

made statements welcoming the recommendations, but asked how it was to be paid for. Tag Taylor, the Conservative Chairman of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities, said that if money was not forthcoming from central government in the form of an increase in the rate support grant, the award could only be paid for through job losses. Ian Coutts, the Finance Committee chairman of the Association of County Councils, commented that it would now be cheaper to employ contractors on many council tasks.<sup>78</sup> Bernard Dix reacted angrily to these suggestions, warning employers that the union would not accept 'a trade-off of jobs for extra pay'. Advice was quickly sent to branches restating the union's policies in these areas: no redundancies; no loss of earnings because of changes in bonus schemes and working patterns; no increase in workloads; and no to the introduction of private contractors. If cuts were made, NUPE members were advised to rearrange works schedules unilaterally; one suggested example for such rearrangements proposed that cleaners could re-organise their work so that the council chamber, the Mayor's parlour and the Chief Executive's office would not be cleaned.<sup>79</sup>

The re-emergence of the cuts issue at the conclusion of the dispute curiously brought the episode full circle, as the union's low pay campaign had been launched in the autumn of 1978, premised on the need to break through the government's system of cash limits, which had been a key mechanism used by Callaghan's government for reducing public spending and keeping wages down. Ironically, the dispute in the public services that was later said to have had a fundamental impact on British politics had emerged directly out of the Labour government's adherence to economic policies of squeezing the public sector, which would prove the cornerstone of the newly elected Conservative government's policies for the next decade.<sup>80</sup> In this sense, it was the Labour government of Callaghan, and not NUPE, which – to turn the meaning of Bernard Donoghue's phrase on its head – 'could not have acted more effectively in the Conservative leader's electoral interests'.

## **ASSESSING THE DISPUTE**

As Senior Policy Adviser inside 10 Downing Street, Donoghue was close to Callaghan throughout his premiership, and he has written extensively on the impact of industrial events leading up to the general

election of May 1979. In apportioning blame for Labour's defeat he identifies 'the behaviour of certain trade unions and especially the public sector unions during the winter of discontent' as the most important.<sup>81</sup> The critical moment, according to Donoughue, was late February, when:

... union behaviour on the picket lines had become very nasty indeed, and this was quickly reflected in the opinion polls which showed a strong swing towards firmer action on pay settlements and especially towards support for Mrs Thatcher; indeed, it was at this time that Labour decisively lost the next election.<sup>82</sup>

In his autobiography he describes how, having left Downing Street on election morning, he called in at his local polling station which was quiet ...

... with just a trickle of old ladies voting. They had come to vote AGAINST. Against Alan Fisher and every NUPE thug who had prevented their sick from getting to hospital or their dead from getting buried.<sup>83</sup>

He goes on to include other trade union leaders practising a 'harsh doctrine of the weakest to the wall', but it is NUPE and Alan Fisher that are picked out as the principal culprits in Labour's downfall.<sup>84</sup>

Callaghan himself also later identified Alan Fisher, whom he described to Donoughue as a 'left-wing windbag', as having a personal responsibility for events during the dispute.<sup>85</sup> Speaking in 1989 to Geoffrey Goodman, a senior and highly respected national labour correspondent, and sympathetic to the Labour Party, the former prime minister said:

I have never believed that the general run of trade union leaders stirred things up; on the contrary. But I make an exception of Alan Fisher and I do think that David Basnett (as well as Fisher) could have shown more leadership over such things as the grave diggers' strike.<sup>86</sup>

Callaghan's biographer, Kenneth Morgan, has written that the Labour prime minister had no 'special relationship' with the current crop of

trade union leaders, including Fisher, whom he described as 'politically less attuned'.<sup>87</sup>

Denis Healey – chancellor at the time of the public services winter disputes – also later apportioned blame to the unions, particularly those TUC General Council members who voted against the government-TUC joint statement on 14 November, but he also recognised that the government had made a fatal error in insisting on a 5 per cent pay limit from July 1977: 'Our hubris in fixing the pay norm of five per cent, without any support from the TUC, met its nemesis, as inevitable as any Greek tragedy'.<sup>88</sup> Healey's biographer, Edward Pearce, wrote that Healey was the one member of the cabinet with the authority to correct Callaghan's misjudgement, but he failed to do so.<sup>89</sup>

Another participant in the negotiations at the time of the disputes, Secretary of State for the Environment Peter Shore, later absolved Callaghan and the Labour government from any responsibility for the dispute. Having acknowledged that the 5 per cent figure was 'too ambitious', he described the resultant industrial action as being 'ruthlessly applied in total disregard of the interest of the public and of the effects on the community':

So we had ... gravediggers refusing to bury the dead; official and unofficial shop stewards and pickets deciding who was to be allowed into the nation's hospitals to receive treatment ... stinking heaps of uncollected refuse in the streets of our cities. It was a nightmare. No one, in their wildest dreams, could have predicted such collective barbarity.<sup>90</sup>

The then Secretary of State for Transport, William Rogers – who was subsequently to be one of the breakaway 'gang of four' leaving the Labour Party to form the SDP – was less forgiving of the prime minister for his decision to delay the election. He criticised Callaghan's insistence on the 5 per cent figure, which was pushed through a 'generally sceptical Cabinet', and indicted him for his failure to 'judge accurately the weight of [union] objections and the limits of his own capacity for influence'.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, David Ennals later reflected that, once the 5 per cent figure was fixed, 'there was little room for manoeuvre for low-paid people'. 'It was very difficult', he went on, 'to get into negotiation and I'm not blaming the unions for this at all.

They had given ample warning of what was going to happen on 22 January'. As Secretary of State for Health and Social Security, Ennals was frustrated at not being able to broaden the basis of negotiation with a higher figure, but the prime minister had made it clear that 'there was going to be no way in which that particular part of the winter of discontent was going to end apart from his own intervention with a figure that was higher'. Ennals went on to recount the story of having misinterpreted Callaghan's speech to the Labour Party Local Government Conference, when he had spoken publicly about a possible higher single figure pay offer but had been 'shot down' by the prime minister, even though it had been discussed in cabinet.<sup>92</sup>

Robert Taylor, at the time of the dispute industrial correspondent of the *Observer*, criticised Alan Fisher's 'empty, superficial rhetoric' and alleged that the union had 'lost control' of the strike at workplace level, with disastrous consequences.<sup>93</sup> He later wrote:

Here were groups of workers, many in caring services, in hospitals, schools and cemeteries, ready to use painfully disruptive tactics, which hit the community, not the employers. This was no historic struggle of labour against capital, but a harsh internecine conflict within the working class itself ... Politically it undermined the confidence of the Labour government and shattered the belief in the minds of the electorate that the TUC and Labour could work together in harmony for the improvement of the economy. More important, it paved the way for Margaret Thatcher's election victory in May 1979.<sup>94</sup>

These disputes, Taylor suggested, were driven by 'acquisitive sectionalism', devoid of 'political perspectives' and concerned only with 'the economic demand for money now'.<sup>95</sup>

Lord McCarthy has also written about how the disputes discredited the Labour government and its relationship with the trade unions, and, like Taylor, he is critical of industrial action that hit those in need: 'doctors unable to treat patients, graveyards awaiting their dead, appeared to suggest that trade unionism itself had become a sectional and selfish movement – with little regard or concern for the comfort and sensibilities of others'.<sup>96</sup>

Len Murray, who was TUC General Secretary during the disputes, was critical of Callaghan's refusal to call an autumn election and then

to insist on an unworkable pay norm.<sup>97</sup> However, in conversation with Geoffrey Goodman he too had strong words for the conduct of the trade unions during these months:

It wasn't just a breakdown in wage restraint policy ... It was the carelessness of people about what was happening to other groups. This was fragmentation of trade unionism; all that had broken down in 1979. And all my assumptions, all the things I had worked for, were beginning to come into question.<sup>98</sup>

The accusation, explicit in Taylor and McCarthy's remarks, and tacitly accepted even by Murray, that the strikes exemplified 'sectionalist' tendencies in the trade union movement in that decade was rejected by Bernard Dix in his contribution to the debate provoked by Eric Hobsbawm's controversial essay on 'the forward march of labour halted'.<sup>99</sup> Hobsbawm had argued that the 'forward march' had in part been hindered by what he claimed was an increase in sectionally based trade unionism. Against this – and linking action during the disputes of 1978 and 1979 to NUPE's fight against cuts in public expenditure – Dix argued that the motives of public employees, far from being narrowly sectional, had been as much influenced by a concern for the social and economic consequences of government policies on communities as they were by considerations about members' pay. His argument was that the union's campaign on pay was essential not only to win a living wage for public service workers, but also to secure society's acknowledgement of the indispensability of the work that they did. This had underpinned NUPE's longstanding campaign to resist public expenditure cuts and to defend the social wage, which it had conducted since 1975, and had extended into the disputes of 1978 and 1979. The tragedy, Dix observed, was that this had been necessary with a Labour government in office. And, while acknowledging the inherent difficulties of conducting effective industrial action in services that provided support for vulnerable people, he also cited the union's success in maintaining emergency cover, in consultation with management; he believed that this demonstrated 'a kind of working class discipline in the face of inexperience and pressure'.<sup>100</sup>

Early in the disputes, Dix had rebuked those taking action that fell outside the union's advice on picketing, but these had never been more than isolated cases, and had been quickly checked.<sup>101</sup> The code

of practice, once agreed between the DHSS and trade unions on 31 January, had proved effective in setting limits on action, but was put under strain as managers acted in ways local activists considered to be provocative. In south Wales the decision of porters to work to rule had led to their suspension by hospital managers and a large-scale walkout by staff.<sup>102</sup> Elsewhere managers had refused admissions and sent patients home despite assurances from the local strike committee that, with emergency cover in place, critical services could be maintained. At the Northern General Hospital, Sheffield management had closed the emergency unit following NUPE's decision to reduce staffing levels in the central sterile supplies department, despite guarantees that emergency services could be sustained. Even when the union had agreed to increase the staffing, management had refused to re-open the unit, insisting that this would only happen when they were told the strike would cease.<sup>103</sup> In this and other cases the union suspected management of hiking up tension, applying moral pressure on those taking action and encouraging the media to run negative reports, all of which was reported to DHSS officials by the union's national secretary, Bob Jones. To Jones had fallen the difficult task of balancing support for local action while ensuring that it remained inside the code of practice. On a number of occasions, Jones's personal intervention had been necessary to prevent hostilities spiralling out of control. Not surprisingly, the press had been less inclined to carry the many stories of responsible union action, such as the decision by staff at the blood transfusion unit at Tooting, south London to suspend a 24 hour strike because they feared an acute shortage would result.<sup>104</sup>

In local government attitudes tended to harden when management took precipitate action aimed at weakening the effectiveness of industrial action. At Winchester the decision of the National Federation of Self Employed, supported by the local Conservative MP, to remove rubbish, swiftly followed by the council inviting private contractors to tender for the refuse collection service, had provoked an angry reaction from the strike committee that threatened the return to work.<sup>105</sup> Four hundred workers at Peterborough had struck after the council brought in contractors to grit the roads.<sup>106</sup> The decision by Sheffield City Council to use private vans to deliver meat to schools had led to a threat from the branch that staff on the meals on wheels service would be withdrawn.<sup>107</sup> In London, Westminster Council's provocative decision to pile rubbish in Leicester Square was followed by a

threat that contractors would be used to clear the rotting mounds. In response three hundred road sweepers and lavatory attendants had taken strike action in support of the dustmen, forcing the council into negotiations that had resulted in a return to work with enhanced payments and overtime to clear the rubbish.

The dispute in Westminster had attracted a good deal of media attention, including sensational stories of rats emerging from sewers to feed on waste that we now know to have been fictitious – blatant attempts to shape public opinion against those taking industrial action.<sup>108</sup>

Such reporting was admittedly at the extreme end of hostile, but it was not atypical of much of the coverage during February 1979, which portrayed public service workers as callous and self-seeking.<sup>109</sup> The news media that had had very little to say in the previous three years about the spirited and principled defence by NUPE members of public services straining under cutbacks, suddenly discovered they existed, and were fair game, when they demanded a living wage. Soon after the dispute, Jeremy Seabrook wrote brilliantly about this aspect of the strikes, describing how the press had reached back into history to represent striking workers as 'the mob ... conveniently located in the trade union movement'. Banner headlines describing action as 'mob rule; wreckers; bully boys' were a recurring theme. This portrayal of working people, 'an ugly travesty', he contrasted with those he knew from his own experience:

the ancillary worker in an old people's home who writes such tender and thoughtful poetry; the council worker who runs a charity for mentally handicapped children; the man who sweeps the road who was able to find such reservoirs of compassion for kids who robbed him and his wife under the railway arch on Christmas Eve; the school meals worker who cooks dinner for a bedridden neighbour before she goes to work.<sup>110</sup>

These images of dedicated but low-paid public service workers driven – reluctantly – to industrial action because of vindictive government policy emerged only fleetingly during the strike. Towards the end of 1979 the union's Northern Division published an account of how the dispute was experienced by two Darlington branches, illustrating in words and pictures the enthusiasm, confidence and democracy of the

action, but also the uncertainty and dilemmas of conscience, particularly for those providing care for the elderly and vulnerable. This, and not the media portrayal, was the reality for hundreds of thousands of public service workers during the eight weeks of the dispute.

Of the national dailies only the *Morning Star* consistently supported the workers, and while the *Daily Mirror*, *Guardian* and *Financial Times* carried analytical features about low pay, the rest were hostile.<sup>111</sup> Addressing this coverage in a TUC debate on the media six months after the conclusion of the dispute, Alan Fisher defended his members, describing them as ‘people who have never been on strike before in their lives and went on strike because they believed that their bloody pay was too low, disgracefully low’. He rounded on journalists who had ‘crept and crawled’ around these members for a comment ‘outside the hospital gates, on refuse tips, and in the streets’, and then pilloried them in their news stories. Although Fisher told delegates he was most concerned about the effects of such hostile reporting on ordinary members, he did remind Congress that he had been singled out for special attention by the media:

Who was it who called me Hitler in January? Who was it who called me Mussolini? Ghengis Khan? I am a murderer, although nobody died through what happened.<sup>112</sup>

Suspicious at the time that the media were hyping up their reporting to damage not only the unions but also the Labour government was given some credibility in 1989, when Derek Jameson, editor of the *Daily Express* in 1979, confessed that ‘we pulled every trick in the book to get rid of Callaghan and Labour. We made it look as if this [chaos] was general, universal, eternal. In fact it was only fragmentary, here and there. There was no big problem’.<sup>113</sup> The anti-union press had been on red alert since the previous autumn, carrying recurring stories of disruption in the health service, which they were apt to attribute to politically motivated local activists, either ‘out of control’ or sanctioned by the union’s leadership.<sup>114</sup> The London *Evening Standard* instructed their journalists and photographers to get pictures of pickets with beards, believing this portrayal would set the public against those taking action.<sup>115</sup> In the context of the health service, the media presentation of chaos was daily with the national and local press, ‘setting an agenda that television news found difficult to resist’.<sup>116</sup> During the

dispute the service was presented as in crisis, with staff led by politically motivated activists who were out of control and making life and death decisions about what constituted emergency cover. In fact, where management were prepared to engage constructively with the local union committee, as they were in the majority of hospitals, critical services could be maintained. Writing about the media presentation of this and other disputes in health faced by the Labour government, the official historian of the NHS accurately reflected that: 'Although the Tory press fastened their adverse reporting on disputes involving ambulance drivers or ancillary workers, the most dramatic and exhausting confrontations were waged by doctors'.<sup>117</sup>

Such reporting undoubtedly helped shape the political climate in which Labour was defeated in the general election, with one writer suggesting that 1979 was 'a point in which the influence of the media, perhaps more than at any point in post-war British history, was crucial'.<sup>118</sup> It is important, however, as we are reminded by the chroniclers of British general elections, to consider Labour's record in government since 1974, and not just the previous few months:

The events of 1979 offer a good example of a government losing an election rather than the opposition winning it. Mr Callaghan interpreted the election outcome as a vote against the events of last winter. But this is surely too simple. The government's own record, with the worst unemployment for more than 40 years and prices up by over 100 per cent was not inspiring.<sup>119</sup>

It is true that Labour's 4 per cent lead in the opinion polls in August 1978 had turned into a 5 per cent swing to the Conservatives at the general election in May 1979, but it has been shown that adverse reactions to the industrial disputes accounted for, at most, only 2 per cent of this turn-around.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, to lay the blame for this at the door of trade unions, and NUPE in particular, seriously misrepresents the events of the period, in particular by not examining critically the contribution to the disputes made both by initial Labour government intransigence, and then by its focus on public services workers' pay claims, when it had patently failed to apply any similar stringency to either the Ford pay settlement or that which ended the haulage and tanker drivers' disputes.<sup>121</sup>

NUPE, along with a majority of other unions, had wanted

Callaghan to call an election in the autumn of 1978, but he had decided against, believing that the economy would continue to pick up, thereby improving the prospect of winning marginal seats. Callaghan was repeatedly warned that the government's insistence on a fourth stage of pay policy would bring problems, but according to insiders he had become 'obsessed' with inflation, and, believing that wage increases led to rising prices, had opted to see it through, even if this meant being tough on the unions.<sup>122</sup> This error was compounded by the insistence on a blatantly provocative 5 per cent norm, which, strictly applied to the public services, led directly to the decisive events in the 'winter of discontent'. The pay increases subsequently recommended by Clegg, when added to those made at the end of the disputes, approximated to what Alan Fisher had described as the 'going rate', and it is likely that, if the employers had been free to make such offers in negotiations at any time before 22 January, the disputes could have been avoided. Although such a figure was significantly below the target of £60, it seems highly likely that this package would have been recommended to union members, as an important staging-post in the attempt to get back to the 1974 situation, when public service workers pay reached two thirds of average earnings. We cannot, of course, be sure that this would have proved acceptable to NUPE members, 'revved up' as they were in the successful autumn campaign on pay, but it is very possible that it would have been. Once in dispute, which for public employees meant confrontation with the state, members' attitudes hardened, and expectations of what could be achieved were heightened, as was illustrated by the overwhelming majority of hospital ancillary workers rejecting the deal. The membership's frustration and militancy was palpable, but history suggests it could still have been successfully managed by NUPE's leadership if the union's members had not been left with little option but to take industrial action. Callaghan refused to flex the government's position, and we now know that by January 1979 he believed, cynically, that a dispute with public service workers could be won, providing water and sewerage workers were separated from the general claim.<sup>123</sup>

### THE DISPUTE IN CONTEXT

NUPE's analysis of the Labour government went beyond its tactical failings in its last months of office to include a generalised critique of

its economic policy, which had proved incapable of tackling the structural problems in the economy that had been identified in the union's pamphlet, *Inflation: Attack or Retreat*, published in August 1975. The radical measures associated with the Alternative Economic Strategy, supported and proselytised by NUPE, were rejected by the government as it retreated from Keynesian demand management to adopt instead a loose form of monetarism, with public spending seen as an inhibiting factor which needed to be reduced.<sup>124</sup> The Social Contract had degenerated into crude wage control, with the trade union movement increasingly marginalised when the government considered economic and social policy, a verdict confirmed by Len Murray in later years.<sup>125</sup> In return for trade union loyalty to Labour and restraint in pay matters, the Labour government had attempted to impose a fourth stage of the Social Contract, in what Middlemas has described as a 'conscious strategic attempt to pin the blame for inflation on the unions'.<sup>126</sup> Having failed to make the policy stick in the private sector, the government's determination that it could be imposed on public sector workers had calamitous consequences, which Alan Fisher had warned of in September 1978 when he said: 'It would be a disaster if this were turned into a political issue when our [pay] campaign is about a social objective which ought to be shared by a Labour government'.<sup>127</sup> The 'social objective' of which Fisher spoke was the ending of low pay throughout the economy, with the government taking the lead by eradicating it amongst those either directly or indirectly in its employment. For NUPE, this should have been a defining course of action for the Labour government. It had begun well in 1974, helping to create the conditions within which unions in the public services could, for the first and last time, win a basic wage equal to two thirds of national average earnings. But the following year this figure had fallen back, and from then on, as the Labour government resorted to percentage pay increases, the gap had widened. The inability of the government and the trade unions to agree a pay policy capable of preventing the low paid from losing ground on average earnings was critical in the final collapse of the Social Contract; and the establishment of the Clegg Commission to settle the disputes in the public services only 'confirmed the depth of failure'.<sup>128</sup>

NUPE's advocacy of the statutory national minimum wage was also intended to provide legislative underpinning and support for trade unions in collective bargaining, in what was conceived as a joint

union and government enterprise to eradicate low pay. NUPE believed that this should have become a central plank in the Social Contract. It was, however, ahead of its time in this, and was misunderstood even by trade unions, which mistakenly portrayed it as 'corporatist', and as contrary to what they termed 'free collective bargaining', as well as being potentially undermining of workplace organisation. Having been defeated at both the 1973 Labour Party Conference and at TUC Congress a year later, NUPE decided not to push immediately for the adoption of a policy supporting a statutory minimum, concentrating instead on maintaining support for the TUC policy, first adopted in 1967, of a minimum wage target, with the intention that this should sit at the heart of negotiations and agreement with the government on pay policy. The failure of the TUC to uphold this policy at the 1977 Congress in the return to free collective bargaining marked a further defeat for NUPE in its attempt to help the Labour government fashion a wages policy that took the issue of low pay seriously.

The task of elaborating what a socialist wages policy might look like was, unsurprisingly, not undertaken by NUPE in these years. However, it was in this largely uncharted territory that NUPE's policy was developing – albeit in an incomplete and mostly unwritten form. Bernard Dix had begun to put some flesh on the bones of an Executive Council statement opposing the wage freeze of 1966 but equally rejecting a 'free for all' on pay. This, said Dix, required 'a new concept of trade union solidarity':

A concept based on the recognition that all workers have a claim on the national wealth and that it is up to the trade union movement itself to develop a system which permits this claim to be articulated in a way which meets social needs.<sup>129</sup>

There were already some elements of this concept set out in Fisher and Dix's monograph, *Low Pay and How to End it*. In addition, there was enough emphasis on economic planning in the version of the alternative economic strategy adopted by NUPE and described in the Executive Council statements of policy, published annually as pamphlets, to suggest that a genuine planning of incomes – all incomes, and not just those earned by those selling their labour power and at the bottom of the income scale – would be an acceptable component of a socialist economic policy. Alan Fisher told one writer

that NUPE would support an incomes policy 'of the right kind', which was only partially correctly deciphered as one that included a statutory minimum wage set at two thirds of the national average.<sup>130</sup> Fisher elaborated on this in an article for *Tribune* in the autumn of 1980 in which he wrote: 'I believe in incomes policy, but I go along with the school of thought which says that an incomes policy is only possible where the Labour Party is prepared to sit down and discuss with the unions all the other aspects of economic, social and political policy that are needed if you are going to have a successful incomes policy'.<sup>131</sup> Fisher expressed a similar view at the Labour Party annual conference of 1980, and made very strong, frequently unscripted, references to the inadequacies of so-called 'free' collective bargaining as a method of eradicating low pay, especially for those in the public sector, who would, invariably, be subject to state policy.<sup>132</sup>

These ideas continued a tradition in NUPE dating back to Bryn Roberts's advocacy of wages policy as a method of removing low pay in the 1950s. Unlike some other left-led unions, NUPE was not encumbered by a view of free collective bargaining as sacrosanct.<sup>133</sup> This did not put NUPE in the camp of right-wing led unions, notably the UPW and the NUR, who supported a continuation of pay restraint. Equally, the union rejected David Basnett's proposal that public service workers could benefit from a planned national assessment of incomes that was devoid – critically for NUPE – of radical action in other areas. But without real progress in delivering commitments made in the 1974 election manifesto to bring about a shift in the balance of power and wealth to working people, and fully honour the original intentions of the Social Contract in respect of the lower paid, NUPE was unable to continue propping up failed policies.

Writing in *Labour Monthly* at the outset of the dispute, Bernard Dix had reminded readers of the TUC General Council statement of November 1966 which stated that:

Trade unionists are not interested in an incomes policy which is based on the assumption that the share of national income going to working people will remain the same. Their interest lies in a radical and progressive incomes policy which will increase their share of the nation's wealth. Nor do the General Council accept it as axiomatic that it follows automatically that other working people must get less. What trade unionists are concerned about – and Congress had

repeatedly made this clear – is that the standards of some people should be pushed forward faster than others. The people who should be pushed forward fastest of all are those who by common consent are in the ranks of the low-paid. Those who should be held back are mainly to be found in the ranks of the top ten per cent of the population who receive at least twenty-five per cent (and almost certainly a good deal more) of the nation's income, including all non-wage incomes.<sup>134</sup>

This, for Dix and NUPE, raised 'considerations way beyond anything previously described as incomes policy':

it poses the need to think in terms of a total alternative economic strategy which has as its objective a fundamental shift in the balance of income, wealth and power in favour of the working class. And that is the only way to provide a permanent solution to the problem of low pay.<sup>135</sup>

Had Labour's first twelve months in office been indicative of the full term, things would have been very different, and doubtless NUPE would have participated enthusiastically in a discussion about a genuine socialist policy for incomes. It was a tragic irony, therefore, that the dispute triggered by the Labour government's insistence on the 5 per cent pay ceiling brought it into conflict with a trade union which, in different circumstances, could have been its closest ally.

In reality, the policies of the Labour governments of the 1970s in no way lived up to this early promise. In the event, NUPE was left, with the rest of the trade union movement after the 1977 TUC Congress, with the prospect of a return to the kind of 'free' collective bargaining which the union's Executive Council knew did not offer it much hope of reaching the target two thirds of average earnings for NUPE's low-paid members. In fact, and hardly surprisingly, free collective bargaining did not return to the public services, as the Labour government continued to impose pay policy on public employees through Stages Three and Four of the Social Contract. For NUPE, this experience of feeling unfairly treated, indeed even victimised, on matters of members' pay, came on top of three years of damaging cuts in public spending, as the Labour government had increasingly adopted some of the tenets of monetarist economic policies, which

were later to expand under successive governments in the next twenty years into full-blown neoliberalism.

Speaking to the 1979 NUPE National Conference, union president Tom Griffiths, from Wolverhampton, referred to the failure of these Labour policies:

Time after time the Labour Conference had gone on record in favour of economic policies which would have helped the lower paid and safeguarded the public services. And time after time, a Labour government has turned a deaf ear to those decisions and in the process helped its own defeat at the polls.

This analysis was further developed by Bernard Dix when he introduced the Executive Council's political report to the Conference. He identified the tendency of the Parliamentary Labour Party to 'act as though it has nothing to do with the rest of the Labour movement', and explained how the union, in an attempt to rectify this weakness, had supported the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy in its efforts to win constitutional change within the Party, including the mandatory re-selection of MPs. This would mean that 'When a person becomes a Labour MP, it does not mean he gets a meal ticket for the rest of his life but has to go back and face his constituency party and be adopted to fight the next election.'

This view received the backing of the Chairman of the Labour Party, Frank Allaun, at the Party's Conference in October in his opening remarks when he blamed the leadership of the Parliamentary Party for defying, ignoring and betraying Labour Party Conference decisions, and in particular for provoking the recent industrial disputes, with its insistence on a 5 per cent limit on pay in the public services.<sup>136</sup> For good measure, Labour Party General Secretary Ron Hayward backed these comments, responding to his own question of why there had been a winter of discontent with the answer: 'The reason was that, for good or ill, the Cabinet, supported by MPs ignored [TUC] Congress and Conference decisions'.<sup>137</sup>

The proposal to strengthen the union's engagement with the Labour Party in constitutional areas, including the re-selection of MPs, was overwhelmingly supported by NUPE's National Conference in May 1979, which also threw out a call for disaffiliation from the Labour Party. Despite the serious disappointments of the previous

four years of Labour government, NUPE remained committed to the party it had been associated with since 1900, which, it believed, it could help move to the left. But it would now be attempting to do this with the Labour Party in opposition, after the Conservatives' decisive election victory. The Tories could argue that they now had a mandate to change Britain, which NUPE knew was a euphemism for a full-scale assault on public services and trade unions.

### **Notes**

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11. *The Times*, September 18, 1978.
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13. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 227/8.
16. Interview with the authors.
17. *The Times*, October 3, 1978.
18. Some of NUPE's own officials later re-interpreted the events of 1979.