

21st Berwick & District Trades Council Annual Dayschool: 25th Oct. 2014

Before introducing the speaker John Kay formally hands over a £100 cheque from Comrade Steve Stevenson formerly from the Kent NUS branch when he worked on the Channel ferry. There has been a longstanding solidarity with our comrades from Deal and Dover ever since their strike over pay and conditions and the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster in 1987. John also explains that the forthcoming weekend on *Democracy* to be held at Wortley Hall near Sheffield, organized by the Raymond Williams Foundation is now fully booked but he has leaflets to distribute about the work of the Foundation.

10.30 -11.30 am Dave Lyddon:

Dave was last in Berwick for the Dayschool of 2003 when he talked about Health and Safety in the workplace. He starts his talk about Trade Unions by giving a short history of their consolidation which falls into five distinct periods.

- Guilds during the pre-Industrial period
- Engineering, textile workers , coal miners of the Industrial revolution
- Casual labour such as Dockers and transport workers. (late C19th)
- Non-manual unions (late C19th, early C20th)
- NHS and professional associations. (late C20th).

Dave explains that a Certification Office gives Unions their Certificate of Industrial Registration.

Only since the 1971 Industrial Relations Act have NHS professionals including physiotherapists, nurses, dentists and radiographers been drawn into unionism.

The Webbs (Fabian Society) identified three doctrines of trade unionism.

- Mutual Insurance
- Collective bargaining
- Legal enactment.

Sidney won a parliamentary seat at Seaham later won by Ramsay Macdonald. The Webbs wrote a book about Trade Union History called "*Industrial Democracy*" in 1897 and this is a classic, translated into Russian by Lenin. Beatrice allegedly coined the term "*collective bargaining*". Sidney Webb helped draft the Labour Party Constitution.

In its early stages only Craft Unions could afford to organize sick pay, pensions etc. Alternatively Credit Unions were available. The most important benefit was 'Out of Work' pay. All unions were male at this stage. The union decided the rate of pay and could use its discretion over superannuation for older workers.

The Miners' Lockout Strike of 1926 in Durham was the most remarkable up to that date with the miners showing extreme fortitude for a period of 7 months. They preferred to suffer a strike rather than have their pay reduced.

The union tried a campaign of withdrawing members one at a time which was another powerful weapon but difficult to sustain.

There were welfare reforms even before WWI and health insurance was compulsory. The Welfare State was a lifeline after WW2.

Dave points out that negotiations would only work if both sides partake. Most employers did not want to negotiate leaving people to use private insurance.

It is interesting that working class MPs only arrived in Parliament during the 1890's and they were more sympathetic and supportive of bills that affected the working class. Dave mentions Thomas Burt, a former miner and member for Morpeth and the very first working class MP. As more T.U. officials were elected to Parliament the Labour Party was established in 1906.

Dave quotes a few examples of successful Parliamentary bills. Lancashire's *Nine Hour Bill* (9 hour day) for cotton factories took four years of campaigning and legal efforts. The reality was more like a 56 hour week. It took 6 months of negotiations for engineers in Sunderland to get a 9 hour day in 1971 and even then it was nullified by a practice of systematic overtime. Improvements may take years.

The giants of the C19th were King Cotton and King Coal. The majority of unions had less political clout but the railway workers were the backbone of the Labour Party. The problem was that members were scattered geographically. Many employers resisted union pressure and it took many years of battling to improve conditions of pay and pensions.

NALGO (National and Local Government Officers) in 1906 pursued municipal government officials to gain superannuation and compensation for salary cuts. This pressure led to a Private Members Bill that made some progress by 1922 and only was en-acted in 1937.

Dave mentions the historical beginning of Craftsmen Guilds in 1563 when wages were determined at quarterly sessions by magistrates. This led to strict demarcations within the trades and the term *interloper* was used against other craftspeople. Vested interests and feudal privileges took time to be removed. Supply and Demand is the law of the labour market.

Living Wage: this was a sensitive issue. Why were dockers sometimes so starving that they could not work a full day? This was inhumane but also industrially inefficient. In the late 1890's there were clashes between different unions which had different aspirations.

The hand-out explains on the back about the perpetually shifting compromise between the three doctrines.

- **Questions:** How can campaigns help? Answer: need to campaign massively and need a slogan
- Unions and international relations? Answer: no consistent policy
- Role of E.U? Answer E.U. has provided some benefits even though collective bargaining is weaker with fewer members.

· Gerry mentions the 1999 Peugeot strike when French union members negotiated a 35 hour week but this did not apply to the U.K.

11.45 – 12.30 From Smokestacks to Ivory Towers: The Changing and Enduring Nature of British Trade-Unionism since 1945 by Dave Lyddon.

Fortunately Dave had produced a 7-sided hand-out on this topic as many facts were supported by statistics.

In general after WW2 there was a shift from heavy industry to service industries. From 1945 – 1979 was the peak of the Trade Union movement. Almost half the workers were in unions by 1968 and 3 million more members joined before 1979 of which half were in public services. There was also a larger increase in the number of women union members compared to increases in men.

The numbers of agricultural workers and engineering workers in pre-war days declined after the war and soon NALGO absorbed utility unions such as water and energy. Nowadays strikes are rare. Collective bargaining is the norm.

13.30 – 14 45 John Stirling “Global or Local: Which way for Trades Unions?”

John asked the audience why we were here and concluded that we want to engage with each other and change the world for the better. He sometimes despairs about Trade Unions and their falling membership. He notices that even in China there are some T.U. activists. There is as much need for T.U.s as ever but we need to change strategies. We need to campaign both locally and globally.

John is going to discuss three aspects:

- Community unionism
- European disputes and Workers Councils
- Trade Unionism in Sierra Leone as he has personal experience there in the mining industry.

The Community: T.U.s have a long history of liaison with the public as shown by the Miners’ Strike supported by wives and the general public.

He notes that many traditional workplaces have changed e.g. call centres and care workers who have limited time with their clients.

In the past T.U.s took the lead in strife (e.g. steelworkers at Consett). They are concerned with the indignities of low wages and unemployment and seek to counteract the “scrounger” image of the Daily Mail and similar tabloids.

Nowadays T.U.s can offer advice and support about e.g. the Bedroom Tax.

The recent shortfall of £1.2 b owed to the E.U. is a blow to the tax payer but we have had opportunities from Brussels which have had a positive effect on health and safety for workers. Some European legislation is progressive. On the other hand solidarity is dubious across Europe. There are issues on the immigration of workers. There are difficulties in communication. Closer to

home some Geordies cannot understand Mackems. Foreigners are more likely to speak English but not all do. There needs to be an exchange of information. The multinationals such as McDonalds are global and there are now 120 Workers Councils globally.

Sierra Leone: John was chosen to go there as a Trades Union specialist but he was still under suspicion of being part of British Imperialism. He spotted that there is still child labour in Sierra Leone and despite legislation passed in 2012 this still exists. There is no legal framework to protect Union members even from unfair dismissal and the minimum wage is pathetically low.

The diamond miners were very badly treated with a lack of healthcare and sometimes no housing. A railway built to Freetown on the coast took iron ore from the mines whilst the British were involved but when they left the railway was abandoned. The Chinese are now building railways. Some of the deep mines are unionized.

John Stirling sees that the future needs collective bargaining about pay and conditions and a proper base so that discussions can be held with tribal chiefs. The people need to campaign for proper sanitation too.

In conclusion John quotes the Hovis Strike as a success story when they battled against zero hour contracts. He wants more solidarity and discussions between unions globally.

He is concerned about the safety aspects for foreign textile workers and want basic standards applied. Also wants to eliminate forced labour. He feels that Trade Unions are vital in the developing world.

15.00 -15.30 Trevor Bark on UNITE Community branches in Durham.

These are community organizations to help people at the edge of society. Many are out of work for different reasons. The organization helps people to obtain their benefits using case work and appeals. Members pay 50pence per week and this can be subsidized in cases of severe financial difficulty. (using money off industrial branches). There is staple activism from the offices to appeal at tribunals (e.g. intervention when a judge shouted at someone with innate anxiety).

Other projects include the recycling of computers and a clothing bank to run alongside Food Banks. Self help is encouraged.

UNITE Community started in Barnsley in relation to the N.U.M. and the Durham branch opened in 2013.

If Berwick chose to open a branch it would need a presence and leafleting around the town. Some people have no access to a computer to fill in benefit forms and would appreciate help. Locally most people go to the C.A.B. but might go to a union if they were offered the chance.

Summing up by all the delegates:

Pressure is needed to allow T.U publicity in the workplace.

Mention is made of RMT Education Centre in Doncaster established by Bob Crow offering training to new starters and IT and Health and Safety courses to all members.

PCS (Public and Commercial Service Union) has 240,000 members and is one of the most successful.

LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) members are actively engaged in union matters with appropriate reps.

Credit Unions are another success. Ruskin College still exists.