was open to abuse by unscrupulous men. Rather, to understand why some CP members of the ETU did rig the 1959 ballot for General Secretary a wider view of the politics and industrial strategy of the CP needed to be taken. Once the area of investigation was widened in this way we could present a rationale for the manipulation of the union's democracy that is denied to us if we concentrate solely on the internal workings of the union. Consequently, against the orthodox view that the CP held power in the ETU by virtue of its ballot-rigging activities, we were able to give an account of the rise of the CP in the ETU by examining the political and industrial shift that the Party made in 1947, and how this shift dovetailed with both the growing sectional militancy of the shop-stewards "movement" in manufacturing and the "indigenous" militancy of the ETU. However, once the CP's domination of the ETU began to be threatened in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and with it the entire strategy of the Party outlined in the *British Road to Socialism*, we argued that the leadership increasingly resorted to bureaucratic manipulation of the union's rules and procedures and eventually some ETU leaders rigged the 1959 ballot.

What primarily shaped the leadership's approach to the ETU's internal democracy, then, were political and industrial factors that were largely determined by events and policies formulated outside of the democratic structure of the ETU. For the CP in the ETU, the union's internal democracy served as a means to reach a desired goal - to push the labour movement in a leftward direction via the TUC and Labour Party Conference. There was nothing undemocratic about this: union democracy is not just concerned with

timeless platitudes, it is a about politics, argument, and organization within the framework of a set of agreed procedures. The CP leadership were found to have broken these procedures, and that, not the politics they were legitimately propagating in the union, was why their actions were undemocratic. However, we argued that the ballot-rigging took place because of the politics of the CP, and that consequently the rigging of the 1959 election was a political act. This political action was to end in the ballot-rigging trial of 1961, which in turn resulted in the right-wing taking control of the union and reshaping its internal democracy to serve its political and industrial policies.

In Part Two we argued that the remodelling of the union's democratic structure under Cannon's leadership was designed to centralize power and dislodge and isolate the activists from the semi-autonomous centres of power in the union such as the Area Committees and the branches. Politically this was an attempt to neutralise the influence of the CP, and industrially it was the first step in bringing the fragmented bargaining system under EC control. From the start then the remodelling was not just about making the union more democratic and efficient as the leadership claimed - it had an overt political and industrial objective. (7) Consequently, the remodelling was accompanied by a transformation of the union's traditional left wing stance to one of right-wing Labourism, although in the early 1960s when the Cannon leadership were still viewed by many as left-wing, and when Harold Wilson was being welcomed by many even on the New Left as a left-winger, this shift was not so easy to discern. By the late 1960s, however, the shift of both Cannon and Wilson was all too clearly visible. The EC supported, albeit critically at times, the three central policy planks of the Wilson Government - incomes policy, productivity bargaining and industrial relations legislation - even after the most moderate of unions had deserted the Government in the wake of the 1967 devaluation of the pound. By this time, though, the EC had almost completed the restructuring of the union, a restructuring that was modelled on, and had largely the same aims as, the American business unions. The creation of the "New Model" union which had at its heart the reshaping of the union's internal democracy was, therefore, an entirely political project which

reflected the political and industrial concerns of the Cannon leadership.

In Part Three we saw how with the rise of industrial militancy in the early 1970s the structure and policies of the "New Model" union, now under the leadership of Chapple, were challenged by two political groupings in the union - the CP and IS/SWP. Although they had different strategies for internal reform, both clearly saw the need to reform the union's internal democracy as an integral part of their overall strategies. So the organized opposition campaigned against the centralization of the union's structure and the forced closure and amalgamation of union branches and for the reconstitution of the Area Committees and the election of all full-time officials. Just as the Cannon leadership knew that if they were to be successful in pursuing their political and industrial aims then a union democracy had to be fashioned that facilitated that strategy, similarly the organized opposition realised that if their strategies were to succeed then the internal democracy of the EETPU would have to be reformed. In other words, there is a close linkage between the implementation of a political and industrial perspective and the type of internal democracy that exists in a union. A brand of politics that essentially sees things happening from "below", by the rank-and-file, will tend to favour the type of democracy that was being advocated by the opposition, whereas the kind of politics that essentially sees things happening from "above", by representative leaders, will tend to favour the type of democracy advocated by the Chapple leadership.

The opposition's challenge was unsuccessful. The political and industrial project of transforming the union which began under Cannon continued under Chapple and, as Part Four showed, developed in a new direction under Hammond. A major reason why the challenge was unsuccessful was, and is, because the internal democracy of the union inhibits the activities of organized minorities and prevents them even if they do gain majority representation at Industrial Conferences or at BDCs from translating that representation into policies that the EC have to act upon. The EC either ignores the decisions because they are not constitutionally binding or orchestrates the "active voters" in a well planned and well publicized ballot of the entire membership which usually

favours the EC position. But this is not always the case. In 1972, for example, 32,002 members voted for entry into the Common Market, while 68,792 voted against. Yet in 1975 the union cast its block vote in favour of Labour's re-negotiated terms of entry at the special Labour Party Conference. Similarly, the 1982 Electrical Supply Industry pay award was rejected by supply members by 41,249 votes to 31,801. Nevertheless, the EC went ahead and accepted the rejected pay award. As was the case with the period of CP leadership, union democracy is, besides other things, a mechanism whereby particular political and industrial aims and goals are furthered and legitimised. If, as in these two cases, that legitimisation is not forthcoming, then it is democracy that is jettisoned, not the policies.

Taken as a whole, democracy in the post-war Electricians' union has (probably more than in any other trade union) been overtly shaped by the political ideologies and the industrial policies of the leaderships. Two competing ideologies have successfully fought for the leadership of the union and utilised or moulded internal democracy to suit their ends. This is not to say, of course, that a multitude of other factors have not contributed to the shaping of the union's democracy or that the leaderships have not gained membership support for their policies, rather it is to stress a seemingly obvious point, but one that nevertheless seems to be often overlooked, that unless the political and industrial aims of a union leadership are examined in historical context then we will fail to fully understand why leaders resort to bureaucratic manipulation and ballot-rigging and why a union's internal democracy develops in the particular way it does.

The Michels/Gouldner debate

Throughout the thesis we have engaged with Michels' "iron law of oligarchy". His theory can be summed up in his famous dictum "who says organization, says oligarchy", and in his assertion that in the trade union movement the "authoritative character of the leaders and their tendency to rule democratic organizations on oligarchic lines, are even more pronounced than in political organizations." (8) And, indeed, the post-war history of the

Electricians' union could be viewed as a classic confirmation of Michels' thesis. However, we have countered Michels by showing how time and time again the rank-and-file have asserted their control over the leadership or over particular areas of union organization. To this extent, we have followed Gouldner in arguing that if it is reasonable to talk of an "iron law of oligarchy" it is equally plausible to posit the existence of an "iron law of democracy". (9) In fact, the experience of the Electricians' union seems to indicate that there is a constant and dynamic tension between the two "laws", and that what shifts the balance in favour of one or the other is not organization per se, but the actual practice of the members of the union in particular historical circumstances.

The ballot-rigging saga seems to offer the strongest evidence in support of Michels, and at one level indeed it does. For the principles of democracy in the ETU were "attenuated and deformed in accordance with the external needs of the organization." (10) And not just the organizational needs of the ETU "oligarchy", but those of the Communist Party as well were put before the democratic wishes of the membership. Yet, in the end, the Communist leadership was overthrown because it acted undemocratically. Whether they would have been ousted without the 1961 trial is debatable. What is clear, however, is that some ETU members resorted to ballot-rigging precisely because they believed they were going to lose control of the leadership, and why they were losing control was because of the campaign by the press and the opposition in the union that focused the attention of ETU members on the manipulation of democracy. That democracy was the central issue, and not the policies of the CP leadership, was graphically illustrated by the "orgy of democracy" that took place at the SRRC in 1962. What tipped the balance in favour of democracy, then, was the activity of a very small group of union activists (Cannon's *Reform Group*) and the publicity they gained. It was because of, to use Coleman's terminology, the "compulsive pressures" of democracy in trade unions that the Foulkes and Haxell leadership were in the end forced from office. (11)

A consideration that is totally absent from Michels theory is the "informal" or "unofficial" ways in which union members can exert control over their leaders and certain areas of union

organization. In chapter 6 we charted in some detail the successes and failures of the organized opposition in the EETPU. We said that although the opposition had not succeeded in its aim of ousting the right-wing leadership that, nevertheless, the permanent constraint that the opposition imposed on the EC acted as a democratic pull on the EC. Moreover, this type of direct democratic organization was able to exert the influence it did because, despite remodelling, much of the union's organization at branch and workplace level was still of an "informal" kind. The opposition was able to counteract the influence of the EC in the branches, on the sites and in the workplaces, where direct democracy still existed. Direct democracy might well be, as Michels argued, "a mechanical and technical impossibility" at national level, but the experience of the opposition in the EETPU would suggest that it is not necessarily the case at local and workplace level, and such forms of direct democracy naturally affect national policy. (12) This type of union democracy, because it is rooted in workplace experience, will always serve as an unpredictable and potentially powerful countervailing force to national leadership.

Michels also argued that the division of labour in organizations such as trade unions would inevitably lead to the domination of a technocracy of full-time bureaucrats who would be immune from any enduring challenge from the rank-and-file. Any change that was forced on one leadership would merely lead to the replacement of one oligarchy by another. Again, this thesis has more than surface plausibility, and the replacement of the Communist "oligarchy" of the 1950s by the right-wing "oligarchy" of the 1960s could be cited as just such an example. However, the ETU of the 1950s and 1960s was not dominated by technocrats, since it had a lay EC and elected full-time national and local officials, and the growth in the post-war period of de-centralized bargaining allowed for a great deal of rank-and-file autonomy and direct shop-floor democracy. That the leaders of the Electricians' union, or any other union, could dupe and manipulate the honest but essentially simple union members by the use of their superior skills and expertise is a myth which has been perpetuated at least since the days of the Webbs. As Daniel found in his study *Wage Determination in Industry*, the rank-and-file trade unionist can

fare quite well without the assistance of "expert" union negotiators:

"...although wage negotiations often involve consideration of complex financial and statistical and technical issues, they were very frequently conducted, on the union side, by lay officers with little or no training and without any expert or professional support or advisory services. The role of the full-time officer was normally to be brought in when problems arose, rather than to have been involved from the start." (13)

This lay competence was if anything more pronounced in the Electricians' union where, as the McCarthy and Parker survey for Donovan noted, the best educated and qualified stewards belonged, with as many as 60% having had part-time further education. (14) And as the experience of the JIB agreement in electrical contracting illustrates, the union leaders were intent on removing the opportunity for EETPU stewards at site level from using their expertise and skills in negotiating site agreements. So the "oligarchical" control that the CP and right-wing leaderships were able to exert was not on the basis of their monopoly of technical skill, rather it was because they controlled the union's central apparatus and increasingly the collective bargaining process at local as well as national level. This, of course, does not invalidate Michels' point that one oligarchy merely replaces another. But it does tend to undermine his view that the masses were incompetent and that the principal cause of oligarchy was "the technical indispensability of leadership." (15)

In fact, Michels appears to undermine his own thesis by arguing that improved education and training could begin to bridge the gap between the specialists and the mass of workers:

"A wider education involves an increasing capacity for exercising control...It is...the great task of social education to raise the intellectual level of the masses, so that they may be enabled, within the limits of what is

"possible, to counteract the oligarchical tendencies of the working-class movement." (16)

Yet taken within the context of his overall thesis it is hard to know how seriously Michels takes this statement. Just two pages before the above he tells us:

"The objective immaturity of the mass is not a mere transitory phenomenon which will disappear with the progress of democratization...On the contrary, it derives from the very nature of the mass as mass." (17)

These two contradictory positions would seem to suggest that Michels himself recognized that there was an inherent tension between oligarchy and democracy, even if in his account oligarchy always triumphed in the end. At the end of Political Parties he says that democracy is like a treasure that no one will ever discover, but in continuing the search we shall perform a work which will have fertile results in the democratic sense. (18) So there is a very heavily circumscribed optimism present in Michels' work. He is saying in effect that the struggle for democracy is like the labour of Sisyphus, never ending, but heroic and necessary all the same, and perhaps the labour will produce some limited results.

Of course Michels is right with regards to trade union democracy at least. Union democracy will never be fully realisable under capitalism. This is not primarily because of the operation of any law of oligarchy, however, but because external constraints - the power of the employers and the state - impose forceful limits on the aims adopted by trade unions. (19) Such external constraints impinged directly on the EETPU's internal democracy as we showed in the chapters on the IR Act and the Social Contract. However, as Hyman writes:

"... those within unions who primarily conduct external relations do not merely react to irresistible pressures; they help shape and channel the nature and extent to which trade union goals and methods adapt to external agencies..." (20)

The EETPU leaders did not merely react to the constraints that the IR Act and the Social Contract imposed on the union, they attempted to shape union policy on the basis of their assessment of these two pieces of government policy. But the EC were deflected from the course of action they wished to take on the IR Act by external pressures of another kind - the "tremendous crisis" that peaked with the jailing of five London dockers in 1972. And although the Executive Council were staunch supporters of the Social Contract, that support oscillated as opposition to the Government's incomes policy mounted inside the union and the wider labour movement from 1977 onwards. So although the powers of the employers and the state do most certainly set limits on the aims and goals of trade unions, and therefore on union democracy, those limits are by no means fixed. They are, as we saw with the two EETPU examples cited, determined by the relative strengths of the competing forces - the employers, the state, the union bureaucracies and the rank-and-file - at any one particular historical juncture. Union democracy may well be not fully realisable under capitalism, but nonetheless, its boundaries are elastic in the extreme.

Overall, the experience of the post-war Electricians' union leads us to the conclusion that Michels' theory taken on its own is inadequate. This is not just because there are instances in the union's history that contradict Michels, but that these instances are numerous and, more importantly, are a product of an inbuilt tension that exists between oligarchy and democracy. Weber put it like this:

" 'democracy' as such is opposed to the 'rule' of bureaucracy, in spite and perhaps because of its unavoidable yet unintended promotion of bureaucratization. Under certain conditions, democracy creates palpable breaks in the bureaucratic pattern and impediments to bureaucratic organization." (21)

Weber, unlike Michels, considered that there were a number of mechanisms that could prevent bureaucratic power reaching a point where it controlled the policy and action of the organization it was supposed to serve. (22)

Within trade unions the mechanisms that control bureaucratic/oligarchic power are part of a "two-way-system of control" that operates between the leaders and the rank-and-file:

"Union officials are accorded specific powers of leadership and of discipline; in appropriate situations they are legitimately entitled to exert control over the members. But at the same time they are the employees and the servants of the members, who are thus in appropriate situations entitled to exert control over *them*." (23)

The factors that shape this "two-way system of control" at any given period in a union's history are, as the history of the Electricians' union shows, complex, multiple and often contradictory. Nonetheless, that such a system of control exists in the Electricians' union, however thread bare it might be at times, goes only to reinforce the argument of Gouldner: that there cannot be an "iron law of oligarchy" unless there is an "iron law of democracy." (24) The "two-way-system of control", in other words, is founded on a dynamic tension between democracy and oligarchy in trade unions.

Future prospects

The now almost certain expulsion of the EETPU from the TUC in September 1988 will undoubtedly have an effect on the future prospects for democracy in the union. Firstly, if expelled the union will be able to pursue its "strike-free" industrial strategy unhindered by TUC discipline. How successful they will be is another matter. There seems little prospect of the EETPU offsetting its membership losses by expanding in the Japanese electronics sector where the union already has a foothold in Wales. For in total the 20 Japanese electronics plants in Britain employ only some 6000 workers, and in 1986 Japanese firms made only 9 separate investment decisions on new production capacity compared with 158 by US owned firms and 46 by West German. (25) Nor do the prospects for expansion in the non-Japanese electronics sectors look all that promising. "Silicon Glen" in Scotland employs 42,000

electronic workers, and yet the EETPU's "strike-free" packages have not enabled them to expand in any significant way. This is because the US companies will not entertain unions, not even the EETPU, and in the other plants, where unionisation is as high as in manufacturing, multi-union bargaining is the norm (one survey showed that only 1 plant out of 79 recognised the EETPU for both staff and manual employees). (26) As it gets harder to recruit in these sectors it seems certain that the EETPU will become even more aggressive not only in its attempts at securing new deals, but also in policing the agreements on the shop-floor. If this is the case, then the diminution of industrial and union democracy that the present deals have heralded will increase.

Secondly, the *Flashlight* grouping is proposing that EETPU members leave the union and join a TUC affiliated union. It then plans to set up a federation of these electrical and plumbing "holding" sections, draw up a rule book and then launch the Electrical and Plumbing Industries Union (EPIU). John Aitken, the architect of the breakaway, estimates that initially 5000 EETPU members will join the new union. We have argued elsewhere in the thesis that this plan could have disastrous consequences for the future of democracy in the EETPU, essentially because the incumbent leadership would then have a free hand to pursue its policies. As Martin argues:

"...democracy exists when union Executives are unable to prevent opposition factions distributing propaganda and mobilizing electoral support. It does not require that opposition should be institutionalized, nor that it should be democratic...merely that it should survive as a recognized form of political activity." (27)

While not accepting wholly Martin's definition of union democracy as the "survival of faction" (constraints can be brought to bear on Executives to act democratically from outside as well as from within a particular union), and while recognising that opposition will still exist in the EETPU despite the possible departure of its most organized section, democracy would assuredly be greatly diminished if the strongest faction within the union was

to voluntarily quit it. The lack of an organized countervailing force to the Executive Council could only serve to reinforce the oligarchical tendencies of the Hammond leadership. The highly centralized internal structure of the union that was constructed under Cannon, and which *Flashlight* has been attempting to reform for the last nineteen years, would remain intact and continue to act as an obstacle to democratic change.

The future of democracy in the EETPU looks rather bleak, which is not just a partisan view (although it is certainly that as well): it is based on the belief that union democracy is shaped by the organized actions of trade union members. As Gramsci put it:

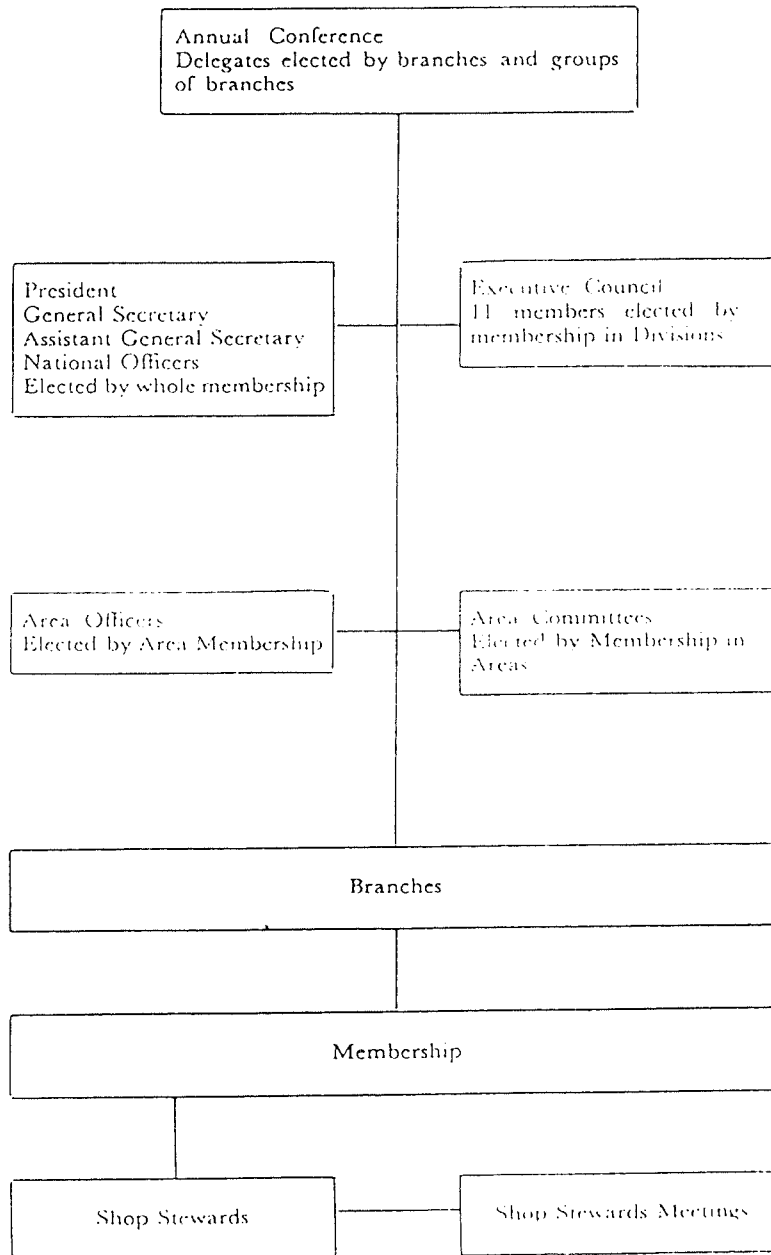
"The trade union is not a predetermined phenomenon. It *becomes* a determinate institution, i.e. it takes on a definite historical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and propose an aim that define it." (28)

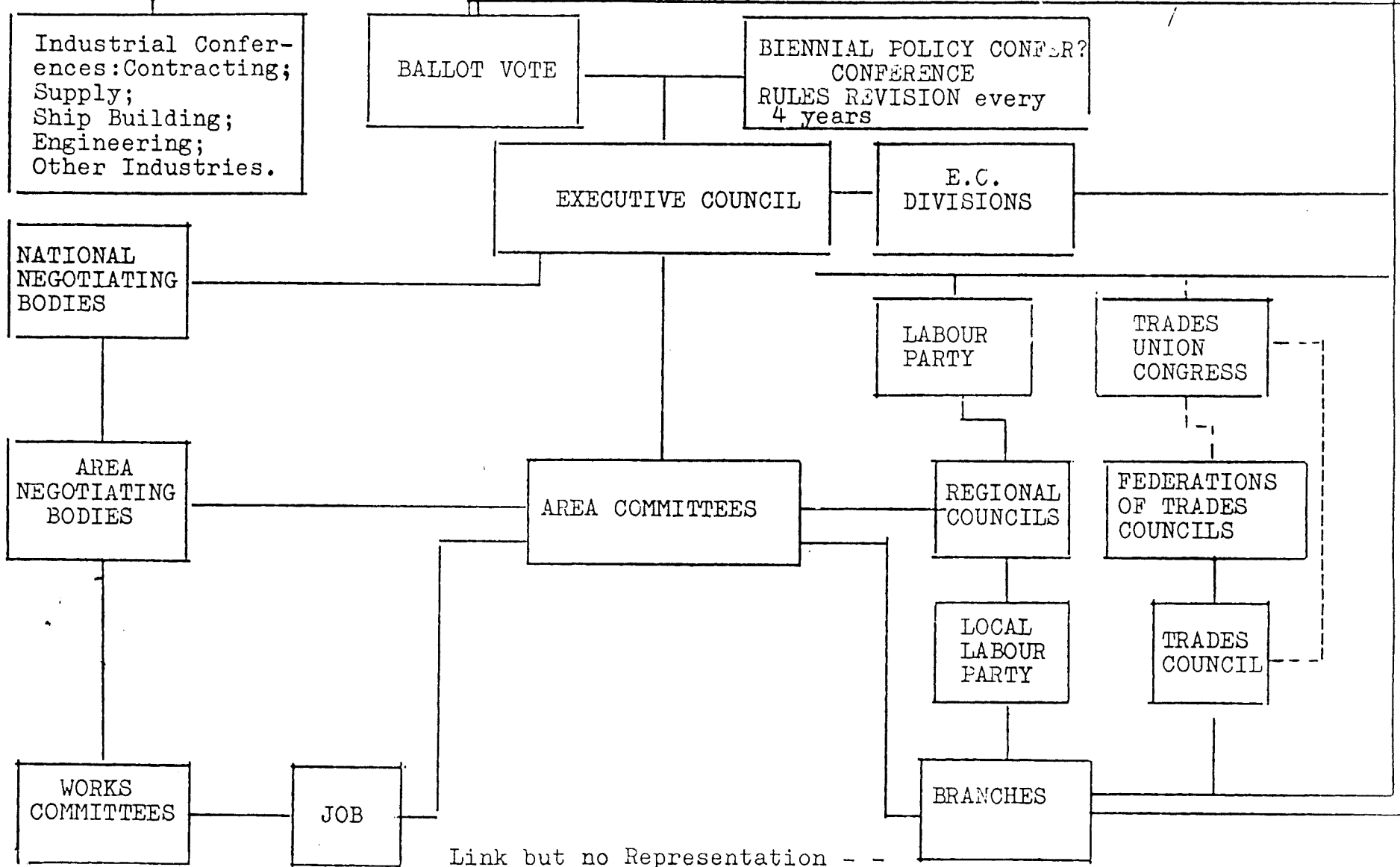
Should the formation of the breakaway EPIU take place, those members that are best placed to "impress a policy and propose and aim" on the EETPU would be removed from the field.

APPENDIXTHE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF THE UNION

- Diagram 1. Pre-1962.
Diagram 2. 1962-1965.
Diagram 3. The "New Model" 1965.
Diagram 4. The present day structure.

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diagram 2

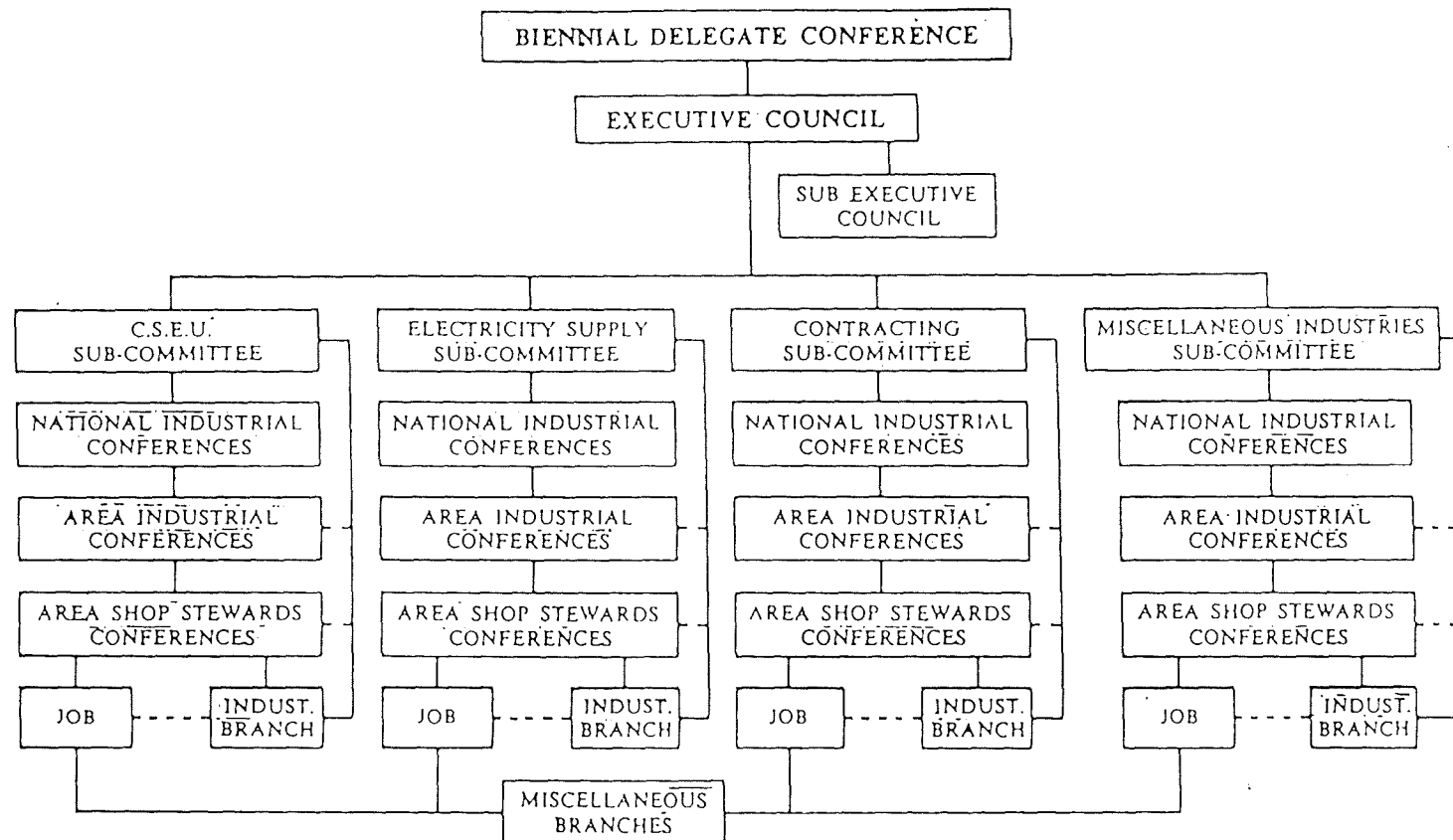
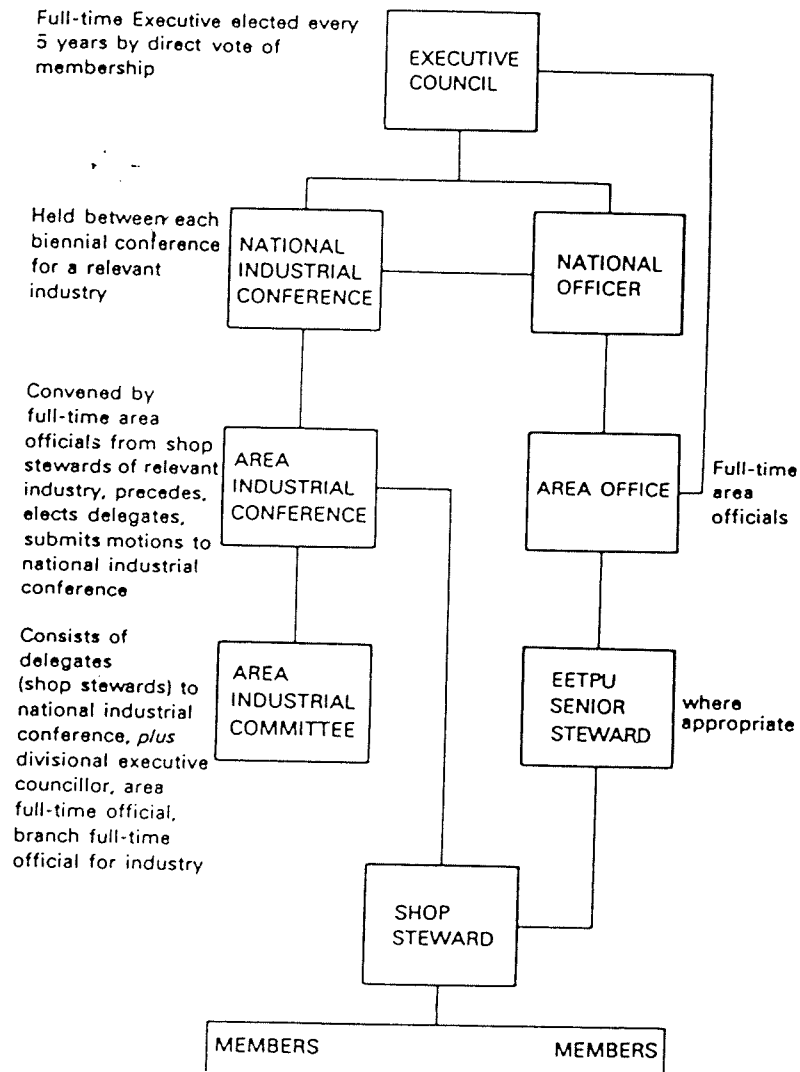


Diagram of proposed new union structure—Line Organisation

diagram 4

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PART TWO THE NEW MODEL UNION

CHAPTER FOUR

THE REMODELLING OF THE UNION

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONSOLIDATION CENTRALISATION AND GROWTH

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- (44) Alan Fox, Man Mismanagement, (Second Edition), Hutchinson, London, 1985, p. 117.
- (45) *Guardian*, 15 March 1986.
- (46) *Incomes Data Services*, Report 472, May 1986.
- (47) *Contact*, Volume 14, No.3, September 1984.
- (48) Michael Poole, Workers' Participation in Industry, Routledge, London, 1978, p. 26; Pateman, op. cit., pp 68-69.
- (49) *Incomes Data Services: collective bargaining No.2*, May 1984.
- (50) Ibid., and Bassett, op.cit., p. 120.
- (51) Bassett, op.cit., pp. 143-146.
- (52) *Financial Times*, 10 July 1987.
- (53) *Financial Times*, 8 January 1986, and "Union World", Channel 4, 20 February 1986.
- (54) *Contact*, Volume 14, No.3, September 1984.
- (55) *Financial Times*, 20 June 1987.
- (56) *Financial Times*, 19 May 1988.
- (57) Quoted in Bassett, op.cit., p. 88.
- (58) *Incomes Data Services*, Report 428, July 1984. For full details see Bassett, op.cit., pp. 133-138.
- (59) Report of the 1983 EETPU Biennial Delegate Conference, Blackpool, 7th - 11th November, p. 189.
- (60) Ibid., p. 190.
- (61) Ibid., pp. 195-197.
- (62) *Incomes Data Services, collective bargaining No.2*, May 1984.
- (63) See *Flashlight*, No.36, (September 1984) for the first coverage of the deals.
- (64) *Flashlight*, No.37.
- (65) Agenda for the Ninth Biennial Delegate Conference of the EETPU, Blackpool, 1st - 5th July, 1985, p. 20.
- (66) *Financial Times*, 6 July 1985. See also report in *Contact*, Volume 15, No.3, August 1985.
- (67) Ibid.
- (68) Agenda 1985 BDC, op.cit., p. 20.

- (69) *Guardian and Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1985.
- (70) *Incomes Data Services*, Report 465, January 1986. The amendment follows word for word a section of the Apex motion passed at the 1985 TUC - see TUC Annual Report, p. 429.
- (71) *Financial Times*, 18 May and 21 June 1988.
- (72) Michels, *op.cit.*, p.159.
- (73) This seems to have been the case at Devalit U.K. Limited, Yorkshire, where one of the reasons given for recognizing the GMB as opposed to the EETPU (and the AEU and TGWU) was that the former was a "safe" union, whereas the Electricians' union was potentially troublesome: *Dispatches*, Channel 4, 25 March 1988.

CONCLUSION

- (1) See bibliography.
- (2) For example, J. Goldstein, The Government of British Trade Unions, Allen and Unwin, London, 1952, or B.C. Roberts, Trade Union Government and Administration in Great Britain, Bell & Sons, London, 1956.
- (3) See the introduction to John Hemingway, Conflict and Democracy, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978, for a good overview of the variety of models and methods.
- (4) For example, S.M. Lipset, M. Trow and J.S. Coleman, Union Democracy, Anchor Books, New York, 1956, or J. David Edelstein and Malcolm Warner, Comparative Union Democracy, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 1979.
- (5) For example, John Hughes, Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, Research Papers, No.5 (Part 2) Trade Union Structure and Government, H.M.S.O., London, 1968, or Roderick Martin, "Union Democracy: An Explanatory Framework", *Sociology*, Volume 2, 1968; and V.L. Allen, Power in Trade Unions, Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1954.
- (6) For example, Hemingway, op. cit., and Cliff and Gluckstein, op. cit.
- (7) On "efficiency" see Hyman, Industrial Relations: a Marxist Introduction, op. cit., pp. 83-84.
- (8) Michels, op. cit., p. 364 and p. 159.
- (9) Gouldner, op. cit., p. 80.
- (10) Michels, op. cit., p. 336.
- (11) Coleman, op. cit., p. 520.
- (12) Michels, op. cit., p. 65.
- (13) W.W. Daniel, "Wage Determination in Industry", *Political and Economic Planning Broadsheet*, No.563, Volume XLII, June 1976, p.76.
- (14) W.E.J. McCarthy and S.R. Parker, Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, Research Papers No.10, Shop Stewards and Workshop Relations, H.M.S.O., London, 1968.
- (15) Michels, op. cit., p. 364.
- (16) Ibid., p. 369.
- (17) Ibid., p. 367.

- (18) Ibid., p. 368.
- (19) Hyman, Industrial Relations: a Marxist Introduction, op.cit., p. 92.
- (20) Richard Hyman, "The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and Some Problems for Theory", *Capital and Class*, No.8, 1979,
- (21) Weber, op.cit., p. 991.
- (22) See Martin Albrow, Bureaucracy, Macmillan, London, 1970, pp. 47-48.
- (23) Hyman, Industrial Relations: a Marxist Introduction, op.cit., p. 73.
- (24) Gouldner, op.cit.
- (25) *Socialist Worker*, 13 December 1986.
- (26) J. MacInnes and A. Sproull, "Union Recognition in the Electronics Industry in Scotland", Centre for Research in Industrial Democracy and Participation Research Report No.4, University of Glasgow, 1986.
- (27) Martin, op.cit., p. 207.
- (28) Gramsci, Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920, op.cit. p. 265.

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This was the main source for examining the press campaign that was conducted against the ETU in the 1950s.

British Library of Political and Economic Science, London

The Library holds the union's conference reports for 1957-1967 and from 1971 onwards (incomplete), and also a run of the union's pre-1969 journal, *Electron*. Cf. A London Bibliography of the Social Sciences.

Communist Party of Great Britain Library and Archive

Holds a very limited amount of material on the Electricians' union, but it does hold the CP's statements on the 1961 trial. Nor does it hold a run of the *Daily Worker* (and the *Morning Star* only for recent years): these can be consulted at the British Newspaper Library.

Dundee Central Library Local History Department

The Library holds over 400 items on the ETU, including: a run of *Electron* (1954-1960), conference reports (1944- 1948, 1950-1961), and Executive Council Minutes (1938-1960).

Cf. Ian MacDougall, A Catalogue of some labour records in Scotland, Scottish Labour History Society, Edinburgh, 1978.

EETPU Motherwell office

Other than the Executive Council Minutes (1949, 1950-1952, 1960, and 1967-1988) the office holds very little material on the union.

Flashlight

All 45 editions of *Flashlight* have proved to be an invaluable source of information about the EETPU

Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick

The Centre holds the Cannon Papers (MSS 137), which includes an assortment of articles, documents and letters, but most valuably the unofficial circulars of the *Reform Group*, ETU pamphlets on the press campaign, Cannon's document "Some notes on the situation in the ETU" (MSS 137/32), and his own collection of press cuttings. The Centre also has a complete run of *Contact* from 1969 onwards.

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