

## \*WEE\* ON THE DRY SIDE

### Trade Unions in Britain

*John Hyde*

We all know Margaret Thatcher is walking all over the rights of British workers, that she is 'bloody arrogant' and 'confrontationist'; haven't we been told so by members of our own industrial relations club? The Thatcher Government has amended the law to make it easier to leave a union and union membership is falling. It could be that workers are tired of unions walking all over their rights. It could be that many of them voted for her in the recent election.

Not all British union managements have reacted adversely to the changes either. The 400,000 strong Electrical Electronic Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU) (why couldn't they call themselves just the 'Thames Society') is advertising to attract members. This is the text of an EETPU pamphlet:

'Our Union is Britain's most:

DEMOCRATIC--leadership elected by independently supervised secret postal ballots

GO AHEAD--"strike stopper" agreements that give fair rewards, provide full company information and safeguard jobs

MODERN--computerised records, residential training colleges' new technological training with mobile units

CARING--benefits for victimisation, accident, disablement, funerals, and disputes with legal aid on a range of problems.

'Build a better future with Britain's strongest union.

'We must all face up to the remarkable pace of industrial change, particularly in the high technology industries. We know that the way for our members to benefit, not lose, from that change is through realistic co-operation, rather than needless confrontation.

'There is only disaster in the perpetual conflict which still motivates some outdated firms and unions. We are sure that your job prospects, pay and conditions, are best safeguarded through the kind of far-reaching agreements we make with sensible competitive employers. They cut out needless strife and provide fair rewards.

'We will represent you with skill, expertise, common sense and responsibility. We are hard bargainers on our members' behalf. But we honour our bargains and expect employers to do the same.

'We reject political extremism and the use of industrial action for political ends. Our leadership is elected by secret postal ballot so that the ordinary members really are in control.

'We cover people working in most major areas of British industry at every level of skill and experience including management and professional staff. Most importantly though, our members' skills put them right at the forefront of the new technologies.

'We offer the most comprehensive and streamlined service of any trade union at a bargain cost to each member. We look forward to welcoming you into the strongest, most democratic and most progressive union organisation in Britain.'

An enrollment form and a montage of press clippings completes the pamphlet---I am not cheating by quoting selectively.

The following excerpts are taken selectively from other EETPU literature but they are fair to its flavour.

'Technological progress is vital to industrial survival. Our concern is to ensure that it is successfully harnessed, not fearfully rejected by industrial backwoodsmen in some emotional spasm.'

'...eliminate strikes through binding arbitration.'

'We reject intimidation to force people into a union.'

'Our new robot installation at Cudham provide courses in all aspects of robotics'

'It is not just our members who back what we do. Ask any of the 5,000 employers we have agreements with. Their testimony will not disappoint you.'

The new industrial relations laws apply to all unions so the EETPU is one the unions Mrs T has 'confronted'; why aren't they frothing at the mouth like Scargill's part of the National Union of Miners and SOGAT and NGA who made life impossible in Fleet Street and unpleasant at Wapping? What ever happened to class war? Whatever will happen to Britain if the workers neglect class war to concern themselves with industrial survival, or to trade unionism if unions reject intimidation? What radicalism is standing the Britain we know of long queues and longer strikes on its head?

Thatcher has made one fundamental change to British industrial laws although there are many parts to it. She has made trade union membership really discretionary. She has opened up the real practical possibility for workers, individually or in groups, of leaving a union, joining another, forming another or doing without---in Australian terms she has allowed workers to 'opt in' and 'opt out'. A union which does not please its members now loses them, their revenue and their votes at the Trade Union Congress (TUC). She has struck the most important blow for civil liberty in Britain since World War Two.

She made her changes gradually; thus she avoided handing the more militant union leaders a cause celebre with which to rally support for a widespread strike. Like the good general she is, she avoided those confrontations she might not win because unions in some circumstances really have been above the law of the land.

Given half a chance, competing unions follow much the same principles as competing businesses---each competes to increase its market share at other unions' expense by offering better services. None can be best at everything so each develops market niches or expand those it has. The EEPTU's peculiar advantages apparently lie in its exceptional ability to be reasonable, be democratic, avoid strikes and offer training. These attributes appear to be marketable and like any good entrepreneur it is now exploiting them quickly, before other unions catch on. Officials of some of the more conventional unions will be saddened to see a brother union following in the footsteps of rapacious market capitalism with advantages to nobody except its members, the members' employers and the employers' customers. Nevertheless they will have to think on the EETPU and its ways if they find themselves losing membership to it.

Of course there are other market niches in the British labour market, each with a potential clientele. Unions which offer more service, cheaper service, different service, and even unions which promise to organise the best industrial barny since the miners' strike will attract some enthusiastic fee-paying support. If a union can attract members it will survive. However, if unions are faced with a discriminating potential clientele, the sort of services that don't drive the members' employers out of business will probably be preferred.

Australia needs even one EETPU.