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BIRMINGHAM LABOUR

BRIEFING

INCORPORATING NATIONAL SUPPLEMENT

No. 28 February 1987

Disunity: who is to blame ?

The answer, as far as the right wing of Birmingham Labour Party is concerned, is the left - 'Briefing' and the Summerfield Group in particular. The right wing are wrong.

The real reason for disunity in the Birmingham party is the activities of the right wing. It is the left who stand for democracy, for accountability, for the proper implementation of party policy. We seek not division but a council which implements the policies the party devises.

It is the right wing who are the wreckers, who sow disunity and then try to maintain their control with loyalty pledges. Unity for them means imposing their will on the party and ignoring democratic decisions.

A look at their record over the past period proves this:

* Going ahead with Convention Centre plans in the face of consistent and principled opposition from the party.
* Pursuing a costly and futile Olympic Games bid without any consultation with the party.
* The loss-making and ill-conceived road race.
* Using money from the sale of council houses for purposes other than housing, while simultaneously failing to establish a house-building programme to meet the needs of the city.
* Issuing an election 'manifesto' over the heads of the party, ignoring vital areas of party policy.
* Failing to develop a proper and effective equal opportunities policing and sacking one of the few councillors who consistently stood for such a policy.
* Using the 'Evening Mail' to publicly attack the party and party members.
* Sending inaccurate circulars about the District Party and its members to wards and constituencies.
* Using 'stalinist' pledge tactics to gag dissent.
* Blocking developments like a sexual harassment questionnaire for teachers because they are scared it might be controversial.
* Disruption of the District Party.

The list goes on. And all the time the situation stays like this the struggle of the left must go on. Soon the annual district policy conference will be with us. The party will pass policies it wants to see implemented, policies that will improve the lot of working class people in the city. With the Summerfield Group now successfully launched, we are in a better position to ensure these policies are implemented.

Meanwhile, we must make sure that the right does not get away with iits loyalty pledges, more details of which are on pages 4 and 5. 'Briefing' calls on its readers to pass in their wards and constituencies resolutions which condemn the practice of forcing chairs and vice-chairs of committees to sign loyalty pledges or face removal from their positions. Forward all such resolutions to the District Party and the Labour Group.

Blunders blunt the right-wing knife

A series of blunders has seriously weakened right wing attempts to launch a counter offensive against the left in Birmingham.

As reported in the last issue of 'Briefing' right wingers on the City Council had become alarmed at the formation of the Birmingham Summerfield Group and the apparent breadth of support in the party for the aims of that group. The view of die hard right wingers was that the sand was slowly slipping from beneath their feet and that Summerfield had the calibre and support to form a potential future administration. They had, therefore, pressed their leadership into an attempt to cut the heart out of Summerfield before it was too late.

Three serious blunders seem to have put a stop to this counter attack, and, at this stage, Summerfield appears to have escaped virtually unscathed.

The right's first blunder was their decision to form their own organisation. But unlike the open, honest, democratic and entirely constitutional methods adopted by 'Summerfield' (which has even applied to be 'registered with the party nationally) the right decided to fall back on its traditional use of 'mafia' tactics and secret plots. Meeting behind the closed doors of the AUEW in Holloway Circus on Saturday 6 December, an unholy alliance of hardline rightwingers and the self proclaimed 'sensible centre', led by that well known model of moderation, Roger Murray, met to plot ways to stop the growth of the left. The strategy was twofold; squeeze the softer end of 'Summerfield' within the council, and break the left's grip on the District Party and its policy making machinery - if necessary by forcing the disoarding of the District Party and re-establishing it under the firm control of the trade union establishment.

The right, however, have become victims of their own conspiratorial secrecy, as the malicious and devious nature of the 'Holloway Circus' contrasts starkly with the almost naive openness of 'Summerfield' and its widely publicised declaration of aims. This comparison reflects unpleasantly on the right and appears to have alienated much of their potential support in the non-aligned centre.

The second blunder was the right's decision to launch an assault on six Councillors, five of whom were associated with 'Summerfield'. Knowles was forced by his own right wing to press for disciplinary measures against councillors alleged to be involved with 'Summerfield'. This attack was a major miscalculation. The councillors had proved, often to the exasperation of left wingers in the constituencies that they are not particularly left wing and are basically concerned with issues of democracy and the implementation of party policy. Hardliners well to the right of Dick Knowles struggled to stick 'extremist' labels on the likes of Trudy Livingstone, Theresa Stewart and Andy Foster. Most perceptive observers will have noticed Knowles' own reluctance to press the attack. As an experienced organiser he realised it was poorly timed and would be counter productive.

Finally in the trio of blunders was the leadership's decision to extract 'loyalty' oaths from six councillors targetted for discipline. Smacking of the worst of Stalinism, these oaths attempted to bind the councillors to unswerving support for the leadership. They can only be seen as a vicious attempt to gag free speech and dissent.

This is so far from the 'broad church' unity that used to be Knowles' hallmark that many even on the centre of the party will see it as a measure of the declining stature and confidence of the present administration. Empires turn to repression as their popularity declines - a lesson that will not be lost on those with eyes on the future.

Rob Pocock (Perry Barr CLP).



WOMEN CELEBRATE ?

"Women Celebrate" - that's the title of a festival planned for 1 - 8 March. Co-ordinated by Birmingham City Council Women's Committee, to celebrate International Women's Day, it aims to show the contribution women make to the city of Birmingham and to publicise the services the council provides for women.

The festival, the first of its kind to be held by the City Council, is to be welcomed. Some events in the week-long programme show that many women's groups and organisations in the city have taken the opportunity to re-establish themselves or to hold public meetings to reach out to a wider audience. Therefore there is a Women's Fayre on Sunday 8 March and a meeting organised by the Trades Council Women's Group on 4 March. This features Betty Heathfield and Sharon Atkin as well as women active in other struggles both local and international. This meeting should be lively and informative.

However, some other meetings are in stark contrast; for example, a meeting organised around the theme of 'women in public life' which features Edwina Currie talking about how she 'made it'. This sort of meeting is patronising, offers no way forward and can hardly be appealing to many women.

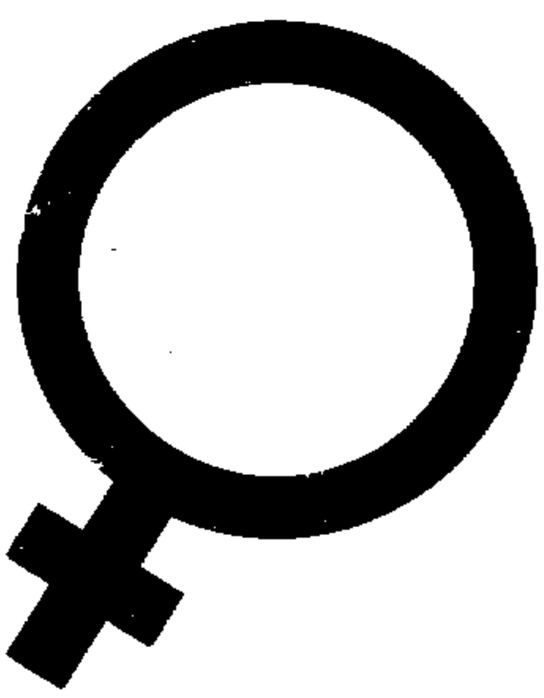
In fact, the whole theme 'Women Celbrate' and some of the ways in which the festival has been organised raise serious questions about the Labour Council. Many women will want to know just what there is to celebrate and ask what services the council has actually provided for them. The whole theme would seem to be about continuing rather than changing policies - for example, to provide more nurseries, more training, more job opportunities and so on. It is issues like this which reveal the Council's inadequacies. Many women



will also question the sincerity of the Council's committment to women when it has just agreed again to cut the women's budget and has tried, throughout the whole planning of the event to wrench away political control of the festival from the Women's Committee and the women in the constituency parties and women's sections.

Nevertheless, we should argue that the council holds a similar event next year. But next time women want more control over the event and deserve to be assigned a lot more than a mere £6,000 for a week long festival.

Bernie Wilde.



JOSEPH FRAY LTD.

Eleven weeks ago, workers at Joseph Fray Ltd. were locked out for seeking a wage rise on top of their £81 a week. Since then, there has been a 24 hour picket at the factory, part of the Metalrax Group of Companies. Scabs have been recruited and the entire workforce dismmissed.

Many of the mostly women workforce have worked for Joseph Fray's for most of their working lives. The company has offered q £200 'severance' payment for all those with at least 39 years service. Small compensation for all those years of service that made the company what it is today. The firm claims to be losing money but directors and shareholders got a 20% dividend increase last year. The largest shareholder and key director, former Tory MP Derek Coombs, nad an income of £200,000 last year.

The firm has been in operation since 1873 and this is the first dispute in the entire 113 years. But the company has not delayed now it is in dispute. On Saturday 24 January, 44 named pickets were banned from their normal picketting place as the law was used to intimidate them. Furthewr writs were threatened. TGWU convenor, Carol Bailey and her daughter were arrested after a scab claimed to have been assaulted. She was supposed to have been assualted six days previously, but had carried on working all week.

Joseph Fray is typical of many factories in Birmingham and the West Midlands. It is the real face of the 'flexible low wage workforce' which some politicians talk about.

The workers urgently need your support. Invite a speaker, collect money, visit the picket at Middlemore Road Industrial Estae, Middlemore Road (near West Bromwich Albian Football Ground).

Liz Hunt.

EDITORIAL:

BRIEFING ANSWERS THE CRITICS

Last month's issue of 'Birmingham Labour Briefing' proved rather more controversial than usual. Controversy centred on the page one article, 'Right Wing Offensive !', written by Rob Pocock. The article suggested that the left in Birmingham should prepare for power. On current trends, it claimed, we would have a majority by May 1988.

This idea prompted much media attention. Both the 'Evening Mail' and the 'Daily News' featured major pieces on the article. The 'Mail', of course, was only too eager to follow up the attacks on the left that, with the assistance of the right wing, it had already begun.

Within the party, it led to a letter in the name of Group Chairperson, Ken Barton, being sent to all members of the Labour Group. This was followed by a stormy Labour Group meeting early in January - a 'night of the long knives' as Albert Bore called it. As a result, some Councillors who had associated themselves with the Summerfield Group were asked to sign a pledge.

Amongst the left itself, including within 'Briefing' itself, much discussion followed. Many comrades assumed the article represented the opinions of 'Briefing' supporters as a whole. This is not the case. It was a signed article, representing an individual viewpoint and should be regarded as such. Any editorial statements 'Briefing' may make will, like this one, be clearly described as such. Otherwise 'Briefing' prints, and will continue to print, articles that debate the political situation in Birmingham, whether or not we agree with them in their entirety. We defend our right to print the article and its author's right to contribute his opinions to the debate on the way forward for socialists in Birmingham.

In these circumstances it is necessary to explain that 'Briefing' considers the article's assessment to be over optimistic. It identifies a "broad left alliance centred on the Summerfield Group" that, it is claimed, will win power because it is "broad-based, non-sectarian and pragmatic". Absent from the analysis is the political dimension, the policies on which such an alliance would come to power.

Instead, it suggests that the left relies simply on winning a numerical majority on the Group so that it can outvote the right. But 'Briefing' does not believe the left will come to power in Birmingham on the basis of superior arithmetical skills, by getting the numbers game right. It will only come to power on the basis of fighting, and winning support, for socialist policies, the sort of policies which the right have made it very clear they have no intention of implementing. In the final analysis, it is not the individuals who are in power which decides whether or not the administration is left wing; it is the policies the fight for and implement. There are many examples, including within the current Labour Group, who have been regarded as left wingers until, in positions of power, they have shown their true colours.

Currently, the Summerfield Group bases itself, rightly, on the implementation of District Party policy. It is on the basis of those policies that we must campaign for power.

It is these policies which the right wing fear. That is why they have stepped up dramatically their onslaught on the left, on the Summerfield Group and 'Briefing' in particular. In his letter to Labour Group members, Ken Barton makes plain the nature of this attack:

"For the 'Briefing clique' to call themselves left is an insult to the real and traditional left and their every action is more authoritarian than democratic,,,the Group will not countenance in any way this sort of attitude. Headlines of this sort and articles of the kind which have appeared recently in Labour Briefing will certainly mean the loss of many Labour votes particularly in the marginals,,,Obviously, the objective of the Labour Briefing article, reported in the Birmingham Evening Mail, is to divide the Labour group and the outcome of such actions could not be the control of the City Council by the Labour Group but,,,by the Conservatives and detrimentally affecting the General Election results. Perhaps, if the "Briefing" group were in touch with the ordinary working class they would have more idea of what the people want and care about and what will attract people to VOTE LABOUR".

The essence of the argument is 'left wing policies lose votes because the working class don't like them'. These policies, of course, are often equal opportunities policies for women, for Black people, for lesbians and

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gay men. But it is the right wing who are out of touch with the working class, with Labour voters. Now, women, Black people and gays make up about two thirds of Birmingham's population. Nationally, women and Black men make up about half the workforce. No longer can Labour in Birmingham base itself on appealing to white working class men working in manufacturing industry. Policies which pander to the racism and sexism of the white working class can no longer be accepted. But it is to appease the racism and sexism of the white working class that the right wing opposes real equal opportunities policies for Birmingham. They are in open war with supporters of such policies.

This explains the onslaught on the left at January's Labour Group meeting, when attempts were made to remove some comrades associated with the Summerfield Group from their positions in Council committees. These moves were narrowly agreed on a second vote, after an initial 31 - 31 tie. At this point, sections of the right, notably Dick Knowles, recognised that going ahead with purges on such a narrow majority would be politically stupid. Such a narrow mandate would look foolish in the press, following right wing claims that the Summerfield Group was a small and unrepresentative clique. Therefore, Knowles called for an apparent 'compromise'. If the named offenders would sign a loyalty pledge they would be let off. Thus, a group of councillors associated with the Summerfield Group signed the following pledge when asked:

"In a year when the LP may well face a General Election and when the Labour Group faces huge problems in making its budget, I believe that no action by any members of the Birmingham Group can be other than to preserve the utmost unity and solidarity against our opponents and I am happy to give such an assurance.

"It is clear that those behind the journal 'Briefing' have made an attempt over the past year to de-stabilise the unity of the Labour Group in Birmingham and I will be no part of that attempt.

"I accept that those parts of the 'pledge' of the Summerfield Group which can be interpreted as attempting to change the Standing Orders of the Labour Group, based on the LP constitution and the attempts (some successful) to de-select elected members has incensed many members of the Group and the disbanding of any organised groups within the Labour Group may well be in the best interests of the Party.

"I am pleased to give an undertaking of support for the elected Leadership of the Group and look forward to working for socialism in Birmingham during 1987."

There can be no doubt that to demand comrades sign such a pledge is indefensible. It smacks of Stalinist show trials. But 'Briefing' believes the councillors concerned were wrong to sign such a pledge. In no sense can it be seen as a strategic retreat or 'boxing clever' as some comrades have suggested. 'Briefing' is dismayed, but not especially surprised that they were able to sign the part which disassociated them from 'Briefing'. The astonishing part is that they felt it necessary to sign the third paragraph. Now, Dick Knowles and the right wing will be able to move against these councillors the moment they step outside the constraints which the right has put them under. And they will be able to do so on the basis of a document signed by these self same councillors. These councillors are fooling themselves if they think they can sign a document like this, lie low for a couple of months, keep their committee positions and then revert to being open supporters of the Summerfield Group.

The only way forward now is to stand up and fight, to build on the launch of the wider Summerfield Group and the solidarity and support it can offer within the party, and to take forward the struggle for the democratisation of the party and the implementation of party policy. On such a basis the left may yet come to power; not otherwise.



LETTER:

SUMMERFIELD'S FUTURE

Before Xmas I attended a meeting which was supposed to be the launch of the Summerfield Group. It was cancelled amidst great confusion.An informal discussion was held instead,which focussed mainly on the reasons for the cancellation.

Then I attended the official launch on 17 January. Unfortunately much of that meeting was taken up with discussion of loyalty pledges in the Labour Party and the councillors who signed the pledge.

I understand one of the principles of the Summerfield Group is accountability. If the group is to function it must display internal accountability. Two questions have to be asked. Why was the first launch cancelled because of adverse publicity? Secondly, who decided Summerfield supporters should sign the pledge and not attend the launch? Have we already a group within a group? I believe the councillors should have attended the launch so they could hear the arguments for and against their signing.

I know people will say they were right to sign for various technical reasons, but I feel that analysis is wrong. They do not know their own strength. Changing Birmingham City Council is about getting existing policy implemented, developing new socialist policy, getting it adopted and implemented, and getting representatives elected who will be accountable to the party and carry out its policy. The first things are impossible without the last.

The January Labour Group meeting is indicative of the changes occuring in the group. Some on the soft left are having their eyes opened in experiencing the venom of the right-wing. They are seeing there are some people you cannot convince and persuade. We need to help the soft left to learn from their experiences who their friends are and when they should not let those friends down.

It was also argued that signing Dick Knowles' pledge was a tactical retreat. Victories are never wonby tactical retreats. They always give those who sit on the fence somewhere to go. Remove the compromise 'tactical retreat' and those who sit on the fence have to choose - right or left.

We must call Knowles' bluff and stand firm. We are in the ascendency, not the old, failed right wing, we have to emphasise this to the soft left and go on the offensive against the right who are scared of us. They are scared of us standing together. But we have to show we can win by standing firm on our principles. Every time people on the left take decisions without being accountable - calling off meetings or signing pledges - they concede the initiative to the right wing.

Our strength is in the branches and constituencies and rank and file members, not among the Labour Group. Removing people from chairs of committees, positions they only hold with the acquiescence of the right wing will not weaken us.

Summerfield needs to push policy development but must not concede the agenda to the right. This means people representing the left remembering where their comrades and political friends are and being accountable to them and not allowing the divisive tactics of the right to succeed.

It means getting committed, accountable representatives in control of the Labour Group. It means a committed rank and file group like 'Summerfield' to help those representatives withstand the right's malicious onslaught .

John Wilton, PPC Edgbaston in a personal capacity.

(Please note: this letter has been edited for reasons of space.)

ANTI-APARTHEID EVENTS

The Anti-Apartheid Movement has called a March month of action to help implement People's Sanctions. Birmingham Anti-Apartheid has arranged the following events:

March 4: Picket of Standard Chartered Bank, 11.30 - 1.30.

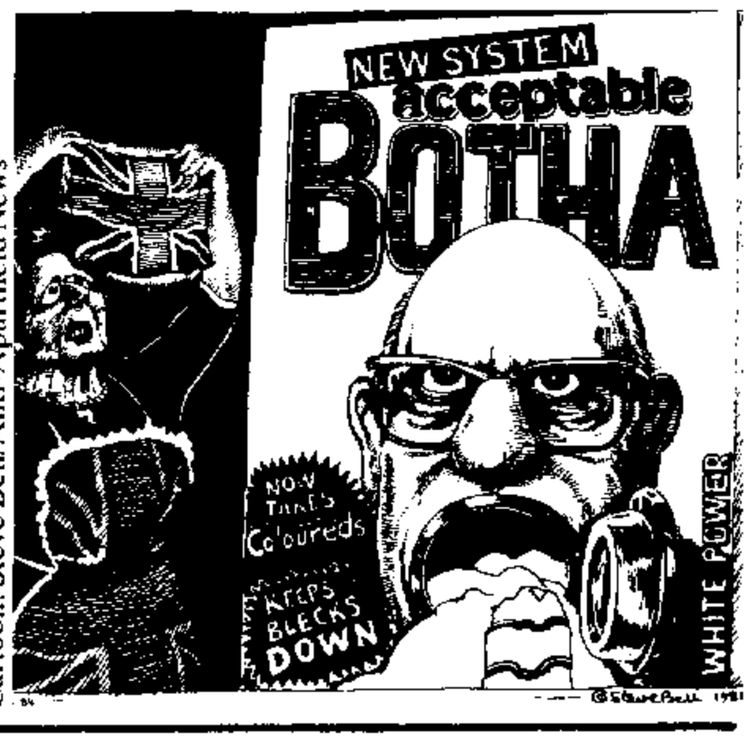
March 7, 14, 28: Picket of Shell Station Moseley Road, Balsall Heath, 11.30 - 2.30.

(The March 7 picket will focus on the role of women in the struggle in South Africa and Namibia, that on 28 March on Shell's involvement in Namibia.)

March 5, 12, 19, 26: Picket of Marks and Spencer, High Street, Birmingham 4.30 - 6.00.

March 21: Demonstration to mark Sharpeville and Langa Day in Birmingham City Centre.

For further information, Ring Andy Chaffer on 236 1240 (day) or 707 2182. Please help build support now in your union and Labour Party branches. Victory is Certain!



Cartoon: Steve Bell/Anti-Apartheid News

SUMMERFIELD LAUNCHED

The Birmingham Summerfield Group declared it was still alive and kicking at its relaunch at the Summerfield Centre on 17 January, despite the new right-wing counter attack.

Over forty party members and Councillors were at the meeting to forge broad left links between the rank and file and elected members. This move has clearly panicked the Council's anti-socialist leadership. In fact, the hard right, led by Stan Yapp, attempted to force through draconian tactics to smash the caucus. This attempt failed and almost toppled the soft right Dick Knowles.

The meeting denounced the right's attempts to force councillors to sign a loyalty pledge that attacked both S ummerfield and 'Briefing'. Memories of the eras of McCarthy and Stalin were conjured up.

But such moves are merely cynical attempts to shore up the right wing's white, male, 'SDP' policies that do not address human need. The meeting raised the issue of millions of pounds of public money being spent on the International Convention Centre, in defiance of District Party Policy, when the Race and Women's units were starved of cash.

One view of the Summerfield group was that it should be pragmatic, even opportunist, in its strategies, creating a viable alternative to the present council run by the 'gang of four'. Although many in the Labour Group and the Party would not actively support a left wing grouping they would support particular socialist policies.

Equal Opportunities for Black people, women, lesbians and gay men, and people with disabilities were declared priorities for Summerfield, in contrast to the ruling right's hostility to these issues. It was pointed out that the political tradition of the 'gang of four' and their supporters was that of the white male shopfloor, simply excluding the experiences of many people.

The meeting decided to plan future debates on socialism in the local council. It was also decided that future meetings should discuss equal opportunities, housing, and the issue of the failure of the Labour Group to implement District Party policies.

Simon Hinds.

Sandwell: underspending and poverty

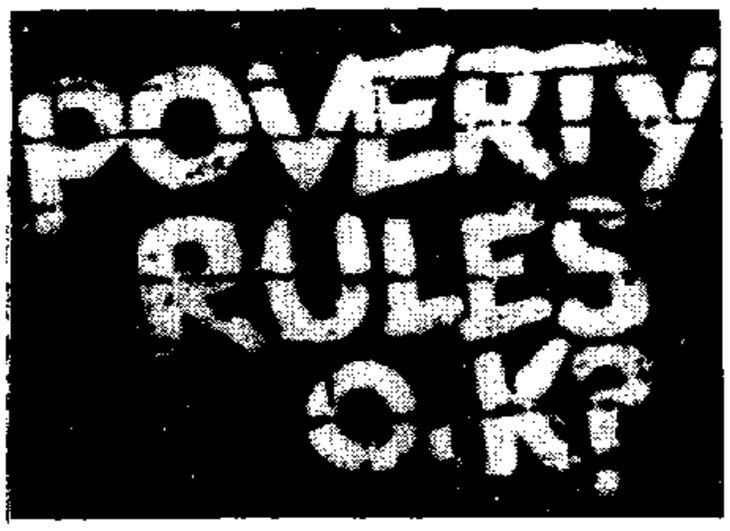
The right wing dominated Labour Group in Sandwell has been thrown into complete disarray by the highly critical management review report just completed by the District Audit Service.

The report confirms that deprivation in Sandwell is self evident, and provides a disturbing analysis of poverty and deprivation made worse by Council underspending - particularly on housing and social services - placing Sandwell amongst the most deprived areas in all the country.

Since 1974, this persistent underspending has resulted in a rate fund reserve of £24 million. Low pay among many of the council's 17,000 workers often means that vacancies stay empty, creating staff shortages, badly distributed workloads and further underspending.

The report catalogues numerous managerial initiatives to improve efficiency and save money, arguing that the council is currently powerless to remedy these problems as it lacks any overall policy objectives for the borough.

The District Auditors call Sandwell a 'status quo' borough, and this reaches to the heart of the matter. Frenziedly opposed to any and all forms of radicalism, Sandwell's ruling hard right clique are faced with a crisis



they can only deepen - a conclusion which even the centre-right Council members have arrived at, to judge from the struggle now taking place.

Clearly, massive reorganisation is an inescapable conclusion of the report, though it is characteristic that the auditors present solutions which are argued only in 'managerial' and 'corporatist' terms. In the bitter post mortem which will take place over the coming months, it is important to remember that these far from progressive solutions, if implemented, will mean a witch hunt to identify individual inefficiencies, rather than isolate political failure. Once again, Sandwell's Labour right will try to put the unions and individual workers into the front line. The left must defend against this.

Certainly, the left must contribute at evry opportunity to the discussion concerning Sandwell council's reorganisation - but it must participate on its own terms, not on those of a conservative audit unit set up by the Tories!

The demand must be for a *socialist* solution to Sandwell's problems and for the urgent *democratisation* of the Council itself.

BT: the truth behind the stoppage

On Monday 19 January telephone engineers in Birmingham stopped work. We have been out since then as a result of a dispute which goes back to July 1986.

Management refused to meet the pay claim of the National Communications Union (NCU) for a 10% across the board increase.

This increase is easily affordable; business is booming, order books are full, members of the British Telecom Board had been awarded 80% pay increases.

The management offer is 5% with strings. These strings include abolition of current duty definitions. In plain language, we would have to go anywhere, do anything, at anytime and forget prospects of promotion. Hours of cover would be extended by two hours, meaning working unsociable hours not at overtime rates. Some minor grades would be abolished. These strings are unacceptable.

The strike follows two ballots, the first consultative, the second under the terms of the Trade Union Act 1984, 70% said yes to strike action on an 80% vote. An overtime ban and a work to rule led to a virtual management lockout on Monday 19 January, everyone reported for work only to be given forms to sign by the management. These were to make us work as directed by management, including overtime. Again, the effect was that we should go anywhere, do anything, at any time. The strike is now solid - a shock to BT who must have thought we'd be a soft touch.

Telephone Engineers are not, by history, a militant workforce, rather the opposite. The Broad left enjoyed power briefly after the war, but the right wing organised a breakaway organisation of the skilled grades. They later regained control and it stayed that way until the early eighties. Then a rather moderate Broad Left gained power for three years after a successful campaign to reduce the working week. Now it is in the right wing hands of John Golding.

Meanwhile, the Tory government has altered the face of the industry by dividing telecoms from the post office, then relaxing the BT monopoly and finally by privatisation. At the same time top city executives have been put in control of the board.



All this means a confident management and an inexperienced union leaderhip - a green light to the city that more money was there for the taking. But leadership at branch level remains left wing and the membership are not prepared tp see all the p ost war gains swept away.

The other factor to take into account is the impact of modernisation on job security. 40,000 jobs are threatened as a result over the next five years. The left proposes a 32 hour 4 day week as a partial solution. The management, and the right wing union leadership would prefer a policy of natural wastage and voluntary redundancy.

British capitalism is in deep crisis. From the employers' point of view it is necessary to roll back the gains of the British working class. The pattern, repeated over and over, is to break a union, bring in new technology and drastically reduce the workforce. For this reason, the dispute is not just about telephone engineers but all the organised working class in Britain. We have to make the strike successful. Success could turn the tide against the ruling class and sweep the Labour Party to power.

Malcolm Speake (Telephone Engineer).

BRIEFING

Please send all articles and letters to;
48 Thornhill Road, Birmingham, B21 9BS, tel: 551 9174.

'Briefing' meets on the second Monday of every month. All welcome. 'Phone for details.

