

CAN THE TIDE BE TURNED?

BRITAIN IN 1982

WHAT TO MAKE OF 1982? Certainly a historic year, certainly a year of defeat for the popular movements. But consider the following: The biggest national strike since 1926; Sinn Fein top the polls in West Belfast; Bradford 12 win and police are humiliated; 30,000 women encircle the base at Greenham Common; 250,000 march for peace with the Falklands fiasco still in progress. Can this really be the year the movements collapsed? More likely, it was the year the Left missed the bus...

Let's be quite clear, for starters, that we don't question the analysis that suggests that traditional working class struggle is at a low point, and that a period of mass unemployment has killed off much of what resistance there was.

But this is not the be all and end all of it. There's a certain Leftspeak which suggests that women/non-white hospital workers earning £50 for a 60-hour week aren't workers proper ('they're not at the point of production, comrade'), and suggests that when they take industrial action this isn't truly meaningful industrial action because it's not striking at the heart of the state. Thus when the action ends in sad but predictable defeat, it's written out of the history books in a desperate attempt to prove the Downturn persists. Will we now rewrite history to say that 1926 was a year of Downturn because the General Strike was bound to end in defeat?

Instead of flying in the face of the facts and denying the existence of major struggles, it makes more sense to analyse those that do exist. I'll begin with the major dramas of the last two years, the events which have had the greatest impact on the radical movements. Ireland apart, I would point to the national riots/uprisings, the Greenham Common protests, and the above-mentioned health workers dispute.

The three phenomena listed have the following in common: 1) their impact at a mass level; 2) the involvement of large numbers of people with little in the way of prior political experience; and 3) their development outside of traditional left-wing spheres of activity, and their consequent ability to surprise both the state and the Left.

Three more points: these phenomena derived their strength, in part, from the development over a number of years of autonomous women's and Black movements; secondly, what they showed was that both these movements have the potential of generating spin-offs in other spheres - whether amongst white working-class youth (Black movement's impact - the riots), amongst tens of thousands of health workers, especially in the larger cities, or within the peace movement (women - Greenham Common); thirdly, the three phenomena occurred because the vast icebergs of mass anger and resentment that float constantly below the surface were bound to be exposed to view through some channel, some time. Let's take this further.

The Left is not only missing out on what's happening by trying to fit the square peg of traditional analysis into the round hole of modern capitalist reality. It is also failing to clearly relate to the disproportionate effects of the crisis and the Tory attacks on different sections of the class and the radical movements. It is not looking, in short, at who is taking the shit.

Prior to 1982, it could be said that many groups of workers had not been adversely affected, in a material sense, by the Tory policies. Either their basic wages had kept pace with inflation or they were deriving extra money through productivity deals or the like. It was only in 1982 that real wages began to drop right across the

THE WORST RECESSION since the 1930s, the pound at an all-time low, record unemployment levels, banking crisis imminent... Yet, as capitalism comes adrift, prospects for the left are grim. Indeed, modern Britain increasingly resembles a black hole down which traditional left politics disappears without knowing why and with little hope of return.

Big Flame is all too conscious that, however hard it has sought to break from the more negative traditions of Marxism, it too is succumbing to the malaise. In the four pages that follow (and with page 4 backing up on related themes), we plunge into the murky depths of the crisis to look for... inspiration?

The article 'Tebbit and the Downturn' by Roger Kline, is the least reluctant to get its hands dirty, dealing as it does with the failures of so many workplace struggles in recent years, the prospects for Tebbit and the lessons for us. Paul Holt, in his controversial but thought-provoking dissection of the Labour and revolutionary Left, is also willing to bloody his hands. In doing so, he concludes that the traditional working class politics should no longer be a central priority and that we need a general reappraisal of theory.

Ben Lowe attempts, on this page, to find a glimmer of hope amidst the general mire, and is the one writer to see a positive side to the revival of the peace movement. He also sees black struggles as central.

On page 8, Phil North and Don Brown tackle the slippery question of import controls, focussing specifically on steel and the failings of Labour's Alternative Economic Strategy in respect to this. Finally, in his stimulating article on blacks, crime and the police, Paul Gilroy argues for the centrality of black politics in Britain today, while tearing apart proposals for 'Community policing'.

Serious gaps remain - women's movement, Ireland, etc. - but in acknowledging this we express our desire to redress the balance in the next issue.



Unemployed youth in Speke Photo Laurie Sparham (Network)

A year when millions of feet pounded the streets in political protest.

A year of very few strikes by industrial workers.

A year of capitalism in crisis, the worst in 50 years.

A year when Thatcher catapulted herself back to the top of the polls

class and, even then, for many workers, wages stayed higher than levels in 1979, when the Tories came in. How else to explain the remarkable buoyancy in retail sales with 4 million on the dole?

Admittedly, workers' consciousness and combativity do not bear solely on wage levels, but there is little doubt that the Tories' ability to divide workers through monetary incentive (productivity deals), to use bribes to push through mass lay-offs (the redundancy payments con-game), or to pay-off those groups most likely to erupt (e.g. the miners in 1981), has

severely hampered the development of working class militancy. It's been the carrot to Tebbit's anti-union stick, while mass unemployment has drugged the beast into senselessness.

At the same time as all this is happening, a tremendous anger and resentment has been brewing amongst working-class women and youth, amongst the male low-paid and unemployed, and in particular amongst the Blacks and Asians suffering racist attacks, police harassment, poverty-level incomes, the Nationality Bill, deportations, job discrimination, race checks in

hospitals, etc... Many of these work in the most poorly paid and poorly organised sectors of industry and the services. The anger and resentment thus flourished in a fertile environment where real wage levels, along with conditions, have steadily worsened over the years. In the health service, in particular, everything came together: the emotions, the poverty, the attacks on the health service and threatened privatisation, and the renewed strength and confidence of the non-white communities from which so many of the workers stem.

But similar emotions are rife outside of the workplace, too. The inner-city youth, with Blacks very much at the forefront, have already borne witness to this with the eruptions of Spring and summer 1981, and the mini-eruptions in Toxteth and Brixton in the summer and autumn, respectively, of 1982. There will be more, and the tactics used, as well as the venues, will continue to surprise and frustrate. There are feelings too strong, on the whole, for the Left to handle. These feelings are not easily channelled into known forms of organisation, and they do not fit happily into pet theories, but they are real nonetheless. And in their persistence they mark the uniqueness and peculiarity of the present situation, one where, far from being sold the illusions of the 1950's (a real downturn, that), people are simmering just below the level at which they might erupt. No downturn, this. It's a stand-off, a waiting-game, a time when the difference between people taking the shit out on each other and taking it out on the state could be bridged by just one more eviction, one more racist attack, one more Black youth dying in a police cell...

The hardest times require the greatest sensitivity. We need to be closer to the pulse of working-class anger, whether in workplaces or the community, whether amongst Blacks or unemployed whites. We need to be patient, to see behind the surface appearance of inter-personal, intra-family hatred, to see beyond the nitty-gritty of the day to day grind, and to get stuck in and support the many struggles, especially Black people's struggles, that do exist. A salutary lesson: Brixton's white anti-racist movement, having for most of its 5-year existence foreseen the momentous events of 1981, and clearly perceived the need to combat white racism in the wake of these, failed to stay the course. It collapsed just weeks before the April eruption because the fickle white left found better (!) things to do...

Finally, to the peace movement and Greenham Common. This nebulous wobbly, apparently ineffectual beast, it reminds one of a lump of jelly on a beach: a new wave comes along and it's back to life with a deadly sting to its tail. Or no wave comes and it goes sad and flabby and has sand kicked in its face. This writer takes the optimistic view that the new wave has come with the protest of 30,000 women at Greenham Common.

I suggest further that the peace movement should be seen within the following general perspective: a) a crisis era in which capitalism resorts to militarism in a big way is one where pacifism comes into its own, acting as a potent force for mobilisation towards mass anti-Government actions; b) the peace movement, this time around, is coinciding with a period of mass unemployment which is having a highly politicising effect (though not necessarily in a socialist direction) on its younger elements; c) the Thatcher Government will only back down on Cruise in the face of the most massive resistance - i.e. their very obstinacy could add strength to the movement (see also p.5); d) millions of people, cowed by one Thatcher victory after another, would like nothing better than for Thatcher to get it where it hurts, no matter where she gets it from (the 'Thatcher' here is the popular usage - a euphemism for the Government).

It is the coming together of these four elements that makes CND so important in 1983. If the massive injection of energy and enthusiasm provided by the 'embrace the base' action can be sustained, if the radical wings of the movement - whether eco/feminist/anarchist or radical socialist/Trotskyist - can be at the forefront of the actions, then we are in for a battle, even a series of battles, that could change the whole balance of forces between 'Thatcher' and the rest. A victory over Cruise, in particular even a victory won by vegan, sandle-wearing, teetotal, non-smoking eco-freaks, could do for working-class morale and confidence what the miners, in totally different circumstances, did in 1973/74.

A downturn? Like Hell. There's more work for us to do now than for donkey's years. We've just been looking in the wrong direction.

Ben Lowe