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**BRITAIN:**  
**STRIKING UNIONISM WITH A POLITICAL CUTTING-EDGE**

**Ralph Darlington**

**Introduction**

Compared with the wave of general strikes that have swept across Europe since 2009, the response of UK trade unions to the global financial crisis and government austerity measures has been rather more muted. However, in March 2011 there was the largest ever trade union protest demonstration in Britain's history involving half a million workers, which was followed in November by a one-day public sector general strike of 2.5 million workers which represented the biggest industrial confrontation since the miners' strike in 1984-5 and the biggest single day of strike action in Britain since the 1926 General Strike. Although nowhere nearly as extensive or prolonged as Greek, Spanish or French-style union organised resistance, the rising levels of strike activity against austerity have led to an upsurge in membership levels for a number of unions combined with renewed levels of engagement and collective organisation (*Labour Research*, February 2012).

Of course this recent spate of union militancy in Britain has occurred against a backcloth of many years of union decline and retreat on a much greater scale than elsewhere in Europe, the broad contours of which include: a decline in strike activity to its lowest ever historical levels; the steepest ever sustained decline in union membership and density levels, with union presence narrowly confined overwhelmingly in the public sector; a substantial fall in the coverage of collective bargaining and number of workplace union reps; and the hangover from the defeat of the miners' strike 1984-5 which, combined with other defeats, has sapped workers' confidence and willingness to fight. Such union decline and retreat has been driven by a complex interaction of factors, including unfavourable economic policies, hostile employment legislation (including the outlawing of strikes with political objectives), strengthening of employers' power, and dramatic changes in the structure of employment and the composition of the labour force. As a result, many commentators have long assumed the prospects for UK union renewal are bleak, with apparently insurmountable challenges providing little reason to imagine there will be any revival of fortunes (Gospel; 2005; Metcalf, 2005; McIlroy and Daniels, 2009; Simms and Charlwood, 2010; McIlroy, 2011).

But arguably, apart from the unfavourable context confronting UK unions, an important, if often downplayed, part of the problem has also been the limitations of their own strategic leadership approach towards union organising, as well as their enfeebled industrial and political response towards neoliberal globalisation. Ironically in the early 2000s growing membership disaffection with the hesitant and often accommodative response of union leaders towards employers and the New Labour government stimulated the election of a new generation of so-called 'awkward squad' leaders. Yet despite a more critical stance only a small minority of this new intake have advocated industrial militancy and anti-capitalist and radical socialist solutions to neo-liberalism and the debt crisis. By contrast the pessimism of most Trades Union Congress (TUC) leaders as to whether the

unions are capable of fighting and winning has been exacerbated by an inability to present an effective ideological and political challenge to coalition government attacks combined with a continuing allegiance to a Labour Party which accepts many of the basic assumptions underlying the austerity measures.

It required the combination of two powerful pressures to provoke conventionally conciliatory leaders to join with their more radical counterparts, albeit reluctantly, in organising large scale strike action: first, from *above*, by the sheer scale of the coalition government's austerity offensive on their members' pay, conditions and jobs in the public sector (with its inherent threat to seriously erode even further the unions' membership base), combined with the government's belligerent refusal to compromise; and second, from *below*, with an evident growing readiness by rank-and-file union members at the frontline of the cuts agenda to engage in militant resistance, along with the growing influence of radical left-wing forces within some unions. Nonetheless, the hesitancy of most union leaders has remained an important factor in the equation contributing to the relative much lower levels of strike activity against austerity in the UK compared with other European countries.

One example of the alternative minority radical union trend has been the Public Service and Commercial Union (PCS) headed by its left-wing general secretary Mark Serwotka and within which a Left Unity grouping has exercised considerable influence at every level of the union. Thus in recent years the PCS has organised a series of sectoral and national strikes within the civil service in opposition to respective New Labour and coalition governments' attacks on pensions, wages and jobs, combined with a left-wing programme calling for increased expenditure, extensive nationalisation and redistributive taxation. But arguably the experience of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), probably Britain's most strike-prone union, has provided the deepest, sharpest and most vivid illustration of this minority radical unionism trend within the UK in recent years.

In many respects the RMT, which represents the majority of the UK's railway and London Underground workers, can be seen to fit within Kelly's (1996) definition of 'union militancy' based on ambitious demands of scale and scope, the frequent threat/use of industrial action, and an ideology of conflicting interests between employers and workers. But in the process, the RMT, like PCS, also clearly has identifiable *left-wing political features* which have contributed to its *industrial militancy*. It has combined the repetitive mobilisation of members through strike action with vigorous left-wing ideological opposition to employers and government and a politically engaged form of left-wing trade unionism which attempts to link workplace issues to broader social and political concerns. In the process, the union's general secretary, Bob Crow, has been at the forefront of calling for a militant response to the 'class warfare' of the coalition government, 'a government of the ruling class and for the ruling class', with 'generalised' strike action across the public and private sectors in defence of jobs, living standards and public services, alongside the outright rejection of neoliberalism, a campaign against EU deregulation and privatisation, and the re-nationalisation of the UK rail industry.

Therefore in examining the RMT's militant and left-wing political model of trade unionism, an exemplar of a broader European minority trend towards 'radicalised political unionism' (Upchurch, Taylor and Mathers: 2009), this chapter explores both: (a) the RMT's

strike mobilisation activity; and (b) its left-wing political orientation and identity. In the process, it focuses attention on the connecting feature between this industrial and political militancy, namely the role of left-wing union activists and the 'political congruence' (Upchurch, Flynn and Croucher, 2008) that exists between leaders, activists and members within the union. Finally, in contextualising the RMT's highly militant and politicised unionism in terms of the broader UK context and recent public sector strikes against austerity, it assesses the potential for its further extension and development. The article draws on extensive empirical research conducted over recent years (Darlington, 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2012; Connolly and Darlington, 2012), involving semi-structured interviews with a range of union informants within both unions, analysis of documentary material, and personal fieldwork observation.

### **Strike Mobilisation**

Over the last 10 years the RMT's 'brand image' has essentially been that of a *striking* union. For example, on London Underground between January 2002 and December 2012 the union balloted in favour of industrial action on at least 87 different occasions, with ballots leading to strikes (usually of 24 hours, sometimes 48 hours, and occasionally 72-hours duration) on 41 different occasions, resulting in a total of 72 full days of strike action overall. On the national railway network during the same period the union balloted in favour of industrial action on at least 131 different occasions, with ballots leading to strikes on 54 different occasions, resulting in a total of 176 full days of strike action overall. In the two industries combined this represented a total of at least 218 ballots, 95 of which led to strikes, resulting in a total of 248 full days of strike action overall. Per thousand members, the RMT has probably organised more ballots for industrial action, secured 'yes' votes in such ballots, and then taken more strike action than any other union in Britain over recent years. Significantly, almost every single one of the union's ballots on the Underground and the railways during the period 2002-09 returned overwhelming majorities in favour of action, with a mean of 83 per cent. The proportion of union members participating in such ballots was also creditable with a mean of 39 per cent on the Underground and 66 per cent on the railways (Darlington, 2010).

Frequently such ballot results have merely been used to bolster the union's bargaining leverage, with no action resulting, although sometimes with significant concessions being extracted. For example, on the railways the threat of 24-hour and 48-hour strikes by 7,000 Network Rail guards, signals and maintenance staff in June 2004 forced a climb down from a proposed plan to close a final-salary pension scheme for new starters. On occasions RMT strike *threats* have led to full-blown strike *action*, sometimes with devastatingly high-profile public effect. For example, a 72-hour strike by 2,300 privatised Metronet maintenance workers on the London Underground in September 2007 wiped out the vast majority of the Tube network, inconvenienced 3 million people and caused an estimated £100m damage to London's economy.

There have been a number of notable characteristic features of RMT strike activity on the railways and Underground. First, the tactic of 'discontinuous action', a single or a series of 24-hour or 48-hour strikes (and on occasion 72-hour) rather than indefinite strike action has been the common currency of the RMT, albeit sometime such discontinuous

action has been highly repetitive (for example, three 48 hour strikes at National Express East Anglia in 2009 and fourteen successive 24-hour Sunday strikes at Virgin Cross Country in 2006). While such strike activity has limited the cost to union members in terms of loss of earnings, in such a strategically important industrial context (unlike many other industries) where there is often effectively a non-substitutable service, such limited action has also often been financially highly damaging to the employer because it has been so effective in disrupting service delivery.

Second, the number of union members involved in strike activity has varied considerably. On the London Underground, while some disputes have been local walk-outs on individual tube lines involving less than 100 RMT members (for example, a strike in 2003 by 80 train drivers led to the loss of 28 peak-time trains and effectively closed the Hammersmith and City Line), there have also been numerous *network-wide* strikes involving the bulk of the RMT's members (for example, in 2010 there were four 24-hour strikes involving 9,300 RMT members). Similarly on the railways, strikes have sometimes involved relatively small numbers of workers usually employed by individual companies (such as 550 on Central Trains in 2005 or 2,000 on South West Trains in 2003), but again strike ballots and/or strikes have also involved much more substantial numbers (for example, 12,000 in Network Rail in 2008). On occasion within both sectors the RMT has attempted to coordinate a number of different individual strikes: in 2003 organising strike action by 4,300 guards across nine different railway companies, and in 2008 coinciding seven separate Underground strikes by different groups of workers employed by a variety of companies.

Third, a wide range of occupational groups of RMT members have been involved in such strike action, not merely strategically powerful groups such as train drivers, signal staff and engineering and maintenance workers, but also less much less well organised groups such as guards and station staff, as well as poorly paid and vulnerable cleaning and catering staff. For example, during June-August 2008 about 700 RMT cleaners (including many migrants) working for four private contractors on the Underground engaged in one 24-hour strike and one 48-hour strike on the issue of a 'living wage'. Meanwhile, while some strikes in both rail and Underground sectors have involved merely a single grade of workers (for example, conductors on London Midland in 2009), often they have embraced two or more grades (such as conductors, station and clerical staff on Central Trains in 2006).

Fourth, compared with another relatively strike-prone industry over the period of the last 15 years, the Royal Mail, there has been little unofficial strike action on the railways and Underground in terms of RMT members engaging in action independently of and/or against the wishes of national union officers. Instead the vast majority of strike activity has been granted official union support and been subject to formal balloting procedures. But rather than such strike activity merely being initiated and led from above by the official union leadership, the pressure for ballots/strikes has often come from local reps and members, transmitted to union branch meetings and then generalised and given official approval at regional and national union level.

Fifth, picketing of railway and Underground stations (and sometimes train depots) has been a common practice, with the regular presence of the union's leading officers on picket lines helping to legitimise such activity and embed it as part of the culture of strike activity. While such picketing has primarily involved merely union reps and activists, in a

context in which there has invariably been widespread membership respect for strike decisions, it has taken the form more of a public relations and union confidence-building exercise than an attempt to persuade colleagues to refrain from going into work.

Sixth, secondary and solidarity action have not been uncommon. For example, the impact of the 2007 Metronet engineering strike was undoubtedly bolstered by the solidarity action displayed by train drivers and station staff on the operational side of the Underground, whose threat of refusing to work on affected lines on the basis of safety concerns obliged the employers to close down most of the network. In addition solidarity action for *external* causes was vividly illustrated on the Underground in 2002 when, despite threats of legal action against the union, significant numbers of RMT members engaged in stoppages of work in support of strike action being taken by the Fire Brigades Union, including drivers who refused to take trains out of depots on the formal basis that the network would be unsafe without professional fire cover.

Seventh, many strikes have tended to be relatively 'political'. On the railways this has been because the all pervasive neoliberal project has shaped the discourse and policy of successive Conservative, Labour and coalition governments, thereby making the political demand for re-nationalisation an underlying feature of the RMT's strike mobilisation approach, as well as because of the specific role of government in awarding franchises to private companies, subsidising the industry with public funds, and because a series of accidents have made health and safety a political issue. Likewise the overall public ownership and management of the Underground, with the directly-elected Mayor of London's over-arching powerful influence, as well as the union's vigorous opposition to part-privatisation and its political campaign for the transfer of work back to the public sector, have made strikes in the capital highly political. In addition, in both sectors there has also been the persistent use by employers of the government's employment legislation to get industrial action ballots declared invalid and strike action called off on the basis that the proposed action was unlawful.

While many commentators have dismissed the RMT's militant trade union model as being outmoded, destructive and self-defeating in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of transformed work and employment relations (Coats, 2005; Roche and Geary, 2006), the union has been able to claim several high-profile bargaining victories and advances for union organisation, even since the onset of financial recession in 2009. Indeed through the threat and/or use of strike action the RMT provided verifiable evidence of its ability to force concessions from employers resulting in the defence/delivery of material improvements in their members' pay and conditions of work (Darlington, 2009a; 2009b; 2012). This included winning numerous above-inflation pay rises, as well as the 35-hour working week on many different sections of the railway network and London Underground; reversing managerial decisions to dismiss individually targeted active union members and reps (2011); preventing attempts by Network Rail (2004) and other rail companies (2006) to end final salary pension schemes for new starters; contributing to bringing the return of infrastructure maintenance in-house in Network Rail (2003); and forcing Transport for London to agree to bring back in-house the failed Metronet Public Private Partnership (PPP) contract (2007).

Moreover during 2002-09 the RMT not only stemmed the relentless decline in membership it previously experienced in the 1980s and 1990s, but also, unlike many other

UK unions, recruited many new members. Membership in the London Transport Region increased from 9,457 to 13,570 during the period 2002-2009 (or 43 per cent), and across the union as a whole over the same period increased from 63,084 to 79,499 (or 26 per cent). Even though the absolute numbers are not large, the RMT became one of the fastest growing unions in Britain and compared favourably within a context of merely stable or even declining membership for many others (Darlington, 2010).

Despite the fact membership levels reduced marginally over the period 2010-11 amidst the austerity offensive, the union has managed to continue to make new inroads into new areas of employment (for example, signing up new recognition agreements for cleaners at Tyne and Wear Metro in 2011). In addition, the RMT's industrial militancy energised a wide layer of reps and activists, boosted the self-confidence of union members and their sense of collective power generally, and contributed to the development of relative vibrant forms of workplace union organisation in many areas. As one union rep explained: 'Collectively we can achieve more through militancy, it follows through: the mobilisation works, militancy works, organisation works, and it gives people strength, the confidence that they can achieve things'. As a result, there was a direct relationship (or 'virtuous circle') between the unions' strike mobilisation and its effectiveness in obtaining bargaining gains, membership growth and union revitalisation.

Yet notwithstanding the successes of the militant approach adopted by the RMT, there were also some important limitations and challenges. Strikes were necessarily 'high-risk' and a successful outcome far from certain, with ineffectiveness/failure weakening union organisation, undermining morale and resulting in some membership loss. There was the problem of employers' counter-mobilisation, including occasional attempts to utilise strike-breaking managers and agency staff to undermine their impact. There were discernible differences between different occupational groups of RMT members (for example, between train drivers and station staff) in terms of potential industrial muscle, strength of workplace union organisation and willingness to engage in strike activity, as well as considerable variation in the strength of union organisation between individual companies. There were inter-union rivalries, mainly with rival drivers' union ASLEF, which also sometimes undermined action. Finally the onset of economic recession in 2008 and implementation of government budget deficit measures, with its accentuated threat of job loss, also posed rather more formidable challenges for RMT organisation and the defence of members' jobs and conditions (Connolly and Darlington, 2012).

### **Left-Wing Political Orientation and Identity**

The RMT's *industrial* militancy has been more than matched by *left-wing political* opposition to employers' and government policies and the development of a clear anti-neoliberal identity. To begin with, there was the decision to break its historic link with the Labour Party. Historically the RMT (and its predecessor union, the NUR) leadership had always been proud of the union's strong links with the Labour Party, a significant number of union activists were Labour councillors, and at the grassroots the union boasted the highest density of Labour Party membership of any trade union proportionate to its size. But after the election of Tony Blair's government in 1997, the union became a fierce critic of the perceived 'neoliberalism' of 'New' Labour, notably its refusal to countenance re-

nationalisation of the railways, its implementation of part-privatisation of the London Underground, retention of the Conservatives' 'anti-union' employment legislation, widespread moves towards the marketisation of public services, and military intervention in Iraq. After reducing affiliation fees to the Labour Party for allegedly 'deserting its working class roots' and 'jumping into bed with its big business friends', the RMT allowed local union branches and regions to affiliate to and campaign for non-Labour Party political organisations and candidates at local and parliamentary elections.

In the Greater London Assembly elections of 2000 ten RMT London Underground workers, led by Pat Sikorski (newly elected as Assistant General Secretary), ran as candidates as part of the RMT London Region's Campaign Against Tube Privatisation, in the process gaining 17,000 votes. This was followed by the RMT national executive's decision to allow five Scottish branches and its Scottish Regional Council to affiliate to the Scottish Socialist Party, after which Labour's national executive committee recommended the RMT 'be treated as disaffiliated from this Party forthwith'. An RMT special general meeting in February 2004 refused to be 'bullied' and overwhelmingly decided to reaffirm its policy of supporting other political organisations that reflected union policies.

Over the next few years the RMT hosted two national conferences open to trade activists from other unions to discuss 'The Crisis in Working Class Political Representation' which made clear the gulf between the union and New Labour. Bob Crow cited the Labour government's continuing obsession with privatisation and its refusal to scrap anti-union laws as evidence that the party no longer acted for working men and women. At the union's 2007 Annual General Meeting (AGM) he delivered a damning indictment of Labour and scorned the possibility of resurrecting it as a workers' party: 'Any hope of the Labour Party working for workers is dead, finished, over. I think all of you who are staying in the Labour Party are just giving credibility to it'. He warned: 'We will have to look to find another route for political representation'. But while underlining the need for the union to have a working class political alternative to Labour the manner in which that might come about was left open to debate inside the union, with no real consensus emerging, even amongst the left. Ironically the RMT national executive proceeded to expand and reinvigorate the RMT's parliamentary Labour Party group (now with 23 MPs), headed by left-wing MP John McDonnell, and subsequently back McDonnell's 2007 campaign for the Labour Party leadership.

However, even though they refused to commit the union to launching a new independent broad-based left-wing political party, individual regions and branches of the union were allowed to support candidates from alternative political parties or organisations to Labour, with Bob Crow personally identifying himself with those socialist candidates who did so. Thus, in 2008 many of the RMT's London branches supported the radical Left List mayoral candidate (and Stop the War convenor) Lindsay German. In the general election of 2010, and local council elections of 2011 and 2012, RMT branches around the country supported independent candidates, including Alex Gordon, RMT President, and other leading union figures in Liverpool, Salford, Portsmouth and Doncaster, who stood as part of an alternative 'Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition' (on whose steering committee Bob Crow served in a personal capacity) around the platform of 'No to Cuts and Privatisation! Make the Bosses Pay!', public ownership and control of the major utilities, repeal of anti-union laws, and withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. For the June 2009 European



elections, the RMT set up a 'No2EU - Yes to Democracy' electoral coalition (again including leading members of the RMT across the country) on a platform of opposition to the Lisbon Treaty and EU-led liberalisation of public services.

Meanwhile the RMT opposed the government's military intervention in Iraq and officially supported the 'Stop the War' movement of opposition. Across the country individual regions and branches, including the union's AGM, endorsed this stance. Likewise the London Transport Regional Council, with a policy of calling for the withdrawal of British troops, mobilised dozens of members for the mammoth 15 February 2003 anti-war demonstration. Immediately after the 7 July 2005 London bombings Bob Crow explained: 'The war Tony Blair led us into in Iraq was a criminal act... and...has now resulted in the very escalation of violence that we warned of' (*Across the Tracks*, July 2005). In the immediate hours after the 21 July 2005 attempted repeat bombings, leading RMT reps on the Underground backed dozens of their members who refused to drive trains or open up stations as requested to do so by the government and employers. Although the action was framed around the issue of safety, the RMT's stance was clearly informed by an explicit left-wing political set of assumptions related to opposition to the war in Iraq.

More generally the RMT took some important steps to broaden the agenda of trade unionism by linking workplace issues to social and political concerns and making common cause with a range of social movements. This was manifest in a number of ways. Thus the threat of substantial job losses on both the railways and Underground led the union to attempt to connect industrial militancy aimed at safeguarding its members' jobs and conditions, on the one hand, with the resulting threat of cuts in the quality and availability of services itself, on the other, thereby developing alliances with service users. For example, the union joined with a 'Bring Back British Rail' internet-based campaign which linked rail passengers and employees in calling for the renationalisation of private rail companies and a newly unified national rail network 'run for people not profit'. Likewise links were established with the 'Campaign for Better Transport' which opposed rail fare increases for passengers and campaigned for improved public transport and a reduction in the contribution of transport to climate change.

The RMT also supported a number of broad based industrial and political campaigns. It maintained close links with other railway and transport unions affiliated to the European Transport Workers' Federation, as well as other unions such as the radical SUD-Rail in France, and mobilised several hundreds of its activists and members for a number of different European-wide demonstrations against EU liberalisation of the rail sector. It took the initiative to sponsor the launch of a National Shop Stewards' Network, both as a means of building links with militant trade unionists in other industries and for revitalising the grassroots of the unions so as to build a combative union movement in Britain; in the process Crow and other leading RMT activists participated in a number of lively national conferences of hundreds of workplace reps/activists, and regional meetings, and helped to generate solidarity for different workers' disputes. In this respect, the RMT played a notably prominent role in supporting a 2009 workers' occupation at the Vestas wind turbine plant on the Isle of Wight in an imaginative and high-profile battle for 'green' jobs and renewable energy policy.

In addition, the union consistently took initiatives to encourage their members to act in solidarity with other struggles taking place. For example, in 2010 it wrote to all its branches and directly emailed/texted members urging them to join a national student demonstration against government imposition of increased tuition fees. In London in 2011 it mobilised its members to join picket lines of striking electricians protesting against private contractors' attempts to introduce pay cuts. Likewise the union supported the global justice and anti-capitalist movement, with London Regional Council participation at the European Social Forums in Florence, 2002, Paris 2003 and London 2004, and World Social Forum in Brazil. Significantly, unlike virtually every other union in Britain, the RMT retained in its rulebook the objective: 'to work for the supersession of the capitalist system by a socialistic order of society'.

Mcllroy (2012) has argued that the RMT's political initiatives have failed to engage substantial numbers of members and have infrequently impacted on mainstream union activity, with the RMT subsisting to a degree organisationally and politically within the orbit of Labourism and failing to evolve as a distinctive, oppositional political entity. Nonetheless such initiatives have been well supported by key national figures within the union as well as a sizeable layer of left activists at different levels of the RMT across the country, and they mark a notable, if as yet tentative and limited, attempt to reorient the union as a social actor towards a broader political agenda and seek new forms of political representation.

### **Reciprocal Linkage**

Clearly there have been some important broad environment factors which help to explain the development of the RMT's militant and left-wing political model of trade unionism. The political economy context of both the railway and Underground sectors has clearly been important not only in contributing to the broad *industrial* discontent, but also in terms of the *politicisation* of industrial relations and trade unionism that has occurred. Thus the impact of privatisation (with the transformation of relatively well-functioning integrated rail/tube networks into highly fragmented businesses involving widely different collective bargaining arrangements and terms and conditions of employment) resulted in organisational restructuring, growing levels of employment insecurity, and constant managerial attempts to change working arrangements in ways which were perceived as detrimental to workers' interests. In turn this encouraged workers' discontent and its manifestation in militant forms of strike mobilisation and left-wing political union orientation and leadership.

The specific sectoral contexts that have placed the RMT and its members in an unusually strong bargaining position and lent feasibility to the strike mobilisation approach adopted also needs to be fully taken into account. The operational vulnerability of both the railway and Underground systems to strike action, with their tightly integrated service networks which are not easily substitutable by other means, and the RMT's strategic position both industrially and within society more generally, has obviously provided it with enormous potential bargaining power in which strikes, or even the threat of them, can have a much greater and immediate impact than in many other industrial sectors. The homogeneity of a large predominantly manual workforce with a strong occupational identity and relatively high union membership density also contributed to creating a

favourable environment for RMT members to engage in strike activity compared with the more subdued union response in other industries in recent years.

But all of these objective factors do not in themselves provide a sufficient explanation for the strike mobilisation that occurred, nor left-wing political form of trade unionism that developed: such an outcome also had to be constructed by the role of *subjective* agency. Thus also crucially important was that most of the union's national and regional officers, and a significant number of local reps and activists held fairly explicit *left-wing political* values, ideology, motivation and commitment, and from the early 2000s exercised considerable industrial and political influence in shaping the union's approach.

Such a left-wing tradition developed in part from the historical legacy of a grassroots unofficial caucus, the Campaign for Fighting and Democratic Union, that operated in the late 1980s and 1990s and sought to overhaul the union's internal democratic structures, challenge the moderate industrial and political leadership of the incumbent general secretary, and rebuild the strength of the union through the organisation of militant collective struggle. Embracing some 300 leading union officers, lay reps and activists, the group produced a regular newsletter, organised periodic meetings and increasingly played an influential role in national disputes, and eventually helped to secure a huge majority in support of Crow's election as general secretary in 2002 on a platform of creating a 'fighting trade union'.

Previously a member of the Communist Party (13 years) and national executive member of the Socialist Labour Party (3 years), Crow retained his radical left politics, and his vociferous (and high-profile media) antagonism towards the employers and government, willingness to support strikes, and persistent stress on the virtues of militant resistance, collectivism and solidarity, undoubtedly contributed to the high levels of union mobilisation. As one Underground union activist noted:

Since his election victory [in 2002] Bob Crow has taken a lead in encouraging a fighting trade union platform, supporting strike action where necessary, refuting social partnership, and breaking with the Labour Party, and so on...we had a figurehead who...wanted to take on the employers, who would actively encourage it. He would look at reasons to go into dispute rather than reasons not to.

In the early 2000s there were a succession of further electoral victories which led to the left's ascendancy on the national executive, and although the RMT no longer had any formally organised broad left grouping as such it retained a wide but loose network of prominent left-wing officers and reps that became increasingly influential in the union's industrial and political mobilisation. The political composition of the RMT's London Transport Regional Council illustrated the process in sharp relief. On the one hand, a number of far left organisations (such as the Socialist Workers Party) had representation, with some other individuals although no longer a formal member of a political party, also remaining highly political in their overall approach. On the other hand there was a 'syndicalist left' element composed of a broad mix of industrial militants, most of whom (like their party and ex-party counterparts) also adopted a consistently adversarial approach to management and the government and necessarily also took up political arguments (Darlington, 2009a; 2009b).

This was important because such left-wing leadership played a key role in helping to encourage the union's strike mobilisation approach. Thus the process of building members

support for strike ballots provided an important focus for this relatively large milieu of combative workplace union reps and activists to engage in 'collective action framing' (Snow et al, 1986) and 'repertoires of contention' (McAdam et al, 2001) via a variety of propaganda communication channels (such as section/mass meetings and regular company/grade/union branch newsletters, leaflets, emails and text messages) so as to 'mobilise bias' (Batstone et al, 1978) in an adversarial direction. In articulating workers' sense of injustice and targeting it at employers and the government, and advocating the need for strike action as an effective means of collective redress, this vibrant network of left-wing reps/activists displayed crucial leadership and organisational skills that made workers more likely and more willing to engage in strike mobilisation.

But it was also important because they provided an intensely *ideological and political cutting-edge* to such industrial militancy. Such left-wing leaders and activists were motivated not just by a struggle against perceived workplace injustice, but also by the search for social justice outside the workplace, often framing issues with a highly political discourse that encompassed a broader and more political set of concerns pivoted on a traditional class-based analysis of society and the need to defend the interests of the wider working class movement ('us') in response to employers and the government ('them'). In seeking to shape its identity as a 'fighting union', there was the constant emphasis on the need for 'struggle' to politically resist the whole process of privatisation and neoliberalism more generally. Thus left-wing leadership was an important contributory catalyst, symptom and beneficiary of strike mobilisation and the union's strategic orientation and identity. Moreover, the left inside the RMT was not only more influential and less divided internally than in other unions, but also faces much less of a challenge from moderate or right-wing organised forces, which were negligible.

It appears to provide some credence to the notion of a 'political congruence' (Upchurch et al, 2008), a convergence of shared political frames of reference, collective identity, expectations and intended outcomes between left-wing union leaders, activists and a critical mass of members, who were able to work together to a sufficient degree that it acted to subdue the inherent bureaucratic cleavages between paid full-time officials and activists/members that in other circumstances tend to be much more pronounced between these two groups. Contributing to such political congruence was the institution of a highly democratic form of union structure and organisation that occurred in the wake of Crow's election. This resulted in the election (rather than appointment) of all national and regional paid union officials (who are subject to re-election after five years), a directly elected Council of Executives (whose members must relinquish their post after three-year terms of office), and central decision-making powers lying in the hands of lay national grade conferences and the AGM (with delegates excluded from attending for more than a three-year successive period). In addition, the strike mobilisation approach and the left-wing politically-informed objectives that crystallised membership anti-government sentiments also encouraged democratic processes, and in turn helped to shape membership attachment/participation.

Undoubtedly there *is* a question mark over the extent to which the broader mass of *members* of the RMT, as opposed to the minority of *reps/activists*, were politicised, on which there needs to be further research. But even if RMT left-wing activists were 'ahead' of the vast majority of their members in 'class-consciousness' terms, their political views

appeared to chime with and not contradict the broad thrust of their members' industrial perspectives, and received no real opposition.

### **Broader Assessment**

The experience of the RMT over recent years provides clear evidence of a direct relationship between union militancy, effectiveness in 'delivering' collective bargaining gains, membership growth and the development of relatively vibrant forms of union organisation and representation. Such an adversarial stance, and the benefits it has bestowed, contrasts with the more accommodative forms of unionism adopted by many other unions which have often not been as successful.

Of course, notwithstanding the RMT's achievements, the union is very small in number and the militant and left-wing political model of trade unionism it has embodied remains a distinct minority phenomenon within the UK. This raises the inevitable issue of the specificity of the case study evidence and the question of whether the experience of the RMT confirms the view of those industrial relations academics (Metcalf, 2005; McIlroy and Daniels, 2009; Simms and Charlwood, 2010) who have argued that unfavourable broader societal economic and political constraints have severely limited the scope for union revitalisation in Britain. Certainly it was the relatively favourable 'opportunity structure' context that has placed the RMT and its members in an unusually strong bargaining position and thereby lent feasibility to the strike mobilisation adopted. Combined with strong levels of workplace union membership and organisation, it helped to explain the willingness to engage in strike activity, compared with the more subdued union response in many other industries in recent years. In other words, it could be argued the case study evidence presents an idiosyncratic sector and union. The implication is that such union militancy is unlikely to be replicable, or be as successfully implemented, by other unions that operate in less favourable arenas of employment in the UK where bargaining leverage and union organisation is much weaker.

Nonetheless the fact that there has been extensive strike mobilisation in recent years within an area of employment like the civil service, which does not enjoy particularly favourable bargaining leverage, but which has a highly politicised industrial relations environment and left-wing leadership at every level of the union (Upchurch et al, 2008), at the very least suggests the potential basis for such radical political unionism may not necessarily be entirely unique. Thus McCarthy's (2009) study of PCS within the Department for Work and Pensions, where the workforce engaged in nine days of strike action over a 29-month period between 2006-8, found a significant positive association between mobilisation and collective action to gain improved bargaining outcomes (over pay and job cuts) and increased short-term 'surges' in union membership recruitment. During 2000-2008 across the civil service as a whole, PCS's emphasis on the importance of mobilisation and strike action (accounting for several million working days not worked), both as a means of defending members and of union building generally, appeared to contribute to a consistent annual growth in membership, which rose by 20 per cent.

Arguably such evidence suggests unions do not have to be little more than victims of external changes wrought by neoliberal globalisation. While the revitalisation of the trade

union movement generally in Britain can only come through mass struggle from below, that does not mean there are not things that could be done in different employment sectors to maximise the potential opportunities that the current protracted 'Age of Austerity' context, with its significant increase in the level of union militancy after many years of relative labour quiescence, throws up. The RMT's left-wing radical unionism provides an important alternative model to mainstream approaches, both as a means of defending members and rebuilding union organisation.

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