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1. *Facing up to Thatcherism: History of NALGO 1979-1992* (2000), with M.Ironside, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 420pp
2. *United They Stood – the story of the 2002/4 strike in the UK Fire Service* (2005) with Tom Sibley, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 304pp
3. *The case for Civil and Public Services* (2005) with Mike Ironside, PCS, London, 60pp

His Recent publications in journals include:

1. ‘The consequences for the management of conflict of the reform of English local government finance and structure’, with W Gill and M Ironside, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, vol 14, 2003, pp255-272
2. ‘The significance of comparability in national pay bargaining in the public

services: case studies of the 1980 and 1989 Local Government White-Collar strikes' (with M.Ironside) in *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, no 16, pages 81-116, autumn 2003

3. 'From poor to rich' in *The Chartist*, no 206, Jan/Feb 2004, pages 14-15

4. 'The impact of privatization and marketisation on employment conditions in the public services', with M. Ironside, *Radical Statistics*, issue 86, 2004, pages 57-71

4. 'Falling into the gap' in *Police Magazine*, February 2006, pp 14-15

5. 'Reforming Further Education – the changing labor process for college lecturers' in *Personnel Review* with Mather and Worrall, 2007 forthcoming

6. 'The Importance of Being Permanent: a study of the North Staffordshire Miners' Federation from 1869 to 1874' in *Midland History*, 2006 forthcoming

Resisting Reform: Public Sector Workers and the British State

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I. Introduction

This paper seeks to illuminate the relations between workers and the capitalist state in the UK in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It does so by discussing the particular relationship between the Labor governments (1997-2008) and organised labor in the form of the trade unions. The assumption being that the government itself acted in the interests of British capital writ large and therefore class relations are partly explained by the application of state power in certain arenas of civil society. In particular the ground to be covered is reform of the public services as this allows for a direct account of the government's 'modernising agenda' and the ways in which different sections of the working-class have resisted the powerful policy direction of market reforms.

In practice this paper, after a brief account of labor-union relations, takes three case studies as examples. The 2002-4 fire dispute which involved the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) in industrial action including several weeks of strikes in a bitter and fiercely contested struggle over pay and modernisation; the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) opposition to government reform of the civil service (2005-7), and in particular its reaction to the Gershon report on efficiency savings leading to job losses. In this case the union took action through the use of one-day demonstration strikes. The third example is the way in which the Police Federation of England and Wales (PFEW) fought off government proposals to merge forces in 2006, and more recently 2006/7 went into dispute over police pay: both the award and the mechanism.

Political activists and writers following on from Marx's historical materialism have emphasized the importance of examining the class struggle as part of a wider study of class

relations in society. Within this there is a strong notion that everyone involved should take note of the balance of class forces. So class in the sense of citizens' relationship to both ownership and the labor market starts the process of analysis, and in this paper it is the twin notions of the center of the class struggle and the balance of class forces that is of immediate concern.¹

In the UK there is a highly centralized state. Much of the state function and apparatus are outside any normal democratic control, and only part of the Parliament is elected. Nonetheless, the elected government has significant authority over other areas of the state and as such plays a major role in shaping state policy. In a party system then the role of the Party itself as a representation of class interest and national citizens common good becomes more important. Thus as Miliband² argued the centre of politics is for the attention of the state, and therefore mainly for the attention of the government in charge of that state. In Marxist terms political parties represent class interests, and while there is much that is contestable and contested in defining and refining these, there is still a core of self-defined objective self-interest without which the relationship of party and class is eroded. This is partly taken up below in the discussion on the links between the trade unions (as the largest representatives of organised labor) and the Labor Party itself, still the mass party of the British working-class.³

The third element in the class-party party-class story is that of the state. Seen as typically an instrument, more or less democratic and more or less repressive, of class rule.⁴ So the struggle to control the state, and *pro tem* state policy, is often the most important struggle in UK politics, even if and when that does not appear to be the case. This paper, then, argues that one way to understand these relationships is through three case studies of organized workers in struggle against some aspect of state policy as implemented by the Labor Government. In particular the argument is based on the assumption that the way governments react to active opposition is a sign of their deeper sense of class representation and interests. So if groups of workers, in this paper from the state sector, oppose by various means specific policies⁵ (firefighters limits on pay and changes to conditions; civil servants job losses; and police skill substitution) and that these collectively add up to opposition,

1 Cohen, G. (1978) *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, Clarendon Press; K. Marx (1859) *Preface to a contribution on political economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow; V. Lenin (1902) *What Is To Be Done?* OUP.

2 Miliband, R. (1973) *The State in Capitalist Society*, London: Quartet Books

3 R. Hyman (1989) *The Political Economy of Industrial Relations*, MacMillan, London; C. Crouch (1993) *Industrial Relations and European State Traditions*, Clarendon, Oxford

4 Chomsky, N (1999) *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and the Global Order*, New York: Seven Stories Press

5 J. Kelly (1988) *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*, Verso, London; J. Kelly (1998) *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, Routledge, London

both subjective and objective, to a wider policy of ‘modernisation’ then the challenge to government policy becomes a challenge to state policy and thus to the dominant policy direction represented by the interests of British capital rather than those of workers.

In this way these cases can be seen as examples of both class struggle in the lower case sense, and potentially an attempt to alter the balance of class forces to make the government retreat from its current policy mind-set and replace it explicitly with one more favourable to the interests of the citizen-worker. The paper’s focus is these case studies rather than an elaboration of familiar themes, although the trade union links with Labor and the subsequent position of Labor government leaders to forms of industrial action are taken as proxies for political challenge they seek to represent.

The two questions for us therefore are: to what extent did Blair’s (Prime Minister from 1997-2007) ‘fairness not favours’ slogan reflect the reality of the handling of these disputes; and to what extent did the Blair government react in accordance with the new paradigm in state policy outlined by Hay¹ in relationship to the strike wave now known as the Winter of Discontent in 1978/9.

II. Labor and the Unions

There is lively debate about the actual nature of the relationship between the British Labor Party (and by default Labor governments) and the British trade union movement writ large. Recently it has centred around Minkin’s book *The Contentious Alliance*² in which he provides four main factors for Labor leaders to maintain the link: finance; ‘political ballast’ in terms of union weight inside party institutions; as an eye into the condition of the working-class; and the need to legitimize the party as the party of the working-class. In turn the unions need the party because of: the rather vague idea of traditional loyalty around ‘This great movement of ours’; notions of exchange solidarity; access to decision-making, especially when there is a Labor Government; and shared policy goals.

The debate centres typically on what is and what should be the level of influence over policy, especially policies directly concerned with the unions themselves, and with the related issues of collective bargaining and regulation of the employment relation. Ludlam and Taylor³ sought to update and test Minkin’s eight points in light of what had happened under New Labor since 1997. They concluded that four factors no longer counted: the labor leadership no longer needed a union eye into the working-class, and had abandoned their

1 Hay, C. (1996) ‘Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the ‘Winter of Discontent’’. *Sociology* 30(2) pages 253-278

2 Minkin, L. (1991) *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labor Party*, Edinburgh University Press

3 Ludlam and Taylor (2003) ‘The Political Representation of the Labor Interest in Britain’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 41(4) pages 727-749

legitimising role; and the unions no longer felt that labor gave them either solidarity or supported the movement. Of the other four the case is made that all are weakening as the relationship vacillates between a union-lobbying model and a union-bonding model and away from the apparently earlier union-dominance model.

All of this came together when Tony Blair won the 1997 General Election on a manifesto with few promises on union-related issues, and with little intention of helping to regulate the employment relationship. This was seen as both an electoral ploy to win back centre ground voters, and a shift to the neo-liberal right in terms of explicit embracing of big business and market capitalism. There was a series of comments about the likely approach of the Blair government to the unions based on his 'fairness not favours' line.¹ These were often located within the wider post-Cold War debate about the nature of social democracy and its associated policies of corporatism, Keynesianism and welfarism². By the time, therefore, that the Soviet Union had fallen apart a market dominated approach was already well entrenched. Hence shifts in calculations about the electoral base and manifesto from major social democratic parties, and these included links with organized labor, and a re-assessment of what part of the labor movement was to play which role in state governance.

III. The Case Studies

The three case studies seek to illustrate a set of variable tactical approaches to resisting reform, although the argument is that both the substance and method of reform belong to the same policy family. So the position outlined elsewhere³ is that the Labor government since the late 1990s has taken public policy for reform, 'modernisation', of the public services in a neo-liberal direction and away from what Hood calls 'progressive public administration'.⁴ The details of this are to be found in other works⁵ but the thrust is clear: that while there is still some consensus in the UK on the remains of welfarism the focus has shifted from free delivery by service workers employed by state organisations owned by

1 Mellroy, J. (1998) 'The Enduring Alliance? Trade Unions and the Making of New Labor, 1994-1997', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 36(4) pp. 537-564

2 Hobsbawm, E. (1994) *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, Michael Joseph: London; Hutton, W. (1995) *The State We're In*, Vintage: London

3 Ironside, M. Seifert, R (2001) *The impact of Private Finance Initiative/Public Private Partnerships on employment relations and conditions*, Evidence to the Scottish Parliament Finance Committee

4 Hood, C. 1995. 'The "New Public Management" in the 1980s: variations on a theme', *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, vol. 20, no. 2/3, pp. 93-109.

5 Dunsire, A. (1999) 'Then and Now: Public Administration 1953-1999' in *Political Studies*, 47(2), 360-378.

public bodies, to the delivery of services owned and managed by anyone deemed to be capable of meeting the espoused objectives of efficiency, effectiveness and economy (the three Es of new public management). Even when the evidence is substantial that the three Es are not being met on any measure, the government persists with the policy thus suggesting that privatisation and modernization are more important than real improved outcomes.

Our interest lies with those groups still employed as public servants by public bodies, and an account of their changing pay and conditions through the prism of reform. In general the case is that in order to meet the public policy targets set by government, site managers have to change the ways in which they manage labor, and this means in largely labor intensive services delivered locally to people that a substantial shift in the labor process of such workers is required. In order to achieve this increase in the intensity of exploitation certain practices have to be introduced, but these are resisted collectively through the unions and individually by workers exhibiting increasing signs of alienation through individual acts of defiance. Therefore, as part of the management of reform, unions are weakened through either direct assault or through marginalization, and there is a raft of mainly useless rhetorical initiatives to counter individual disenchantment, often described as soft HRM.

Within the narrowness of our subject of industrial relations this comes down to reforming the two pillars of the employment relation: pay and performance. It is these that are more or less exchanged in the contract of employment, the legal representation of the economic relationship of buying and selling labor power in a market. The terms of that arrangement are being altered in favour of the management and against the workforce through government pressure on local managers, and in particular government seeks to control labor costs through setting low cost-of-living pay deals (whether through indexation as in fire and police, or through normal bargaining as with the civil service agencies, or through pay review with health and educational professionals). Such nationally approved low increase (on average about 2% this year) are aimed at both controlling the bottom line on pay and allowing local and performance pay variations thereby bypassing collective bargaining and isolating individuals from each other in the wages movement.

At the same time efforts are being made to control, in order to improve productivity, worker performance in terms of management-defined objectives. This creates two battlegrounds: the traditional one over actual conditions of service including pensions, working hours, health and safety, discrimination, and rights; and a more recent explicit one over professional autonomy and the relationship between service deliverer and service user, control over the labor process itself.¹ Both now are acute and have created a crisis in the UK public sector, and this is the basis for the argument presented above that the centre of

1 Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

the class struggle is the reform of public services, and for the details below of three different types of struggle.¹

The FBU's 2002 claim had three main elements: pay rate parity for its members thus removing the long-standing discrimination against part-time retained firefighters and the mainly female staff operating the emergency call centres, a new Pay Formula linking future earnings growth to that of associate professional and technician grades rather than skilled manual workers, and an increase from £21,500 to £30,000 for full-time firefighters after completion of four years on the job training. In the event the principle of equal pay for control room operators and part time retained firefighters was conceded early on in the negotiations. The sticking point for the employers and the Government was the claim for a basic full-time rate of £30,000 per annum. This dispute has been described in detail elsewhere.²

The Police Federation of England and Wales (PFEW) is not a trade union in the normal sense, because it is statutory based, it is a post-entry closed shop and they cannot go on strike.³ But many of its functions are similar to a trade union: there are branches and lay activists; a central elected executive and national office holders; these negotiate and represent at local and national level on all matters including pay and conditions; and discipline and grievance.

In 2006 the government sought to change the structure of the service through the merger of forces. The case was that this would be more efficient and help fight terrorism and serious crime through bigger units. Most of the police and the PFEW opposed this and took action against the decision. This was won, but then there was a new struggle against a low pay settlement in 2006/7 and the decision to review present pay setting systems. The PFEW are unable to strike but nonetheless employed a variety of tactics to counter these aspects of government modernising. A core element of the reform in both cases, but not stated as a central element, was the increased use of civilian workers to substitute for qualified police.

The issues against which the PFEW fought come under the general heading of public sector modernising, and took a particular form: reform of pay and pay bargaining machinery; structural reform of operational units; labor management reforms especially deployment of officers and changes in skill mix around the Community Service Officer linked with key policy aspects of neighbourhood/community policing.

1 Edwards, P. (1992) 'Industrial Conflict' in *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 30(3), 361-404

2 R. Seifert and T. Sibley (2005), *United They Stood – the story of the 2002/4 strike in the UK Fire Service*, Lawrence & Wishart, London

3 L. Hunter (2003) 'Police Pay and Bargaining in the UK, 1978-2000' in *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol 41

My own reports for the PFEW¹ raised some key issues: namely that the proposed mergers of Forces themselves was one important element in a raft of ‘modernizing’ reforms intended to radically alter the ways in which the Police Service is structured, managed, and staffed. High on the agenda was the need to improve productivity, and this was to be achieved through privatization, civilianization, and through changing the priorities of the remainder of the Service. In my initial assessment of ‘Closing the Gap’² I pointed out many of the problems with the report, and in my statement to the Home Office on this I repeated my arguments that its emphasis on performance management and reform of collective bargaining arrangements paralleled those elsewhere.

In 2007 the government started a process of reform of police pay under Clive Booth³ with the possible intention of setting up a Pay Review system. This has been opposed by the PFEW and in the meantime there has been severe difficulties with interim pay settlements.⁴

Traditionally there was a highly centralized system of control in the civil service with national bargaining, and national pay and conditions of employment across the country and across sections. In the 1990s this changed with the creation of more stand-alone units of administration (agencies) with increased single-employer bargaining and specific pay and conditions. Generally the main union, the PCS, is an open general union within the sector with a leftwing national executive and leadership.⁵ In recent years central government’s efforts to cut costs and modernize services has meant a range of labor management initiatives such as performance related pay, more flexible working, changes in pensions, new promotions systems, and job losses with resultant work intensification.

The union has opposed these developments and sought to return to national bargaining on most key issues such as pay and pensions, as well as opposing specifically redundancies. It is this last issues, based on the Gershon⁶ report recommendations that has triggered a round of one-day strikes and other action. In 2005 the government issued a report aimed at cutting civil service jobs, privatizing aspects of their work, and reducing the conditions of service of those that remained. As part of the campaign the main union, PCS, asked academics and others to analysis the government’s arguments in order to present a logical

1 R.Seifert (2006) *Comments for Police Federation on “Closing the Gap”*; R. Seifert (2007) *Report for Police Federation on the origin, functions and purpose of Pay Review Bodies with a preliminary comment on the first Booth review*

2 R. Seifert (2006) ‘Falling into the gap’ Police, February

3 C. Booth (2007) *Fair Pay for Police Officers*, Home Office

4 R. Seifert (2007) *Report for Police Federation on the origin, functions and purpose of Pay Review Bodies with a preliminary comment on the first Booth review*

5 See PCS website, pcs.org.uk

6 Gershon (2004) *Releasing resources to the front line: an independent review of public sector efficiency*, HM Treasury

case against the proposals as a basis for a programme of action to include propaganda through politicians and the media and days of action. One such account¹ supported PCS members on a day of national action.

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Conclusions

The three case studies have sought to illustrate the different ways in which different public sector workers have struggled against a variety of government inspired reforms. The entire range of changes come under the heading of New Public Management and therefore is a central part of the policy direction largely known as neo-liberal market modernisation. The purpose of the policy is to shift the costs and risks of modern life for the average citizen away from taxpayers and the state and to families and individuals. This allows both a cheapening of the tax for the rich, and the private provision of services by increasingly large companies making easy profits from government contracts. This in itself increases the level of corruption and thereby makes the actual delivery of the services less secure, more uneven, and greatly commoditized. But there is resistance to this pattern, mainly from existing workers and their unions, but also from citizens and pressure groups.

In particular union resistance takes the form of the nature of those employed (workforce composition), the nature of the service, and the traditions of struggle of those involved. This last also includes therefore the politics of the national leadership, membership support, and the realities of available action. In the event all were true to form: the broad left leaders of the FBU used the powerful closed union to take strike action; the more mixed left leadership of the PCS with its diffuse open membership made a great deal of public noise that included days of action; while the more conservative PFEW worked hard behind the scenes within its influential network of connections. All shared a critique of reform varying from outright opposition to the whole basis of change, to a more measured attack on the immediate changes on offer. But all saw the dangers to their members in terms of weaker pay bargaining opportunities, changes to labor process mainly centered on occupational dilution and job degradation, and attacks on the ability of their defense organizations to mount campaigns.

1 R. Seifert and M. Ironside (2005) *An Alternative View of the Future of the Civil Service*, PCS