

Educate, Agitate, Organise!

Frances O'Grady



Frances O'Grady, General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress, gave the inaugural Ken Coates Memorial Lecture at Nottingham University on 3 June 2015.

I've been invited to talk about the future for the Left and the Labour Movement. I have to admit that when I accepted the invitation I'd hoped things would be looking a little more optimistic in Britain. Then on Election night at 10pm I saw the exit polls. All the opinion polls had pointed to a Labour-led coalition. Paddy Ashdown famously promised to eat his hat. And even the institution I'd come to trust most, the other Paddy, Paddy Power, miscalculated the odds. So there were plenty of people left scratching their heads about what went wrong.

Luckily, before the week was over, Tony Blair popped up on our TV screens to give us the answer. Apparently, Labour lost because it was too left wing. In my view, he was wrong: any Labour manifesto worthy of the name should be about building homes, raising wages, and protecting the NHS. That's what I'd call real aspiration.

In my view, if anything, Labour's problem was its failure to counter the Tory mantra that the deficit was caused by too much spending on public services early enough. And the admission that the previous Labour government had been too soft on banking regulation came far too late. That view is supported by research commissioned by the TUC and carried out straight after the election, which was published two weeks ago.

Far from thinking Labour was business bashing, voters believed that controls needed to be tougher. Labour was seen as being on the side of ordinary people and was most trusted with the NHS. But views on Labour's economic competence, and on welfare and immigration, were all

unfavourable – sometimes brutally so.

Another key factor in the last weeks of the campaign was the Conservative Party's shameless playing of the nationalism card, whipping up fear of a minority Labour government dependent on SNP MPs. Our evidence shows that it worked. If the SNP slogan was 'put Scotland first', then it followed that people in England would worry that they would be put second. It is one reason why I believe that, while the level of participation and debate in Scotland may be exciting, the politics of place is ultimately an inadequate response to neoliberalism. Fragmentation on the left always favours the right. And I've long believed that working people will always have more in common with each other than we will ever have with a London stockbroker or, for that matter, an Edinburgh banker.

But I want to say a few words about Ken Coates and his legacy. Our paths briefly crossed when Regan Scott commissioned Ken and Tony Topham to write the history of the Transport & General Workers' Union. I'd started work at the T&G at the old head office in Smith Square when Ron Todd was general secretary. I was in awe of the union's rich tradition of working class intellectualism that combined a commitment to socialism with industrial militancy.

This wasn't a purely theoretical exercise. It was borne of real experience. For me, Ken was the embodiment of that tradition of intelligent trade unionism and practical socialism. It's no exaggeration to say that Ken was one of the most perceptive and eloquent figures on the Left in post-war Britain. Other names may have hogged more headlines, but few could match his immense body of work.

Ken's political career began at the age of 15, when he won a mock election at Worthing Grammar School. Perhaps the first and only time a Communist has topped a ballot in West Sussex. From that moment on, Ken dedicated his life to the cause of organised labour. As a miner he understood what hard, dangerous, manual work was like; but also the spirit of solidarity that can flow from it. As a teacher and academic, he was deeply committed to the cause of adult and trade union education. As a writer, he famously charted how poverty corroded working class lives here in Nottingham. And as a socialist he firmly believed in public ownership – fighting tooth and nail New Labour's decision to ditch Clause 4.

Just as fundamentally – as befits someone deeply involved in Bertrand Russell's Peace Foundation – Ken was a committed internationalist. He became a miner because he refused to fight the communist uprising in Malaya after the war. He resisted American militarism in Vietnam. He opposed Soviet intervention in countries like Hungary and the former

Yugoslavia. And he was at the heart of the European movement for nuclear disarmament.

In many ways, Ken's life reflected the ebbs and flows of the Left, taking in as it did the fortunes of communism, old and new Labour, social and neoliberal Europe. I want to draw a thread from Ken's life and work, to the future. However, while I'm a great believer in learning from labour history, equally, I refuse to be a prisoner of it. Perhaps the Left needs a little less nostalgia for a supposed golden bygone age and a little more hardheaded analysis to help us shape our future. In particular, we need to address how capitalism has changed and how that means labour must change too.

We are all familiar with the trends: growing inequality with top bosses' pay rising by 26% since the crash while everyone else's wages have tanked; the role of new technology – not just in the workplace but in our home lives too, with workers increasingly expected to work for free, from administering our own bank accounts to the nightmare of assembling flat pack furniture; globalisation and how that feeds nationalism and political disaffection; and the fact that just a handful of multinational corporations – many of them investment banks and private equity groups – now dominate corporate wealth.

But we are less practised at working out what all this means for the battle of ideas, for social change and for industrial power. And, more to the point, what we need to do about it. Will the next wave of unionisation come from the new global middle class? Or from the great masses of the precarious poor? Where will the new front lines of that battle be drawn? And what do new business models mean for collective bargaining, still one of the most effective ways of redistributing, not only wealth but also power. As an experienced union organiser once told me, there is no such thing as an unorganised workplace. It's just the employer got there first. In other words, our job is to match and then surpass them.

I want to highlight three of Ken's great interests and raise questions about what this means for the wider labour movement over the next period ahead. The first is Ken's pioneering work on workers' voice, through the launch in the 1960s of the Institute for Workers' Control; an influential group that captured the support of large numbers of shop stewards, as well as trade union leaders such as Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon. Ken's focus on achieving reforms to give workers a role in running their enterprises was nothing if not forward looking.

It paved the way for the Bullock Report on industrial democracy a decade later, to my mind, despite Jack Jones' best efforts, one of the great missed opportunities for the British Left and the then Labour government.

But perhaps more fundamentally, it inspired working people to take charge of their working lives, generating a multitude of models; workers' co-operatives like those at Meriden, Kirkby and the Scottish Daily News; workers taking control of their plants, such as the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in; and so-called 'workers' plans' for alternative production to meet social needs.

The best known of these plans was the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards' proposal in the face of plant closures. They worked up detailed plans for switching from arms production to a range of 'socially useful products', from portable kidney machines to hybrid road/rail buses. The industrial history of the 1970s is too often reduced to lazy clichés about mindless militancy and union dinosaurs. But the movement for workers' control, of which Ken was such an integral part, presents a very different story.

I still have a copy of the workers' plan for the motor industry, produced by shop stewards and sympathetic academics in the 1970s. My dad was a steward when he worked on the line at Cowley for British Leyland – a company whose industrial relations were characterised as the ultimate basket case. Yet on page 87 of that workers' report you will find a cogent environmental and industrial case for investment in the development of electric cars. The stewards were all too aware of the challenge of climate change, that the British car industry was in trouble, and that prototypes were already being developed in Japan. Sadly, management and the government rejected the plan. It wasn't until thirty years later that a BMW electric mini finally rolled off the line at Cowley.

Imagine how different things would have been if management had listened to workers and their unions all that time ago. This is one reason why – and I recognise this is a long-term project – the TUC has been campaigning for representation of workers on top pay committees and, indeed, on boards. Our boardrooms are badly in need of the ingenuity, honesty and plain common sense union reps can bring. Not as an end in itself but as the beginning of a journey of economic democratisation.

The propaganda that entrepreneurs are the sole wealth creators has been peddled for so long that even some of those politicians who should know better seem to swallow it. But it's workers who create wealth and they should be entitled to a voice in the fair distribution of it. Similarly, we are saddled with a corporate governance system premised on the notion that shareholders – who hold shares, on average for just a matter of months – are the best stewards of the interests of a company. Yet nobody has a stronger interest in the long-term success of a company than those whose livelihoods depend on it.

Now, in the shadow of the election result, I realise that, to some, the TUC's campaign for workers' voice may sound fanciful. But surely no more so than how it must have felt for those who began the long campaign for political suffrage for working people centuries ago?

And, of course, today the majority of European Union states already guarantee worker representation in some form, up to and including board level.

Which brings me to another of Ken's preoccupations that still has relevance today – a deep commitment to social Europe. During his ten years as a Member of the European Parliament, Ken earned genuine respect for speaking up for the interests of ordinary workers, pensioners, the disabled, and the unemployed – if not always from the party he represented. He was chair of the European Parliament's human rights sub-committee at a time when the continent was faced with the terrible conflicts in the Balkans. He worked with Jacques Delors and Stuart Holland to promote not just full, but decent, employment; an ideal the current generation of EU leaders would do well to remember. And he argued, convincingly, that without a strong social dimension, that bargain between capital and labour, popular support for the European project would wither on the vine.

Since before the crash, the European Commission, along with the International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank, has pursued an agenda of austerity, liberalisation and deregulation – including taking a sledge hammer to collective bargaining in the programme countries. So the political class should not be surprised if workers around Europe start to wonder - what's in it for them?

Of course, David Cameron's gamble of an EU referendum is premised on the belief that workers will buy curbs on migrants' rights to benefits as the answer to their problems. Never ones to miss an opportunity, some business leaders are lobbying to get workers' rights, particularly those for agency workers and on working time, together with a moratorium on any new rights, thrown into the 'reform' package. We are told Europe must become a jobs factory. But without workers' rights it would become a sweatshop.

The government is playing with fire. Far right parties take many different forms across Europe, but they have one thing in common: they all thrive on scapegoating migrants. And making exploitation even easier, for example through employing migrant workers on inferior agency contracts, which undercut local workers and union agreements, will only add fuel to the fire.

With the EU referendum fast approaching, last week I issued a warning

through the pages of the *Financial Times*. Our message was simple: you will not win blue collar votes to stay in the EU by worsening workers' rights. As Ken himself would have been the first to recognise, the challenge for us on the Left now is to restate the overwhelming case for a Europe for people not just corporations – and the progress of that trade agreement, TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), will be one key test of that. It means taking the fight to those who want to get rid of all those rights – to paid holidays, to consultation at work, to health and safety – that emanate from Europe. And it means pushing back and framing the referendum debate along positive, progressive lines.

Of course, we in the trade union movement will be having our own debate about the referendum at our Congress. I hope it will set out our alternative vision for the European Union; one that is fit for the twenty-first century, and sets new standards across the EU, including for collective bargaining and economic citizenship; a Europe of investment for good greener jobs and decent wages; strong rights, and corporate governance reform for a voice at work; tough regulation of excessive corporate and financial power; and good public services fit to meet modern needs, such as childcare and care for the elderly. And, last but not least, a transactions tax (the 'Robin Hood' tax) on the finance sector, to help pay for them.

The third area to consider is union organisation. Ken and Tony Topham's book on workers' control also included a brief history of the rise of mass trade unionism. The book was titled *The New Unionism*, and I bought a copy in 1974. This work had a big and lasting impact on me. So much so that I called the project that launched the TUC's Organising Academy, 'New Unionism'. I admit this was in part designed to mirror – some might say gently mock – New Labour. But I also wanted our young trainee organisers to learn about, and feel inspired by, that first wave of mass trade unionism, including it's small band of paid union officers who combined the roles of organiser, agitator and educator.

It is no accident, all the challenges our country faces: low productivity borne of low investment and low wages; lousy jobs that frustrate the talent of our young people; and growing inequality whereby the five richest families in the UK have more wealth between them than the poorest 12 million ...

It's no accident that the new Tory government's top priority is to impose new thresholds on union strike ballots. Not only to impose thresholds but also to give employers new powers to break strikes with agency workers, and potentially criminalise pickets and make them the subject of new state surveillance. I often explain this attack by highlighting the fact that unions

are the last line of defence against the colossal cuts in the pipeline. But I think it goes even deeper than that. Neoliberalism and extremely unequal societies necessitate more authoritarian models of democracy. Trade union values and organisation – still six million strong – act as a living, breathing and sometimes rebellious rebuke to all that.

But, while this government may be ruthless, they know that they are not invincible. It is, after all, a weak administration with a much smaller majority than the previous coalition government. If UKIP can mount a rebellion against its leader with just one MP, think what those Eurosceptic Tories can do. And David Cameron has already said that, in the interests of his country – or was it his career? – he will not stand for another term. That means that the contest for the next leader of the Conservative Party has already started and it will last a full five years. In fact, the only face on election night that looked more disappointed than Nigel Farage was that of Boris Johnson.

I want to make one thing clear: if the Conservatives think we're going to give up our freedom of speech; give up and go quietly; surrender the human right to protest against workplace injustice – then they better think again. But, without doubt, we have our work cut out to defend and rebuild the movement. We will have to box clever and re-learn the art of broad alliance building; something that came as second nature to Ken Coates.

There are lessons to learn from around the world; the mobilisation of young people into a mass movement for change in Spain; the fast food workers' campaign for a living wage in the United States; the bus drivers' action in Brazil.

Closer to home, we need to champion communities that have long felt abandoned. A new activism is emerging on the grassroots Left, from anti-austerity organisations such as 38 Degrees to green campaigns such as Reclaim the Power to debating groups such as the Post-Crash Economics Society. But we need to live our values in real communities, not just virtual ones; take Focus E15, a housing protest group. It began when housing benefit cuts led a London council to try and move single mothers out of a hostel to cheaper private rented accommodation, 100 miles away. Like many community campaigns, it's driven by young people – including young working-class women. Those young housing campaigners do not necessarily see traditional party politics as the answer, nor what the former TUC leader, Walter Citrine, once called 'the traditional walls of trade union policy'. But they are often highly skilled networkers and campaigners.

What if those skills were put to work in union organising? Fewer than one in five workers in the private sector now hold a union card. For young

people the figure is even lower. Yet young people are on the front line of flexibility, which means zero hours, low pay and no prospects. Organising isn't easy. Where once life seemed simple – Labour against the Tories, workers against the bosses, underpinned by strong class identity – building the movement today is more complicated. But for all we are living through a state of political flux, remember our movement has shown itself to be resilient throughout our history.

Together we must show we've got intelligent answers to the central challenges of our time. How we build a greener, fairer economy with decent jobs, wages and homes at its heart. How we safeguard the public services and social security that are the hallmarks of any civilised society. And how we address those profound inequalities of wealth, income and opportunity in modern Britain.

This parliament will see the TUC launch a major new initiative to reach young workers – the baristas, the shop workers, the cinema workers. We aim to help them self-organise in their workplaces, with the backing of families, communities and the general public. As the experience of last year's dispute at the Ritzy Cinema in London showed, this is a generation with a lot of courage and little to lose. Those workers led 13 strikes and won a 12 per cent pay rise in their campaign for a living wage. A great achievement. And one that confounds the stereotype of young people as apolitical and apathetic. There's plenty we can all learn from how they did it: from musical picket lines to Facebook campaigns to winning public support and shaming the company.

But if we are to succeed, let's not pretend that trade union structures and organisations can stay the same. Capital has changed and so must we. At a time when trade union resources are under pressure, we have to think hard about how we empower workers to represent themselves. In the long run, I've always believed that our destiny, as workers, is in our own hands. From Mary Macarthur to Bob Crow, from Jim Larkin to Jack Jones, the trade union movement has always been at its best when we have educated, agitated and organised. Together we must address the growing disconnect many ordinary working people feel with politics, work and life in general. And if we do not, then we can be sure about one thing: others will.

We've already had a glimpse of what can happen when nationalists offer people easy solutions, appealing to romantic but ultimately false new dawns. And we know how in an age of anxiety, when people feel scared, insecure and powerless, they can turn on the vulnerable and disadvantaged. That's what's at stake when we talk about the future of our Labour Movement.

With the Tories back in power, these are undeniably tough times for us. But while this is a moment for hard-headed analysis, there are grounds for hope, too. If we remain true to our values of equality and solidarity; if we find new ways to reach out to new groups of workers, supporters and campaigners; if we resist the temptations of factionalism and stick together in unity; the Left, the Labour Movement, working people – our fortunes rise and fall as one.

Because the struggle for equality, fairness and justice to which Ken Coates devoted his life remains as urgent and as vivid as ever. Labour can't do it on its own. Trade unions can't do it on their own. Social movement campaigners can't do it on their own. But here's the point.

We can do it together. And if we join together and organise together, then together we will win.

For audio and video of the lecture:

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/cssgj/centre-activities/previous-events/ken-coates-memorial-lecture.aspx>



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