

# NALGO

## The New Unionism of Contemporary Britain

### Richard Maybin

## The transformation of NALGO has opened up a new arena of struggle and potential - but it is not without problems . . .

The National and Local Government Officers Associations, which this year celebrates its 75th anniversary, represents a large, and growing, section of the working class. With a membership of 729,405 (Dec 1978), it is the fourth biggest trade union in the country and claims to be the biggest solely white-collar union in the world. It compares in size with other white-collar unions as follows: ASTMS 476,106; NUT 291,239; CPSA 224,780; and TASS 200,954 (Dec 1978 membership figures). NUPE, a leading public service union mainly for manual workers, follows closely behind Nalگو's membership with 712,392. In scope Nalگو includes not only local government but also health, gas and electricity services, among others (see Table 1).

The white-collar section of the working-class is one whose growing class consciousness is important in the struggle for working-class unity. Since their class position is not always clear-cut, an examination of experience may help to clarify the problems.

The role of the 'local state' is important in the struggle for greater democracy and participation. Nalگو members work within the state apparatus and their consciousness of their role and what is happening around them and to them is closely linked to this struggle. Moreover, the role of Nalگو members in their administrative and executive capacities involves the whole question of democracy and the over-coming of bureaucracy.

### History

Nalگو was formed in 1905 with a membership of 8,000 from an amalgamation of Municipal Officers' Guilds, the Municipal Officers' Association and the Institution of Municipal and County Engineers. It was founded by Herbert Blain, who later became Sir Herbert Blain, Principal Agent of the Conservative Party 1924-27. In general the driving force behind the formation of Nalگو came from Chief Officers and senior professional men whose objective was not only to obtain pensions for local government officers but also to reform the state at

local level from within.

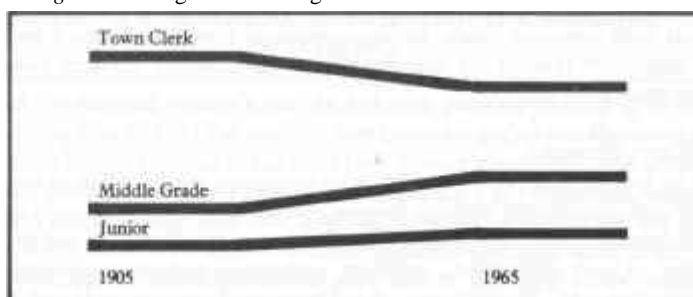
Although there had been some form of elected representation in the boroughs since 1835, county councils in 1900 were only twelve years old, and urban and rural district councils who took over the work of the old vestries and a host of independent health and highway boards were only six years old. Local government at the turn of the century was inefficient, corrupt and riddled with nepotism. Alec Spoor, in his excellent history of Nalگو *White Collar Union*, says of this period:

'At a time when only property owners had a municipal vote, councillors were drawn almost exclusively from the upper and higher middle-classes — in the towns, professional men, wealthy manufacturers and a sprinkling of the bigger shopkeepers; in the counties, members of the landed aristocracy, clergymen, and "gentleman farmers". . . . Such councillors tended to appoint men of their own class to the senior positions, at salaries commensurate with their status, but to go to the cheapest market for their subordinates. As a result, the staff was commonly divided into two strata: at the top, chiefs, enjoying salaries and perquisites ranging between £500 and £3000 a year — equivalent to at least six times those amounts today — and the status of gentlemen; below them, the clerks, mostly earning £40 and £175, with few, if any, in a middle range.'

Figure 1, based on information given by Spoor, shows the contraction of differentials between 1905 and 1965. Such a change must have a bearing on changing class relationships.

The aims of the Liverpool Municipal Officers' Guild founded in 1896 by Blain, viz. 'to provide means for social intercourse amongst its members and for their improvement, advancement and recreation and also to promote a knowledge of the principles of local government' were to prove the cornerstone of this embryo trade union. But it was certainly not seen as a trade union by its founders. In 1911 Nalگو's first full-time Secretary, Levi Hill, said, 'anything savouring of trade unionism is nausea to the local government officer and his Association'. Sixty-two years later, another General Secretary,

Fig 1 Nalگو Contracting Differentials



In 1905 an average town clerk got fifty times the pay of his junior, six times that of the middle grade. In 1965 he got seventeen times his juniors pay and two and a half times that of the middle grade.

Source Alec Spoors *White Collar Union* p567

Table 1 Nalگو membership by service, October 1978

Electricity	40,132
Gas	44,313
Health	85,709
Local Government	453,574
New Towns	6,755
Police Authorities	8,136
Port Authorities	451
Transport	10,116
Universities	10,280
Water	24,646
Honorary members	10
Retired members	45,283

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Geoffrey Drain, made a rather different statement. On assuming office in 1973, he said 'I'm in no doubt as to Nalgo's total commitment to the three basic principles and objectives of trade unionism. The first of these is the improvement of the standards of living of its half a million members. The second is the protection of the individual against arbitrary or unfair treatment at the hands of his employer. The third and more altruistic objective is the making of the fullest possible contribution towards the well-being of the citizens of our country as a whole'.

By 1914 Nalgo was 35,000 strong and represented 70% of local government officers. At this point Nalgo came to its first crossroads. During this period there was considerable industrial unrest in the country and in 1917/18 a parliamentary committee headed by J Whitley recommended the setting up of joint councils of employers and employees at national, district and local level. The object of the exercise was to smash the powerful shop stewards committees in industry. Given Nalgo's background it is not surprising that its leaders welcomed the proposals with open arms. However for the record it should be said that even at that time a number of Nalgo branches were preparing to take strike action. The returning soldiers brought militancy to Nalgo. In 1919 Pontypridd guild applied for a war bonus and after some months unanimously gave strike notice. The employers caved in. Over the next two years Pontypridd, Gellygear, Caerphilly, Wolverhampton, Erith, and Oldham were all to threaten strike action. However, rising unemployment and falling prices dampened down the militancy. The failure of the 1926 General Strike in which Nalgo did not take part sealed off the militancy for nearly 40 years. It was not until 1961, after a decade of argument, that Nalgo finally adopted a strike clause in its constitution and only as recently as 1970 was official strike action taken. The Whitley committee collapsed soon after 1920 with the employers in no mood to recognise Nalgo at a national level and it was not until 1943, following the government's wartime compulsory arbitration measures, that a National Whitley Council was set up and not until 1946 were the first national salary scales recognised. However Whitleyism remains the basic structure of Nalgo's negotiating to this day albeit very modified by government intervention and the growing militancy of Nalgo members.

After the Second World War, Nalgo followed its members into the new national health, gas and electricity services and in 1952 changed its name from the National Association of Local Government Officers to the National *and* Local Government Officers Association. It overcame the organisational difficulties posed by the new services by setting up a federal structure with each service negotiating for itself but with common funds, facilities, national Executive Council and Conference (except for one day when the different services have separate meetings).

### Wages Struggles

The history of the postwar years is, as with other unions, a history of a struggle against pay policies, freezes, guiding lights, norms, etc. (25 in all since the War). In general Nalgo's strategy during the 50s and 60s was to use arbitration, publicity campaigns and the occasional overtime ban. Nevertheless, the Electricity Service carried out a successful strike ballot in 1965 only to be fobbed off by George Brown's prices and incomes policy. It is important to understand that the various sections of Nalgo sometimes have very different negotiating situations, where for example Nalgo's members in Gas

and Electricity Services obtained substantial 'productivity' increases in 1978 because the prices and profits in these industries were unusually large.

During the recent period Nalgo has been a leading supporter of incomes policy and the social contract. This support can be understood because of Nalgo's history, the newness of its membership and its social democratic leadership, and it still continues despite the fact that, according to research carried out by the Trades Union Research Unit at Ruskin College, earnings in the public sector during the period of the social contract declined by 8% relative to those of all adult males whereas those in the private sector remained stable. Moreover, the decline in relative pay was greater among non-manual workers. Nevertheless opposition within the union to incomes policy has been substantial, the voting in favour being in the order of 2 to 1. In addition Nalgo, using a strategy of fully-paid selective strikes, has been involved in relatively successful struggles concerning London Weighting, Social Workers and Hospital Maintenance staff, as well as many local disputes. It does have the problem along with other public service unions of having to maintain long disputes directly against state interference. The recent imposition of cash limits and cuts in public spending will face Nalgo members with a straight choice of struggle or reduced wages. Faced with such a choice Nalgo members may again be tempted by the myth of an incomes policy as an easy way out in spite of their past experience.

### Political Struggles

During the 50s and 60s the main political struggle in Nalgo centred round the question of affiliation to the TUC, which finally happened in 1964, forty-three years, twelve conference debates and six ballots of the membership after it was first suggested. This step was of great significance for Nalgo and represented an irreversible qualitative development. It brought it into the mainstream of the trade union movement and aligned Nalgo for the first time on the side of the working class. It is still bitterly opposed by a small minority in Nalgo but in straight-forward trade union terms of co-operation with other trade unions, protection against poaching and influence at national and government level it is inconceivable that Nalgo would reverse this step. It opened the way for links with other unions and membership of trades councils. Nalgo was followed into the TUC a few years later by the National Union of Teachers and the unions catering for the higher-paid civil servants.

The greatest factor against affiliation was the TUC's association with the Labour Party. However a possible development for the future is the affiliation of Nalgo to the Labour Party and a number of conference debates have taken place around the issue. There are two main strands of opposition to such a proposal. The first is those who feel that they have a politically neutral role to play in the work situation and that in some way Nalgo's affiliation to the Labour Party would undermine such a position. This is particularly strong amongst senior officers who still have an inordinate influence in Nalgo. However, of course, in real life it is impossible for people to divorce themselves from a political position. Most Nalgo members vote and many are active in politics. The answer to this position is that a union has the distinct function of protecting its members' interests as workers, which is an entirely different thing from the function of the employee as a professional adviser. Historically most unions in Britain have seen the need for political representation in order to defend their members and achieve their aspirations, and they formed and have continued to support a political party called the Labour Party.

The second strand of opposition comes from the many-Conservative Party supporters in Nalgo who are politically opposed to Nalgo helping the Labour Party. With Mrs Thatcher's attacks on services, wages, and above all mortgages, this opposition may be

somewhat undermined. Affiliation to the Labour Party has its supporters amongst the leadership in Nalگو as many of them see Nalگو as a moderating influence within the Labour Party. Without doubt a major step in increasing the influence and power of Nalگو and the raising of political awareness of its membership would be its affiliation to the Labour Party.

The 1970s saw Nalگو involved in an extensive campaign against cuts in public expenditure, often in political opposition to its employers, and involving itself in every facet of the trade union movement including support for the Chile Solidarity Campaign, the Anti-Nazi League, Anti-Apartheid, and the National Abortion Campaign. The union became much more political during this period — the leadership representing a conscious social democratic trend and an appreciable left minority following on an influx of 'new left' ex-students and others taking employment outside the private sector.

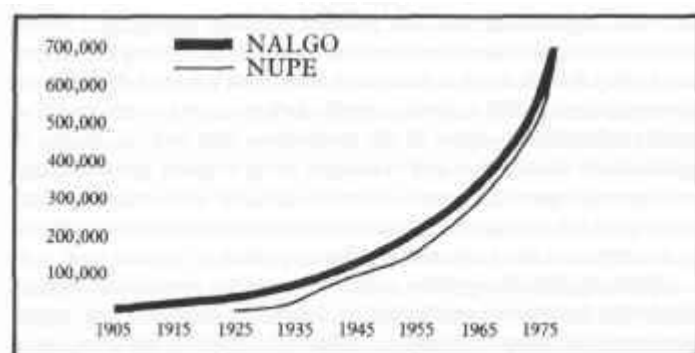


Fig 2 Nalگو and Nupe Membership

### Growth of Membership

The Conservatives' attack on the public services has been partly based on a call (which strikes a chord in people across the political spectrum) to get rid of the bureaucrats and pen pushers (ie administrative staff) who occupy a disproportionate part in these services. The increase in Nalگو membership over the years might be thought to lend credence to these views.

It was during the 50s and 60s that growth in the union really took off. As shown in Fig 2 the growth in membership since 1905 is an exponential-type curve. Although total white-collar staff employed in the industries organised by Nalگو went up by about 12% between 1952 and 1965, Nalگو membership increased by a massive 57%, at the rate of about 10,000 per annum. Since 1965 membership has increased by about 21,000 a year. (Table 2 shows membership growth during the 70s).

Since NUPE experienced a similar growth pattern (Fig 2) this rapid growth was more than just a white-collar phenomenon. No doubt it is related to the growth since the end of the Second World War of the social democratic welfare state and its willingness to see trade unions as an acceptable part of the established order. The reorganisation of

public services into bigger units also helped. Between 1948 and 1968 the local government share of the GNP doubled. Despite factors such as increases in interest charges and transfer payments which mean that such figures cannot be accepted at face value, there is no doubt of the increase in local government, and since the war the number of employees there has nearly doubled from 1.4 million people (6% of the working population) to 2.5 million (10% of the working population).

When considering these figures various factors should be borne in mind. Firstly, local government has more part-time staff than the economy as a whole, ie 28.8% of local government employees work part-time compared with only 15.3% in the economy as a whole. In many cases they work only a few hours each week (eg crossing ladies, dinner ladies etc). Secondly, in an industrial society with increasingly modern machinery needing less manpower, it is not unexpected or undesirable that there should be a shift of labour from industry to labour-intensive service sector. In fact this shift has not been as big as one might expect, as shown by the following figures from *Nalگو Economic Review* in 1976:

Proportions employed by sector in UK	1959	1966	1974
Total Public Sector (including central and local govn. and public corporations)	25.0	23.0	27.2
Private Sector	75.0	76.1	72.8

Moreover, if we examine the Health Service, where expenditure on administrative and clerical staff is particularly criticised, we find that the numbers of such staff did indeed increase by 28% between 1973 and 1977. However, this increase was the result of the provision of Community Health Councils, ward clerks, health centres, and a general expansion of health services. According to figures being generally quoted, for every £100 spent in the health service in 1974, £6.50 was spent on management and administration. For 1977 the comparable figure was £5.60. The alleged over-staffing in administration is part of a concentrated propaganda drive, softening people up to accept cuts.

### Women in Nalگو

Since the First World War women members of Nalگو have risen from being a minority (16% in 1921) to a position of almost equal numbers with men (46% in 1978). So women's interests and trade union involvement are obviously important for Nalگو. By 1925 Nalگو was operating a policy of positive discrimination for women and reserved first one and then two seats for women on its National Executive Council. The women who held these seats played a vitally important role in winning Nalگو to a commitment to equal pay and the removal

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Table 2 Nalگو membership during the 70s (October membership)

1970	439,887
1971	463,798
1972	498,170
1973	518,117
1974	541,918
1975	625,163
1976	683,011
1977	709,331
1978	729,405
1979	750,000 (estimated)

of the married women's bar. In fact their position was felt to be so strong that in 1945 the positive discrimination policy was abandoned as no longer necessary, but since then women's representation at the top level has remained more or less static, e.g., in 1948, when Nalگو was much smaller than now, the NEC had 5 women members, but in 1978/9 there were only 8 women members (out of a total of 65). Nevertheless the impetus was such that in the early 1950s Nalگو members demonstrated, lobbied, marched and petitioned on the question of equal pay and it was finally won in 1954. Activity of this sort is quickly forgotten in the short-term memory of trade unionists but it shows that such action is by no means new to Nalگو, though it may be to many present-day Nalگو members.

In 1975 a Nalگو Working Party made a comprehensive study of equal rights. Its wide ranging recommendations, from abortion rights to helping women to play a greater role in the union, were later adopted by Nalگو. A National Equal Rights Committee, making recommendations directly to the NEC, was set up and it has in turn encouraged the setting up of district and branch-level Equal Rights Committees, and has also produced a useful negotiating kit for workplace nurseries. Its influence has meant that Nalگو has campaigned strongly against reactionary amendments to the 1967 Abortion Act, as shown most recently by the large turnout from Nalگو on the demonstration against the Corrie Bill. However, the Working Party came out firmly against positive discrimination. This tendency (fully supported, it must be emphasised, by the women members of the NEC) led Nalگو to withdraw from the Women's TUC. The NUT also withdrew. Despite the withdrawal of two large unions, the Women's TUC has continued to do very useful work on women's rights and in my view Nalگو is unnecessarily restricting its role by not taking part in it. It is interesting to note as a further reflection of this attitude that apart from a few districts Nalگو has no special structures or facilities for youth. At branch level, the involvement of women is greater than at national level with an average of one woman to every 5 men on the branch committees. Whether the hundreds of thousands of women in Nalگو will have a progressive or reactionary influence depends to a great extent on how far they play a full part in their union and the question therefore has wide political implications.

### The Role of the 'Local State'

An important issue for Nalگو members is the relationship between the State and the locality (vd. Paul Corrigan's article 'The Local State: the struggle for democracy' in *Marxism Today*, July 1978). The role of the state is classically understood by Marxists to be that of controlling society in the interests of the ruling class. In order to control society by consent the state must delegate many of its powers. But in a society where there are deep contradictions between the interests of the ruling class and the people this delegation can be the weak link in the power of the state. This is because the local council or the local representative of central government (Tax Office, Social Security, etc) are more exposed to direct and immediate democratic pressure. Changes that occur in the relationship between the central state and the locality, and the opportunities for the involvement of people in struggle at local level, have an important bearing on political progress in general. Nevertheless the 'local state' is not a separate entity but, in my opinion, a shorthand term for the organisation at local level to which state power has been delegated.

In recent decades there has been a trend in favour of more central control and less local democratic control. Two processes have been at work here, and under the present government a third may be added. The first has been to centralise in order to operate more efficiently, eg the amalgamation of local gas and electricity into National Boards by the 1945 Labour government, and to create bigger units in order to be

process, under this government, is an ideological desire to turn the clock back to 19th century 'laissez faire' policies (eg reducing controls on planning).

To achieve maximum participation and democratic control there are two equally important issues, namely political control and structural forms of which the former is perhaps more equal in that the political decisions must come first. It is not central government control over public expenditure, or a corporate management system at local level, that are the obstacles, but in whose interests they are being used. New forms of participation are needed in order to meet the criticisms of bureaucracy and lack of democracy and in fact these were already beginning to develop under the previous Labour Government eg Law Centres and Community Centres. However these new structures cannot develop within a contracting public service.

### Class Position of Nalگو Members

So what in general is the class position of Nalگو members? I would without doubt support the broad definition of the working class as set out in the *British Road to Socialism*, viz. those 'who sell their labour power, their capacity to work in return for a wage or a salary, and who work under the direction of the employers (who own the means of production, distribution and exchange) or their agents'. In the case of public employees, although 'they do not sell their labour power directly to the capitalist employers, indirectly their work contributes to the capitalist production of goods and profits'.

Quite clearly when public service workers are involved in struggle for better wages and conditions, in defence of their jobs and against the cuts in services they are as much involved as any other section of the working class in the struggle for their share of surplus value. They are also involved in the provision of the conditions necessary for the extraction of profit. The key question is the unity of the working class and a narrow definition of that class excluding such workers as Nalگو organises is dangerously divisive. That is not to say that the majority of Nalگو members see themselves as part of the working class. Workers not involved in direct production do find it more difficult to realise their objective class position. Many Nalگو members do tend towards individualism and passivity and are against class solidarity organisation and discipline. But it is not simply a question of the relationship to production. NUPE members, because they are lower paid, more exploited, and come from a traditional section of the working class, tend to be more militant. But many Nalگو members also have traditional working class backgrounds, are on low pay, or are intellectuals or professionals who tend to have a left bias. Because of the large number of employees involved it is impossible to buy them off as in the past and therefore the possibilities of holding this section in the mainstream of the working class is quite realistic. Because it is also a section in which capitalist ideology has been dominant but in which there is an increasing proletarianisation it is an important strategic area to win over if majority support is to be won for the establishment of socialism in Britain.

The class position of the most senior levels of management such as chief officers and their deputies in local government is not clear. In my view, on balance they fall into an intermediate class position as set out in *The British Road to Socialism*. Nalگو has difficulty as a union in deciding in what category to put its most senior officers and from time to time there are anguished discussions on this subject. The general view seems to be that although there are difficulties and contradictions in having the 'boss' in the same union Nalگو should not limit its membership at the top level. This is because a great many of the members are managers at one level or another and are somebody's 'boss', and secondly because union membership of top officials can make them more sympathetic. Nalگو's attempt to organise a higher management branch in Gas proved to be disastrous, with the higher

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able to take strategic decisions. This process has in general been supported both by monopoly capital in its own interests and by the Left as building a stronger state in the interests of the working class. The second process has been a diminution of local power because the central state cannot any longer control by consent and must therefore take the power to itself. Heseltine's proposals to stop councils from increasing rates or selling assets in order to defend services shows the desperate measures that the state is now having to take. The third

management branch acting as a gang of blacklegs as soon as an industrial dispute came along. The vertical nature of Nalگو comprising as it does all levels has an effect on it as a union. In fact Nalگو is controlled by higher management. In 1979 its National Executive Council consisted of 31 officers at Principal level and above, including one Assistant Director and 2 Personnel Officers (!), 19 senior officers, 4 professional officers, 5 clerks/technical assistants and 6 unspecified.

### The Communist Alternative to Bureaucracy

In *State and Revolution* Lenin propounds the concept of the withering away of bureaucracy to be replaced by 'an order in which the functions of control and accounting becoming more and more simple will be

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performed by each in turn and will then become a habit and will finally die out as the special functions of a special section of the population'.

He quotes Marx on the Paris Commune thus: 'The Commune made that catchword of bourgeois revolutions, cheap government, a reality by destroying the two great sources of expenditure — the standing army and state functionarism'. In *State and Revolution* it is proposed that state officials should be elected and subject to recall at any time, that their salaries should be that of the average worker and that they should be aided by technicians of all sorts, types and degrees. Lenin urges that the representative state bodies should be working bodies both executive and legislative at the same time and thus sweep away the situation where the real business of 'state' is performed behind the scenes. The section on popular democratic power in *The British Road to Socialism* calls for the fullest encouragement of tenants' associations, trades councils, local community groups and action committees, workers' participation, etc as an essential check to bureaucracy and the abuse of power by the state.

Our aim as communists is quite clearly to do away with bureaucracy and red tape. We do not want a passive populace administered to by a state machine. There have been developments in recent years eg in Southwark, Wandsworth, Lambeth, Haringey, Walsall, which have tried to devolve power. Bologna in Italy is also an example of developing local area politics. In the Soviet Union each factory, street or block of flats (even down to separate floors) has its own committee with community responsibilities. People must be able to take the fullest responsibility in running their own affairs.

In making such changes Nalگو members would also have to change their methods of working. The role of community teams and quangos is likely to develop and many professionals might well find it attractive to work closely in teams with councillors and local residents in problem solving without Chief Officer interference. Nevertheless there will still be a need for co-ordination and technical sections. A still underestimated proposal is that of Worker Councillors. The presence of the people who actually know what is going on at the policy-making committees could make a qualitative difference in breaking down bureaucracy, chief officer power and departmental cover-ups. In a number of Boroughs such as Hackney and Islington trade unionists regularly attend committee meetings and play a full part, albeit without voting rights. Worker representation and control in public services such as gas and electricity and the nationalised industries is essential in the functioning of a socialist state.

Very often the role of Chief Officers and the bureaucracy is overstressed when it is really ideological and political understanding within the labour movement which is the problem. The growing attacks on 'bureaucrats', planners, architects, are in fact in the main a diversion. It is the political decisions that are at fault. This is not to say

that those in power do not frequently act in favour of the status quo and in their professional self interest. Yes, bureaucracy does exist and sometimes the tendency to build empires of unnecessary staff. A crucial step in preventing these tendencies is the involvement of the trade union in policy making.

### The Left and Progressives in Nalگو and the Way Forward

Progressive policies have been adopted by Nalگو over recent years which would have been unthinkable a few years ago and there is a substantial left minority active in the union. The major problem for lefts and progressives is how to advance from a position where the leadership at national level is firmly in the hands of right-wing social democrats (in my view the postal ballot correctly reflects the balance of forces within Nalگو), and where the majority of the union membership support reformist policies.

The left in Nalگو is not immune to the influences of individualism and opposition to class organisation that affect other Nalگو members who have no experience or confidence in trade union organisation, and therefore it falls easier prey to ultra left 'rank and file' ideas than some more experienced sections of the working class. The experience of the Nalگو Action Group, which in the early 70s represented a broad spectrum but eventually fell totally under the control of the Socialist Workers Party and adopted increasingly sectarian policies, has resulted in reluctance of many progressives to come together organisationally. Opposition to the National Executive on incomes policy has over the last few years been led by the Metropolitan and Scottish Districts. It may well be that in the immediate future progressive policies will be campaigned and fought for by the coming together of progressive districts and branches around specific issues. If these campaigns around basic trade union issues are successful then changes in the make-up of the National Executive, which swung sharply to the right during the social contract, will follow and indeed there are some signs of this beginning to happen. It has to be remembered that districts and branches in Nalگو are very autonomous and control considerable independent finances. Nalگو is a very democratic union in which the lay member has the power, and forms of broad left organisation used in some other unions may not be necessary.

One of the keys to the advance of the left within Nalگو is the development of union membership involvement and of shop stewards or departmental representatives' committees. Improvement in the union's educational, communicational services, particularly at branch level, and its work with regard to women and youth will themselves help to break down reactionary ideas. The withdrawal of Nalگو from the Women's TUC and its reluctance to form youth committees are negative features in this development.

However, no improvement in trade union activity or membership involvement will in themselves solve the problems or fulfill the aspirations of the members. Only fundamental political changes will do that and therefore the battle of political ideas is of paramount importance. For the last four or five years there have been eight multi-union Civic or Public Service branches of the Communist Party in the country and the development of place-of-work branches and the selling of the *Morning Star* are essential factors in the advance of left ideas. The Civic branches are also playing an important part in the Party's work generally in community politics.

The immediate struggle for Nalگو will be to resist an incomes policy thrust upon the public services and to protect jobs and services. Many Nalگو members will be fighting shoulder to shoulder with their councillors against vicious Tory attacks, which in itself will be a new development. But at the same time there is the need for a growing political consciousness both in the general sense and with regard to the specific role which they play in the state apparatus.

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