

emergency!

The following was produced and distributed to ambulance pickets in February 1990, less than 2 months before the Poll Tax riots. It refers to a national day of action on January 30th 1990 in support of the ambulance drivers strikes that had been going on for some time.

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE JANUARY 30th AMBULANCE DISPUTE SOLIDARITY ACTIONS AND OTHER RELATED MATTERS



Poster in support of ambulance crews produced at the end of 1989, when the government were dispatching troops to replace the crews on strike (the crews continued working in response to important emergency calls)

Judging by the statement of that mass-murderer Kenneth Clarke, the man behind the cuts in the NHS which lead to thousands of deaths mostly amongst the poor, that the deal now being worked out by the Union leaders and NHS bosses shows "the dawning of a new commonsense", ambulance crews can now look forward to the traditional insulting sell-out, doubtless to be hailed as "the best offer we could hope for

under the circumstances" by well-healed bureaucrats who were never in favour of the dispute from the outset. What the ambulance crews are going to do about it, though, remains to be seen. Resign themselves to the deal whilst moaning about the bastard bureaucrats, or something better? Any new initiative from the base will only develop from a reflection of the strengths and failures of the struggle so far. What follows - written before the present talks at ACAS - is intended as a contribution to this reflection. "What is to be done?" is a question that can only be answered - initially at least - by the ambulance crews themselves.

* * * * *

January 30th was, at best, a short-lived sparkler in the long cold night of increasingly brutal humiliation and isolation facing workers in this country. An opportunity to break down the divisions between workers was not developed.

"Rather pointless" - Kenneth Clarke, 30/1/90.

"This stoppage will have done nothing to enhance Britain's reputation in the eyes of our international trading partners who have not forgotten the British disease of the 70s"

- a C.B.I. spokesman, 30/1/90.

January 30th was a combination of these two contradictory statements from different sections of the ruling class. The CBI spokesman overstated things because he wanted to warn his friends of the potential - though hardly the reality - of a major class threat to their profits, a threat increasingly repressed since the end of the 70s. However limited, January 30th reminds the rulers of what lies dormant beneath the 1000 Year Reich of Money Terrorism: a desire for some subversive solidarity, desperate for a breath of fresh air. But Kenneth Clarke was probably closer to the truth: it was "rather pointless", despite what people wanted it to be. The fact that probably only a million or so were involved, for a short period of time, won't shift the government, and Clarke has good reason to be smug: he knows that the Unions are only concerned with media images of popular support - not practical popular support. As Roger Poole stated earlier on in the strike, "We don't want solidarity strikes from other workers" .

Sure, Clarke was overstating things the other way. January 30th did have its moments, 10s of 1000s went on strike for the day, and loads of people from different sections of the working class joined in common actions. For instance, the St.Johns Wood crew on wildcat strike organised the blocking of Kilburn High Road for half an hour: Irish, blacks, O.A.P.s and others joined in, and perhaps as many as 200 had fun stopping the traffic. The cops were obviously furious but, because of their "nice" image of apparent support for the ambulance workers (whilst raking in loads of money doing overtime scabbing on the strike), they had to swallow their pride and merely resort to verbal haranguing, rather than their usual physical form of intimidation. An ambulance woman threatened with arrest managed to shame the cop into withdrawing. Bus drivers in Kilburn, though, were worse than the cops - they tried to plough into people. Yet at the same time several hundreds of bus drivers in South London took half or the whole of the day off. In fact, some of them have been on strike in solidarity with the ambulance workers on and off, days or half-days here & there, for a couple of months now (of course, this Good News is hardly ever mentioned in the media - it might actually encourage people; hence the near-total silence in the media about the dispute since Jan.30th). There were doubtless loads of other places where people stopped traffic - for example, the centre of Liverpool and of Newcastle came to a standstill, and in London Old Street and Euston Road were blocked.

But most of the time people were content to let the police line keep them to one side of the street. On January 13th, with 75,000 demonstrating in support of the ambulance workers, the potential for bringing the centre of London to a stop was clearly there, but no-one was prepared to take the initiative. In fact, most people don't need the cops to keep them to one side of the street - they police themselves: they just can't see the point in strolling across the whole of the road and stopping the circulation of commodities and of people-as-commodities. Never having done it before, they just don't know the exciting feeling of mass power it brings. Trade Union officials and politicians demagogically talk of People Power, but conveniently ignore the fact that in East Europe People Power at least involves taking over the streets some of the time. The only acceptable form of People Power the bureaucrats praising the ambulance workers want is an obedient crowd clapping their demagogic clichés which they shout to them from on high through a microphone. We've heard all their usual "We shall win" rhetoric before, the 'we' referring to themselves - professional representatives hoping to make political capital out of a defeat that they help to bring about, since they always do their very best to throw up obstacles to the poor winning any of their battles. After all, their role would be at stake if there really was a movement with a chance of winning. Hence Robin Cook and Roger Poole's vitriolic denunciation of those ambulance workers going on strike (or, in the past, Kinnock's utter indifference towards the miners' strike: how relieved he was when it was all over). How come these 'supporters' of the ambulance strikers are all politely clapped during their banal speeches instead of being abused (like when Norman Willis was attacked with sticks and bottles just after the miners strike ended, or when Kinnock was pelted with tomatoes, also shortly after the end of the miners' strike)? With friends like Poole and co. workers don't need the Tories' new anti-wildcat strike laws.

"If the T.U.C. called a General Strike and a million came out it wouldn't come to much. But if we - the rank and file - organised a General Strike and a million came out, then we'd be getting somewhere"

- Docker, March 14th 1988, at a meeting in Euston after an NHS demo.

Well, January 30th didn't come to much. All it did, mostly, was to raise hopes that the Union leaders would do something, which is all that the TUC wanted it to do. Almost 2 years after the above docker made his lucid comment, we're still no nearer to an autonomously organised mass strike of workers from all sorts of different sectors. The ambulance men have a lot of passive public support, but few are prepared to put their lives where their money is. But then the crews haven't demanded much from us apart from money. Sure, there have been some excellent exemplary actions - like when ambulance crews went down to Canary Wharf and persuaded steel erectors to come out in sympathy on December 6th, then turned up on the day to make sure they stood by their decision (300 came out). Or, on the same day, when Hammersmith council workers linked up support for the ambulance crews with support for the councils' own striking nursery workers (council workers also came out in Hackney on unofficial strike that day, as did hospital workers at the Elizabeth Garret Anderson hospital in Soho). And sure, there have been several other sympathy actions other than on Jan.30th - e.g. by bus workers at Hanwell garage, workers at Homerton and St. Bartholomews hospitals. And ambulance crews have made links with strikers at Luton, joining the Vauxhall workers' picket line. And doubtless there were many unofficial actions on Jan.30th - but nothing big enough.

"IF A COUPLE OF NURSES PICKETED EVERY PIT, THE WHOLE OF THE

YORKSHIRE COALFIELDS WOULD COME TO A STANDSTILL, THERE'S SUCH SYMPATHY"

- South Yorkshire miner, during the '88 NHS strikes (when two Yorkshire pits were picketed out).

There are many independantly-minded workers who are good at formulating the problem - "When we struggle together we need to go directly to other workers, unmediated by the Union hierarchy, to persuade them to strike for us and for themselves". But when it comes to actually doing something - well, the risky moments have been few and far between. Many fear their Union as much as the bosses: e.g. during the Wapping dispute ('86 - '87) several sacked printers talked about going directly to printworkers in & around Fleet St. and urge them to go on strike. But they bottled out because putting up an unofficial picket line could have led to being blacked from the Union for life, weakening their chances of a future legit printing job. It's unlikely, though, that ambulance workers would face a similar threat from NUPE, despite Poole's menacing diatribe against the wildcat strikers. In the end, it's a cop-out to blame the Union or this or that bureaucrat for the failure of struggles ~ submission to the Union that insures the "sell-out". Complaining about officials is all too easy - unless it's a prelude to action.

The Union bureaucrats only want a moral image for the NICE ambulance workers, with token appeals, petitions & opinion poll ratings about public support not because they're Bad Leaders ('Sell-Outs') but because it's their social role. When shop stewards complain that Poole "is still suppressing any move to strike action. He's even looking to our bosses" or that he's "duped shop stewards in London into voting against strike action" (both quoted in *Socialist Worker*, 10/2/90) they are deliberately obscuring the fact that the bureaucrats function necessarily leads them to pursue interests independently of those they represent. Not just because they are not subject to immediate recall by the base, but more essentially because as professional mediations between capital and labour, they must inevitably act like bosses: like when lefty leader Rodney Bickerstaffe called security guards to chuck out ambulance workers who'd tried to speak to him at the TUC headquarters. And that's why, in the various health strikes, NUPE and COHSE have consistently divided off the workers from each other (as many healthworkers are well aware).

Trouble is, submission to the divisive effects of Trade Unions'(and bosses') cynical organisation of workers by role and category, always leads to demoralisation. Why have so few healthworkers practically supported the ambulance staff? (and few ambulance crews have posed to other healthworkers that if they really took their support seriously they too would only do emergency work). Indeed some healthworkers, despite claiming support, are only too eager to grab the opportunities for extra overtime which the dispute has created. Course, it's no good just moralistically finger-wagging, since it doesn't get to grips with the history of why people feel they can't win, and attack the cynicism which comes from accepting defeat. I heard of one bus driver in Notting Hill who wouldn't support the ambulance staff because they hadn't supported the miners in '84. Miners themselves don't generally go along with this bullshit type of excuse: on Jan.30th in a great many pits throughout the country, during the day shift, all those who safely could, downed tools for varying periods of time. On the other hand, I've heard of a Kent miner cashing in on the dispute by working shifts with the St. John's Ambulancemen. And I've met one ambulanceman who used this fact as a reason not to try to get solidarity actions from miners. It's these divisions which are the most depressing. When yesterday's striker/rebel/lucid critic becomes today's

scab/conformist/professional ideologist, doesn't it make you feel suicidal (whilst dreaming of slitting their miserable throats sometime in the future, of course)? Indifference and resignation to this horror makes bastards out of individuals who, at one time, were genuinely Good People: they become everything which in the past they detested in others. Being betrayed by these ex-friends is always the most traumatic of all.

One of the reasons for all these divisions is that no-one really thinks authority can be defeated. After years of failure this is understandable, if only because no-one wants to look for some causes for these defeats other than to blame the various enemies (e.g. the Law, the cops, the media, the Union bureaucrats, the passivity of other sections of the working class). Since such enemies will always exist when people challenge authority in some way, the only function such blame serves is to resign oneself to defeat rather than look at how to combat the enemies better. In the meantime, the life or death question facing the poor in the U.K. - "How are we going to prevent the Thatcherite Economy (let alone global capitalism) completely fucking us over?" - has yet to lead to a practical answer.

The Labour Party - and all those who pin their hopes on a Labour victory which is by no means assured - have a pat answer of course: Vote Labour! (they will save us! Hallelujah!). Never mind - as one ambulanceman pointed out - that the great reforming Attlee Labour government of 45 - 51 sent troops in to crush the ambulance strikers; never mind the troops sent by the last Labour government, including Tony Benn, against the firemen; never mind the fact that Labour has pledged itself to maintaining the outlawing of sympathy strikes; never mind that Labour's policies are about the same as those of Thatcher's '79 election manifesto (they've already bluntly stated that their first priority will be to get the Economy right, and that social concerns will come second); never mind all this - Labour will make things better - rather like praying for rain. But any reform of the State which would be of partial - and inevitably temporary - benefit to the poor could only come if the rulers (Left or Right) felt threatened by a massive explosion of autonomous class war. As de Klerk stated in South Africa, "Reform is needed if we are to avoid revolution". Since we in the UK are as far from any revolutionary situation as Soweto was in May 1976, the rulers can get away with blatant repression. Reform is only resorted to when it's the only means of asserting social control (that's why the South African rulers released Mandela: they know his calls for discipline, an end to looting and an end to the theft and burning of cars, his calls for an end to classroom boycotts, etc. are their best bet of getting blacks to submit to the commodity economy there). But in this country autonomous class struggle hasn't threatened the market economy with anything like as much consistency as the uprisings of the South African blacks. So far, class struggle here has been defeated mainly from within, especially by submission to the prison of Trade Unionism.

There are historical reasons behind this submission. In the 70s - height of the inspiring "British disease" which still haunts the CBI, Trade Union rules & structures were sufficient means to carry out a United fight against the rules of profit, to go-slow, refuse overtime, work-to-rule, phone in sick and not be disciplined, strike or whatever. Whilst there was always hostility towards the top Union bureaucrats (e.g. lefty Jack Jones got duffed up following the deal he'd arranged to sell out the dockers' strike of '72), up until the '74 Labour victory, workers on a rank and file level, could generally use shop stewards to fight for their own immediate interests - or, at least, to ignore or by-pass those shop stewards who were more compromised with the bosses. Within the framework of the Union, miners in '72, organised on a rank & file level, won their fight with the Coal Board by going directly to workers in the Birmingham area and getting

them to go down with them to picket out Saltley Coke depot (if only miners in '84 had gone round Sheffield appealing directly to workers to come down to Orgreave instead of leaving it to Scargill to appeal on TV to people to support them). Also within the framework of the Union, in '72 dockers forced the government to U-turn and release shop stewards and others from Pentonville prison. Though the 'revolutionary' atmosphere was more an unfulfilled promise than a reality, these victories did encourage resistance everywhere to the point when, in '74, Heath, the P.M., called an election based on "Who rules? The Government or...?", which he lost. With the Labour victory, though, all the social democratic illusions of the working class in Labour and the Unions were sufficient to dampen down any mass class struggle for over 4 years. The incorporation of the Unions onto management boards and a much greater integration of stewards into the Union/State hierarchy helped suppress rank and file opposition. Looking to shop stewards to lead the struggle lost much of its previous rationality. For instance, there were a far greater number of senior stewards on 100% facility time, paid for by the company/State dept., leaving them as remote from the sharp end of an intensifying workers' alienation as the Union bureaucrat behind his/her desk. However, beneath the Social Contract between Unions and State, a constant subterranean resistance to wage labour was forever causing misery for the bosses. Eventually all this bubbled over into "The Winter Of Discontent" ('78 - '79), most of which was fought by the base - and won - completely within a Trade Union perspective, despite the years of Union - Government collaboration. Whereas in the 60s over 90% of strikes had been wildcat, in the 70s Unions generally made such strikes official, taking on the image of protecting workers' interests even when, they were de-railing them. The Winter of Discontent saw workers taking the Union into their own hands but not going beyond the Union. And, generally speaking, shop stewards couldn't put up obstacles to a struggle run by the base (of which, many of these stewards were still a part). With Callaghan, the Labour P .M., labelling strikers as "free collective vandals" and other sections of the bourgeoisie moaning about truckdrivers "taking managerial decisions" (Sunday Telegraph), Trade Unions seemed like the ruling classes' "spectre of communism", to the point where Thatcher could label Trade Unionism as *the* enemy, subsequently entangling the working class in all sorts of laws, falsely labelled as "anti-Union" laws. In fact, those laws have made Unions more overtly the enemy of the class struggle than ever before: fear of sequestration of funds has turned Unions into overt cops. And the new anti-wildcat strike law is making the process even more blatant: witness shop stewards at Fords threatening to discipline anyone going on wildcat strike - and this before it's become law. Or the way EPIU at Fords is scabbing against the EETPU in a tit-for-tat retaliation for EETPU scabbing at Wapping, really just a cynical desire for recruits, justified out of submission to the Tories' strike ballot laws (democracy moves in a mysterious way). Or the way Ron Todd (TGWU boss) went personally to the Liverpool docks last year to get the dockers there to call off the strike even though a ballot had made it completely legal. The examples are endless.

THATCHER MAY STILL REGARD TRADE UNIONISM AS "THE ENEMY WITHIN" BUT AS AN ENEMY IT'S BEEN HER BEST FRIEND

Not just the TUC (Thatcher's Unofficial Cops), not just this or that leader or Union, but Trade Unionism as such has been a major reason for the failure of the class war here. When, for example, the 1984 striking miners blocked off the Humber Bridge during the dockers' strike of that year, a great opportunity to break beyond Trade Unionism and develop a direct encounter between two different fronts of the class struggle was missed. However, it wasn't the NUM or the TGWU in themselves which blocked off this chance of a potentially subversive meeting, but the miners' and dockers' reflex to trust

only their "own" trade or to look to their own leaders, or stewards/branch secretaries for the initiative for such a meeting. In an epoch when the blackmail of unemployment wasn't so threatening because it was relatively easy to get another job and social security was an automatic right, workers could win their struggle merely by looking to their 'own' trade. In 1978 Ford workers could massively defeat the State's 5% wage rise limit simply by having a totally solid strike and a token 5-man picket which absolutely refused to even talk with outsiders. But for such Trade Unionist attitudes to continue during an epoch when the "every sector for itself" stance has led to painful defeat seems like some stubborn Death Wish. It's not that many striking workers have not shown courage and dignity it's just that will alone is not enough. There'll be no successful breakthroughs until rebellious workers see the necessity of breaking through Trade Unionism, until they stop looking to the Union for initiatives and look at how to extend their own self-organised initiatives.

A few see the way forward as being the intensification of shop steward organisation. But since 1979 the number of shop stewards has risen from about 300,000 to 350,000 - and to what effect? Shop stewards generally just represent the lowest common denominator of those they represent: when a minority are militant the shop steward will tend to express the moderation of the servile majority. If the majority are in struggle, the shop steward will often participate in the most radical acts of the active section of the strikers. Though their real contribution is neither more nor less than this active element, their greater access to contacts, phones, equipment, etc. often make them seem like indispensable leaders. But when there's a downturn in any particular struggle, their privileged position will often be used to contribute to the ending of the strike. Basically, shop stewards, regardless of their own personal integrity, are trapped within the representative role of their authority position: they will swim with the tide, generally going where the majority goes, showing about as much consistency and coherence as an alcoholic on speed. When it comes to practical initiatives, rare is the shop steward so unconcerned about maintaining their status as to step out of line with what the - mostly passive - majority want of them. And if they do - it's not because of their position as shop steward. In the end doing something is started by a minority, whether that includes shop stewards or not. If a shop steward is looked to as a benevolent authority, someone who can protect workers against vicious management fingering, it's also indicative of the extent to which workers become dependant on them, even up to the point of coming to them with all their problems, treating them like a social worker, when, likely as not, these stewards will also have a fucked-up daily life they're desperate to talk about, but which their specialist position forces them to bottle up.

To break the impasses, it's useful to consider the examples of others, not as an ideal to be aimed for, but as something worth adapting to different circumstances. A critical knowledge of other people's struggles helps to convince us that the danger is not overwhelming; that there will always be more security in organising some innovative subversive activity than in repeating past mistakes.

For instance it's worth looking at some of the struggles in France. Like, for instance, the French railway workers' strike of '86 - '87. There, over a month before the strike, a 31 year old class-conscious train driver put out a petition calling for a pledge from other drivers to an indefinite strike, listing the various demands. It was asked that this petition/pledge be reproduced and passed round by those in agreement. It received an overwhelming response, so later a leaflet was produced by other train drivers, 2 and a half weeks before the strike, also to be reproduced and passed around: it clearly set out the strikers' demands, stating exactly when the strike would begin, asking the unions

involved to support the strike, threatening them if they didn't. The strike began without a single command from the unions and developed partly by means of daily assemblies of strikers held in each station, in which no particular striker held any greater power than any other. Where delegation seemed necessary, it was subject to immediate recall by the assemblies. Of course, many exemplary actions - such as sabotage - were carried out without discussion in the assemblies, and sometimes against the wishes of the majority. But, without wanting to make out that assemblies and co-ordinations are some insurance for active commitment, they did provide an environment of direct communication which made manipulation difficult and provided the strike with some continuity, although it must be said that there was often a lot of suspicion towards 'outsiders' and a lot of division amongst strikers along the lines of their different work roles and later developments of co-ordinations in France sometimes had a reactionary content - e.g. railway workers striking in support of a ticket collector who'd shot and killed a guy who'd aggressively refused to pay his fare. So they're no fixed model - just worth adapting.

The 'co-ordination' has travelled to the UK - but without the original zing of its inception. The London tube drivers of '89 were the first to use the term co-ordination but the co-ordinations had specific characteristics related to the fact that the UK suffers under the most draconian labour laws in the whole of Europe (east and west). They were a semi-clandestine organisation defying LRT management and unions alike (particularly ASLEF). Its clandestinity could be very broadly imitated when the recent law against wildcat strikes gets underway. As a body they were devastatingly effective - at one moment doing a kind of syncopation with Tendon bus crews and main line rail terminal staff in order to paralyse London (May 15th '89, while June 22nd. was the most comprehensive stoppage of traffic movement in London since the 1926 General Strike). In the beginning, bureaucrats (mainly ASLEF) were ordered out of meetings and the coordinators were basically anti-party in the sense of ignoring them. But later Trotskyists began trying out their entryism routine and the coordination faltered in other ways when the national railway strike got underway with full union (NUR) control and ASLEF moved in again on the tubes, with coordinators relinquishing something of a direct democracy to union officials. Even so, the coordinators snapped back into focus when the usual union sell-out deal was handed down and mad-as-hell drivers at a final strike meeting ferociously refused ("listen motherfucker!") to talk to any of the professional liars of the media - a response not heard since the heady days of the miners strike of '84. However, the co-ordination had its limitations: it was an intense heart-felt expression of a sectional skill but wasn't actually opened up to other underground workers.

Other bits of fertile ground for coordinations have been the building trade and the North Sea Oil platforms - but, generally speaking, these have been dominated by shop stewards making decisions behind the backs of the strikers - and have been basically coordinations only in name. Practical development of coordinations remains so far a tiny minority escapade in the UK. Rigid union centralism has regained ground bit by bloody bit. Recent strikes have not been very inspiring affairs and are much orchestrated by bureaucrats acting like public relations personelle in tandem with companies like "Union Communacations Ltd.", taking their theatrical cue from Saatchi & Saatchi which, whilst abstractly influencing passive public opinion, reflects an absent passionless life, where, on the simplest level, picketing is just some routine duty, hardly a lived experience. Hardly the supercession of the sabotage and violence of the miners strike or the Wapping dispute which, though defeated and trapped in the Union form nevertheless, in their rage, really did point to something more than a 'fairer' nicey nicey media-cultivated

version of the same old order.

"I reckon it will fizzle out - people will just trickle back to work. The building societies, finance companies, will see to that"

- Camden ambulance worker on unofficial strike, January 30th.

Whilst, if it does fizzle out, it won't just be debts that'll force ambulance workers back, but the Unions as well; it's also a reluctant form of Thatcherite ideology ringing through peoples' minds that stops them pushing on: "Whatever happens, I'll find some way to survive within the hell of the market economy, alone, if necessary." In the end it's this survivalist fantasy that makes people "trickle back" from the class struggle - putting a tough face on defeat. Why "fantasy"? Because most of the poor know, within their hearts, that every defeat for the struggle is another blow to their lives, another nail in their coffin, another victory for brutal Market Forces, where who sinks or swims is largely down to chance &/or money (Kings Cross, Zeebrugge, Piper Alpha and Hillsborough are just the most obvious examples). Others say "We'll get them next time" - but that's generally just bravado - because each "next time" becomes more half-hearted, wearier and warier of committing yourself too far because of the expectation of defeat, the expectation of the pain of high hopes dashed. Sure, despite 10 years of demoralising defeat, we're not going to roll over and die - as the ambulance crews have shown. But if the ambulance dispute is not to be just another tombstone on the road to hell, and if we're truly going to get them "next time" (over the next couple of years or so) then each and everyone of us has to analyse the limitations of the present and past struggles - and of our own relation to them - in order to draw practical conclusions for "the next time".

It's this that has made me put this out: it's so utterly depressing to see another lot go down without at least doing something to try to alter the apparently inevitable course of events. Sure, a text is easy - and it's not meant to be a substitute for practical risks (unlike the texts put out by Leftist parties and groups, which striking workers are suspicious of with good reason, since these leaflets are always saying "Do this!", mainly with the aim of trying to get recruits or giving the Party some public image of apparent relevance). At the same time being a spectator of the class struggle, and just commenting on its limitations after the event or from afar, is an impotent role, about as smug and inconsequential as all the vanguardist fantasies of the political sects. So that's why I've put this out. If it gets people - including me and my friends - working out actions they could do - then it'll not be in vain.

Completed on 22nd February 1990.

P.S.

A Camden striker said on TV last night (22nd Feb.) that Roger Poole was completely "out of touch" with the crews, and that the dispute in reality was not so much about pay but about the whole future of the NHS. If the ambulance workers made direct appeals to other workers on the basis of attacking the Government's run-down of the NHS, then we truly could begin to see the blossoming spring of a united class struggle in this miserable country! The Merseyside crews look like showing the way forward. Who can guess what magic moments may lie ahead?

