



Globalising Solidarity: Organising Aid for Cuba. Interview by *ephemera*

Phil Lenton

SALUD, Aid Organiser and Activist

abstract

Throughout the sixties and seventies, Phil Lenton was a political activist involved in protests against nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. In the 1970s, he began working for UNISON. At a time when workers often came off worse than employers in direct confrontation, he organised alternative forms of industrial action, actively seeking alternatives to traditional strikes. In the 1990s he became involved with Cuba through his work twinning UK and Cuban health service unions. Since his retirement from UNISON, his activities have concentrated on organising aid for Cuba, and global health initiatives. In this interview with *ephemera*, he reflects on a life of political activism and the potential for collective action in an age when the old certainties of Marxist class-conflict have been eroded by globalisation and the emergence of new political groupings, defined only, if at all, by their opposition to capitalism.

51 Ambulances for Cuba

ephemera: We are in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and as we conduct this interview, a boat is arriving at Teesport in Middlesborough where it will find 51 ambulances, a double-decker bus and three containers full of medical supplies lined up on the quay ready to go to Cuba. We are talking today with Phil Lenton who has been organising this aid mission to Cuba. For the last six months or so he has been dragging ambulances from all parts of the UK to get them, finally, to Cuba. Perhaps, Phil, you could start by talking about how you got to be in this situation?

PL: January 1998 I visited a hospital in the mountains in Santiago, Cuba, to link them with a hospital in Gateshead and their urgent need was for a bus because they had no spare parts for their existing ones that were broken down. There had been a fatal accident because they had no parts for the brakes. Also, without a bus they couldn't get their staff to work so the hospital might have to close. I had been used to sending aid to Cuba on a small scale in containers and sometimes by scrounging space on a plane. But the thought of a bus was something completely different and when I asked how would I transport it there if I could get one, I was told that the Cubans would divert a ship to Britain. I spoke to contacts of mine in the Transport and General Workers Union to see if they could help us, and within two weeks they came back to me and said they had ten double-decker buses! The Cubans

were then challenged about diverting a ship and that's when the negotiations really started about what we were going to do and how to make the ship a viable proposition because of the cost of fuel for diverting the ship, the port fees *etc.*, which all needed hard currency. I was asked how many buses I could get and how many ambulances, and we finally concluded an agreement in May 1998. I would try to fill a ship with aid for Cuban hospitals and it would be called 'SALUD, the Trade Union Ship for Cuba'. So that is how it started.

There was a condition that no matter how many ambulances, buses or whatever we got, if there was no food then there was no ship. They specifically wanted food because there had been a drought and they had serious shortages. We managed to put together a team of people who wanted to have a shot at this and they included an organisation called the



International Rescue Corps, who specialise in rescue work in earthquakes and floods all over the world. Many of them were trade union members and friends of mine, including a number of trade union officials, and off we went scrounging whatever we could: asking bus companies to donate buses; asking the London Ambulance Service if we could have an ambulance or two. We had the logistical nightmare of finding these items as far apart as Devon in the south of England, to Aberdeen in the north of Scotland, so the question was how to get them all in one place. In fact, what was the place going to be? What port would do it? We had no money, that was the key thing. There was absolutely no budget, no money whatsoever. Everything we asked for we asked to be given for nothing. We did launch an appeal through the trade unions to try to raise money, which was very successful. We then had to tackle difficulties like tax and insurance on these vehicles travelling to one point. We then had to find a port that was prepared to do this for little or no payment.

ephemera: Where did you go from in the end?

PL: We started off looking at Tyne Dock in Newcastle, but when the scale of the thing became apparent we took the view that it wouldn't be big enough. After that a friendly shipping agent, Waterfront Shipping, who agreed to provide their services free of charge, recommended a number of ports and one of them was Liverpool, although they did say it was likely to be expensive. Liverpool had other problems. It had the legacy of a bitter strike with sacked dockers at loggerheads with the Transport and General Workers Union, and both at loggerheads with the Port Authorities. The Transport and General Workers Union helped us to talk to the Port to get the fees down, so we just had to take a decision. It was also a port that the Cubans knew and they were reluctant to send a ship to a port that they had never visited. There had been very few Cuban ships come into Britain, but Liverpool was one that they knew, and that was probably the deciding factor.

ephemera: Your involvement with this aid effort comes out a connection with the trade unions although it also takes directions that the trade unions have not traditionally been involved with. Can you tell us a little more about that?

PL: Nobody had ever asked trade unions to donate or find aid on this scale before. We've heard of special projects where maybe a double-decker bus is driven from England to North Africa, with aid for children in a particular school or something like that. But this would really be a challenge for the trade unions and even the leadership of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, who were very, very sceptical about going down this road. They said, "It's impossible, it can't be done, you don't have any money, you don't have any skills to do this, the Cubans will never deliver a ship."

ephemera: But you have done it once and now you are doing it a second time?

PL: Yes. I think that in the process of doing it that first time we actually showed everybody what could be done. We all knew that there was a huge risk, that the ship might not turn up and we would be left with all this aid on the port side. Which in fact happened. The ship that was supposed to come was coming from a port in Poland, Gardenia, and for some reason, which we never really got to the root of, the Cuban ship was trapped there. It was in the port to load fertiliser. It started to load and then suddenly the port stopped them without giving any reason. We don't know whether it was accidental, whether there was good reason for it or not, but the ship was effectively trapped. I went to Cuba to talk to the shipping people and the trade union leadership there to say that this was a serious problem



and so another Cuban ship was then diverted from St Petersburg. That ship arrived precisely when the Cubans told us it would arrive. Of course the port was panicking because they had all this cargo on the port side and they needed that space for other cargo. So this was just one of the many logistical problems that we knew we had to face.

ephemera: So you had these problems with the logistics of getting the ship organised, and also these problems with the unions. How far were the unions involved?

PL: Well it was important to get the support of somebody important in the union leadership. We got the support of Robbie Bickerstaff who is the General Secretary in UNISON. Also Ken Cameron, the General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union. We also did a publicity stunt at the TUC (Trade Union Conference) where we handed out sticks of rock [candy] with the name of the project, SALUD, written through them, just a stunt to kick the thing off. We handed them out to people in front of the TV cameras, because these were significant trade union leaders handing out sticks of rock.

ephemera: When was this?

PL: That was the TUC of September 1998. UNISON allowed us to use its mailing list to mail branches directly and we also got the TUC to do the mailing. We had to say that this was a new kind of project, it was humanitarian, but it was trade unions sending humanitarian aid, which was a brand new concept. That same year Claire Shaw, Secretary of State for International Development, issued a challenge to trade unions to basically stop whinging about things in the Third World and start developing humanitarian aid programmes with sister trade unions in other countries. So we also said we are taking up that challenge. We went to see the Department for International Development, but what we got from them was basically, "Thank you for coming, it sounds very interesting", but there was no money. They were not hostile, but there was no budget for Cuba. Three countries in the world were excluded from any budgets, that was Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Haiti for some reason. There had also been a series of world disasters, Hurricane Mitch, there had been earthquakes and the disaster fund was empty as well. So they were very nice, very polite to us, but said there was nothing that they could do. So we were on our own.

We developed a team of people who found they could do things, or if they didn't know how to do it they knew someone, who knew someone who knew how to do it, or how to fix this, or how to find that. And that is how it went on. We were inundated with offers and at one stage we had offers of sixty buses but we couldn't take them because we had no storage facilities for them and the bus companies wanted them moved. We had to come to a point where we said, "right, that's it, that is the date that we want the ship here, and that is the date that we get the cargo to Liverpool". I think if I was going to make any comment about the trade union role in this I would say it was about ordinary people, ordinary trade unionists, who have come through very difficult times under the Thatcher government. I mean there were very few things trade unionists could do anymore and huge demoralisation. Here we had the opportunity for trade unionists to get involved in doing things very positively. So we had people in hospitals going round asking for specific pieces of equipment that were coming out of service. We had local Transport Union workers asking their company for buses, asking them to fill them up with fuel, asking them to provide drivers, so there was an impact on employers as well. We also got unions that had always been hostile, or at least had been hostile to the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, involved. A number of unions, like the GMB (General Municipal and Boilermakers trade union) had generally been hostile but in two regions, London and the North, they gave us full support and raised money to buy ambulances. Their national executive also gave us a donation, which we felt was a new step forward.

ephemera: It sounds as though there is a split here, where on the one hand you have resistance from the trade unions because you are doing something different, something new, and on the other hand, once you are able to get people interested or motivated you gained considerable support.

PL: No, the resistance came from the people who felt that they had been doing work for Cuba for many years and then suddenly the new boys came along.

ephemera: Was this the Cuba Solidarity Campaign?

PL: No, it was some people, and I wouldn't necessarily be critical of them, who rightly felt that this was a high-risk project. With the trade unions it was more, "well we have never done this before."

ephemera: So different kinds of resistance?

PL: Different kinds of resistance, yes. But at the end of it, I had a letter from Ken Gill, then President of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, who congratulated us and then said that he was one of those who was previously quite critical. He congratulated us on being able to bring trade unions into the work around Cuba. Also we had a number of additional trade union general secretaries who put their name to the work. It sounds arrogant, but it was almost like achieving the impossible. When we said we were going to do this, this and this, everybody was saying, "Well it can't be done." Then we came up against all sorts of obstacles but we found ways around them. That was the philosophy. It was a 'can-do' philosophy, as opposed to a 'can't-do' philosophy.

From South Africa to Cuba

ephemera: You have spoken in our earlier conversations about your own passionate commitment to Cuba, but how did it happen that you personally became involved in Cuba?

PL: I had been sent to work in South Africa for the African National Congress (ANC) in the elections in 1994 and many of the people - South African people - I was working with were full of admiration for the Cubans. It was from them that I discovered the significant role that the Cubans had played in helping to bring down the Apartheid regime there, and also liberating labour in Namibia from South Africa. This was the Cuban troops in Angola, Cuban doctors and teachers in Angola, but particularly the Cuban troops with the Angolan army who defeated the South African army at a place called Quitacavara in the late 1980s. This led to the international conference and the Angolan accords meaning basically that Namibia would become an independent nation, Cuba would withdraw its military support to Angola over a period of time and it effectively it meant the end of the power of the South African army. The people I was with thought that that was the beginning of the end for the Apartheid regime. I hadn't really understood that role before.

When I returned from South Africa, by sheer coincidence a Cuban health union General Secretary was visiting Newcastle and asked to meet me. That's where it all began. We started off by twinning regions of UNISON with regions of the Cuban health union. That involved people looking to see what Cuba had done in the way of health and seeing that the backbone of their revolution had been health and education and that they had high standards. Things like infant mortality rates there are as good, if not better, than in Western Europe and certainly better than in the United States.

All this was at risk because of the ongoing blockade by the Americans and collapse of the Eastern Bloc. They called it the second blockade, where all their ability to trade dried up and their economy went into freefall. I could see that there were things in Cuba really worth saving, particularly the health service and education, their advances in medicine and I just love the Cuban people. The way that they do things for other nations, other people,

when they have got nothing themselves is really quite remarkable and that became a sort of lesson for me, to try and do something to help.

ephemera: So when did you first visit Cuba?

PL: 1995

ephemera: This is just a year after you had been working in South Africa. What was the nature of that visit?

PL: Things were pretty grim. Because of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and all the trade contracts disappearing, food was in desperately short supply. There was no fuel and no transport. There were electricity blackouts for 30-40% of the day and night. Things were very, very difficult for people. I thought that it was going to be very difficult for Cuba to survive that period. As I went on with my visits. I could see the steps that they were taking to change the situation. They are a very imaginative people who find ways of getting around every problem that is confronting them.



ephemera: So were you visiting with the purpose of providing aid at that stage, or did that develop at a later time?

PL: At that stage I was trying to set up a twinning between the Santiago Province of the Cuban Health Union and UNISON Northern region. That was the main objective, but it was also just to have a look to see what it was like, because neither I nor any of my colleagues had ever been there.

ephemera: And you have visited a number of times since then?

PL: I think about fifteen or sixteen times in total now. That first time was before there was any tourism to speak of in Cuba and of course that is one area that has mushroomed.

Early Experiences

ephemera: Can you talk about your early work experience, leaving school, work and so on?

PL: I left school at sixteen. I had become quite political, probably through my family, so I got very involved in the anti-Vietnam War campaign during the early sixties. After finding myself in jail after being arrested during a demonstration, I went through job after job after job. Fifty jobs by the time I was twenty. Life was different then. You could just walk out of one job and into another one. When I was twenty-six I got a job working for NUPE (National Union of Public Employers) who sent me to Newcastle to work as an organiser. I think that is when I discovered my real skills were in organising things, sometimes in a

shambolic way, but always to achieve an end. I was very much involved in recruiting, in organising campaigns and industrial disputes.

After 1993 UNISON was created as a merger of three trade unions. Two years later I was seconded into the role of actually forcing branches to merge, many against their will and trying to get to grip with the union's finances, not as an accountant, but just trying to find the money. So that was one of my jobs. It meant making a lot of enemies because you actually had to stand up and force change through, that was what it was about. It was about forcing change, embracing change and then trying to control it. Many of the branches that we were forcing to merge were reluctant, at best, to do it. I moved on to try to tackle some of the thorny issues around finance, then tackling some pretty serious issues of, as we call it, political cleansing, where certain groups literally, through use of threats and violence force others to yield power to them within the trade union and that is not an acceptable principle. So I had to tackle that as well. I was quite used to those kind of things, so getting into the Cuba work was really a logical extension of that because once again you have to tackle very difficult problems and force a way through: force a change of thinking, force a change of how you deliver something. I retired in November 2000, so I had been doing it for 28 years and three months by the time I retired. It was a sort of seamless transition from doing that kind of work to the work that I am doing now.

ephemera: You make it sound almost seamless! From working with UNISON to this?

PL: Well that is true. Not that it was something I enjoyed doing, but I became the prosecutor - we use the word 'union representative' - in high profile disciplinary cases within the union, mainly to do with harassment, intimidation, bullying *etc.* and I would be doing that one month and then I would be doing work for Cuba for another three weeks. The balance of the two kept my sanity.

ephemera: You finished with UNISON two months ago. Do you still have friendly relations with them?



PL: Oh yes. In May of 2000 my dream of taking Robbie Bickerstaff of UNISON to Cuba was realised. He went there for May Day and it was an official visit. There were lots of invitations to him previously and I was trying to persuade him to go. The truth is that every time I have taken somebody new with me to Cuba they have come back enthused with this work and the team has been expanding and expanding. So then to have Robbie Bickerstaff on the team became very, very important and we have a network of people in UNISON who continue to do this work. My leaving of UNISON is to work full time now for the organisation and the network in UNISON is just one part of it. There is a network in the train drivers union (ASLEF), in the Transport and General Workers Union, the National Union of Teachers and we also have private companies who have joined.

ephemera: Private companies? Such as who?

PL: The first buses came from Stagecoach. We shipped a load of fire engines over as well to Cuba. The maker of those fire engines and the double-decker buses that we sent to Cuba was Dennis and the chairman of Dennis has now asked what he can do to help. English, Welsh and Scottish railways helped us with a train to transport ambulances. Admittedly a lot of this was through trade unions.

ephemera: Through union members working in these organisations?

PL: Yes, except with Dennis. With Dennis and some other companies, they actually saw an article in the newspaper called *Bus and Coach Buyer Monthly*. One of their journalists or editors had seen these buses and ambulances, but I had wondered who on earth read this. Obviously people who wanted to buy buses. That generated the interest from the Chairman of Dennis. Another company who specialize in spare parts have sent us brochures to see if there is anything that they can do to help. So it is beginning to gather momentum and we've taken it beyond the trade unions now.

ephemera: You were talking about the organisation that you are working for now and we have agreed not to mention who is funding this, but you have been able to get in a situation where you are actually funded, to be given a salary so that you can live, by a very generous donor. Do you want to talk about this organisation and how it came about?

PL: Sometime in early 2000 I was sitting down with three colleagues talking about the future. We had done one ship and we were going to do another one. Because the demands on individuals were enormous, there was a suggestion we should try to get SALUD charitable status. We took this concept through further and thought that we would try to (a) get SALUD charitable status, because it would open up more doors to us, and (b) work beyond Cuba, but start in with those places where Cuban doctors are working in poor countries to improve infant mortality. That was the kind of thinking that we had, which talking about it now, sounds so simple. But it would require somebody to be working full time on it and nobody knew how we were going to find that money. But there was an anonymous benefactor who had been to Havana and seen the results of the work that we had done who agreed to do just that. The Cubans thought that it would be better if we worked as an NGO, a non-governmental organisation. From their point of view it would make things easier. As a result of all this we have set up SALUD International and have a couple of honorary patrons including Robbie Bickerstaff. We have two wings. One is the charitable trust, and the money from that will be spent on whatever the objectives of the charity specify. Secondly, we'll have a part of it that is not connected with the charitable trust, because it would be more about campaigning. Maybe campaigning is not the right word, but we want to explore and promote the debate about the globalisation of solidarity which we have begun to see in its embryo form.

Globalisation of Solidarity

ephemera: What do you mean by 'the globalisation of solidarity'?

PL: Strangely enough when the Pope visited Cuba in January 1998 he made three speeches. One was about the evils of contraception, which went down like a lead balloon in Cuba. One was about family values which, given the pressure they are under, again went down like a lead balloon. The main speech, which was welcomed there, was one where he talked about the effects of globalisation on poor countries and he used the phrase that what is needed to combat this is the 'globalisation of solidarity'. So that is a concept that the Cubans are exploring and we want to explore as well. It is an idea that will develop and we want to open up that debate, so we are setting up a web-site and we will publish something regularly on this concept of globalisation of solidarity. The Cubans will be invited, and anybody will be invited to do the same.

ephemera: I suppose this is the other side of globalisation that has not been given much coverage: a kind of colonisation of the rest of the world by America and Western Europe. When you talk about the globalisation of solidarity on the other hand, it has a slightly more positive ring to it. Can you talk about the concept and the work that you have been doing on that?

PL: As I said, this idea is in its infancy at the moment, so we might all think differently tomorrow. At the World Trade Organisation conference in Seattle, when there were huge demonstrations and the pepper gassing of the demonstrators, I think that was the point when people thought "Hello, what is going on here? What is it all about?" And you had the attempts, particularly by the United States, to deregulate world trade even more; to open the doors to the huge multinationals to take over and wipe out national industries, particularly in developing countries. I think there were two significant results of that conference. One was that the smaller countries got together and stopped any agreement being reached. I think that was when the alarm bells were set ringing. Secondly there was the nature of the demonstrators. This is not to take anything away from them, but there was no common theme. No common theme about what they were saying. There was a multitude of organisations that were all arguing different things. So you have the problem of globalisation destroying industries in poorer countries and you have the disparate views and ideologies of the people opposing that. So nobody can wave a magic wand and say "Hey presto! Here is the line and you have to follow it." But there are people who are very close to SALUD now who are trying to pull all that together: the various diverse groups who are concerned about globalisation, and the impact of the WTO, the IMF, World Bank etc.

I think it is about putting a positive direction on that movement and what we are doing is only a small part. I'll give you an example. I think what confused things, even amongst British trade unions, over this was the line that the British Government was taking at the World Trade Organisation Conference, supported by British trade unions, that the WTO should impose minimum or core labour standards on all member countries. Whilst that might sound a desirable thing, in my view it is actually interfering in the affairs of the smaller poorer countries by rich Western countries that dominate to make sure that the goods produced by the poorer countries are not competitive. It is a very complex argument, but this is the kind of debate that needs to be had.

There is also the question about doing something. One of the things that we can do, and this comes back to Cuba, is that we can start looking at areas of poverty and actually to do

something about it. The Cubans have offered their doctors, nurses and teachers at no cost, but what they do need is technical support, medicines, etc, which only private industry or the West can provide. We could actually begin to save lives in Latin America and Africa by doing this, and that leads onto other kinds of issues. If you have a population that is growing, where is the economic infrastructure for it *etc.*? What we want to do is push that debate out, try to open it up and see where it takes us.

ephemera: The situation in Seattle had competing groups with no single unified core to hold together all of their various struggles, but the traditional response from trade unions has generally been that the economic struggle - the struggle between capital and labour - is the central struggle, the central antagonism around which all other struggles are organised and co-ordinated. Now you have ecological groups, women's groups, groups from developing countries and you are talking about those as being equal and working alongside other struggles. Is that where you are?

PL: There are all sorts of different interests which is why there are different opinions and I think that we have got to define what it is about globalisation that is bad or good. We have a lot of people saying that globalisation is a very good thing, well let's have the argument! What is it? If there are aspects of globalisation, which I am convinced there are, that favour capital and neo-liberalism - or deregulation as it is called - what are they, who do they affect, and how do we tackle them? Without a doubt that will mean involving more groups than just trade unions. There are issues of child labour and the exploitation of women. There are issues of the exploitation of whole populations of ethnic groups, as well as issues of national sovereignty, national industry, sustainability and all those kind of arguments. At the moment the argument is too much of a *cliché*. We need to understand what it is we want to tackle and how we are going to tackle it, so this issue of the globalisation of solidarity just a small contribution to that debate. Let's start sharing views and see where it takes us.

Cuba is actually playing quite a key role in all of this. It is developing new relationships with Latin American, Caribbean, South American and African countries, as far as possible on the basis of equality. This doesn't mean to say that there is harmony and agreement over everything, but on some things there is total agreement. For example the whole Latin American, Central American, Caribbean bloc was the core group in preventing any agreement in the WTO. Cuba is a member of the WTO, so Cuba is involved in this and is actually setting up, with the agreement of national governments, these areas in their countries where it can try to improve healthcare and that can be followed by improvement in education. How this relates to the whole idea, I don't know. I think that we have to explore that.

Learning Politics

ephemera: You said that you came from a political background, about being in a family which made you political in some kind of way. Do you want to talk about that and your own political education or your own association with politics?

PL: Well I grew up in the late fifties and early sixties and it was a political time, post war. The way that I have always seen it, the generation who fought in the war, both at home and overseas, were transformed and changed by that experience. The 1950s and 60s was quite a political era. Both my mother's and father's families were very strong trade unionists. My father's family were railway trade unionists. He fought in the war and was a prisoner of war. He organised a strike in the POW camp - I'm not sure that was the most sensible thing for him to have done! They were unloading railway lines off a train I think. Who knows what actually happened, but the story was that they were unloading a train and it got to five o'clock and they said they had had enough: "We've finished." To which I am told a Luger pistol was put to his head. Everybody was following him. And he says no, we've worked however many hours today and we are not doing any more, that's it, and they all sat down. The next morning he and half a dozen others were sent to a salt-mine for the rest of the war, which he discovered later was a satellite of a concentration camp. So experiences like that obviously affect you, and like any person of that age who had a father or mother in the war, they tell you some stories, but they don't tell you others. You begin to develop an interest in what is going on around you. My father became General Secretary of a small union. I got involved in the peace movement and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

ephemera: That was your first experience of organised political action?

PL: Yes, I was about twelve at the time. They used to have this march from Port Marsden, which was the atomic weapons research establishment near Reading, to London every Easter: a four-day march. I went on it. Looking back on it, my parents let me go on a march for four days at the age of twelve or thirteen, so I think they must have been very liberal with me. Within two years I had got them to go on the march as well. Through that you begin to meet people and you become more political. I was involved in some youth politics for a bit, then the Vietnam War came along. This was something that my generation knew we had to express ourselves about. I don't know anybody that wasn't involved in some kind of action around Vietnam. It was on the television every night and it was horrific. We used to organise rallies, demonstrations here there and everywhere, including a regular one in Grosvenor Square. Some of the demonstrations were interestingly confrontational. One weekend there was a demonstration for the whole forty-eight hours and I was leading the night shift on the Saturday night when the police arrested everybody. When it came up in court, we were 'lost' around a number of prisons and nobody could find us anywhere. I was eighteen at the time and that had an effect on me.

ephemera: In what way?

PL: I began to hate the system. I think that is when I really learnt hatred. I used to think, "Why do people take jobs locking people up for the abysmally small wages that prison officers get, what kind of person actually does that? What kind of person is prepared to work for such low pay? They must get some pleasure out of locking people up." That is the way that you begin to think and I can see where the hatred comes. It must have a couple of weeks before they found me, I was at Ashwood Prison. So I came out of there changed - not bitter, but far more determined I think.

ephemera: What do you mean by the system?

PL: The capitalist system I suppose. I consider myself a Marxist, I consider myself a Communist. There I was, deliberately lost in a prison with no means of anybody knowing where I was and these things are not supposed to happen here. Then you realise that they do happen, then you begin to think, "I had better do something about this". So I became very determined to try and change things.

ephemera: Campaigning for nuclear disarmament, protesting against the Vietnamese War, these are Marxist causes?

PL: No, not necessarily. The peace movement or whatever you want to call it was about a genuine fear of nuclear war, of nuclear weapons, but it was a very, very wide group. Going back to globalisation, it had as many different groupings in it as the WTO demonstrations. In the fifties and sixties the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) had many different groups: there were conservatives, liberals, labour party members, communists, greens (who had no real 'green' label at the time), women's groups, gay groups, anarchists - they were all there. The thing about the CND was that it had one single objective, to oppose nuclear weapons, a very simple objective. But of course it would challenge conflicts where nuclear weapons weren't necessarily involved. It would get out of that single line at times.

Vietnam? Well on the one hand Vietnam was about the small guys taking on the big guys, or the big guys taking on the small guys, and on the other hand it was about national liberation. Once people were against it because they didn't like it, then they began to learn the history of it, colonialism, the cold war, the politics of Vietnam, the politics of China, the politics of the Soviet Union all come into it. So yes, I would say my opposition there was from a Marxist perspective.

ephemera: Marxist? In what sense Marxist? Marxism is often simplistically derided or thrown away and considered to be *passé* - as belonging to the sixties or to some other period that we are supposed to have grown out of today. But you are talking about Marxism in a way which seems far more sophisticated than this. What does Marxism mean to you?

PL: Marxism to me was an explanation of the way society has evolved and is expected to evolve, the economic relationships that make that happen or make that inevitable. At the time it was also about trying to change the world. In the early sixties we all thought that we could achieve the impossible and to a degree we were quite successful. Like I just said, there was my fathers generation, the people who came out of the trenches having seen friends that they had made the night before blown to pieces, going through this trauma. They come back as different people, sometimes traumatised, but people with values of humanity. In politics at the time there was a lot support for the Soviet Union, a lot of support for the Red Army. So that was that generation. The next generation as I see it was my own. We were never heavily theoretical reading Marxists. We had a basic education in Marxism. As young people in our teens I suppose we got involved in the peace movement and the Vietnam War. As you move on into the seventies those people end up having real jobs and families and then they go into the trade unions. You have got the older generation from the wartime who by this time are in the leadership of the trade unions and then you have got this other generation coming through. The combination of the two of those in the 1970s was that the trade unions made huge, huge advances and brought down two

governments. They brought down the Heath government and eventually brought down the Callahan government. I think that things change as you go on through your life because the situations that you are in change, and I ended up working in the trade unions where I put my politics into practice organising resistance. Certainly in the eighties under Thatcher I was organising resistance against everything that she was trying to impose. In the seventies I was still learning, but in the eighties, as a trade union official, I wasn't afraid to take risks and to experiment with new forms of organisation or means of putting pressure on an employer.

Creative Industrial Action

ephemera: What kinds of pressure?

PL: Well we had the first ever strike of hospital ancillary workers in 1972 and nobody in any of the unions of the health service really had a clue how to organise a strike. I had only been working in the union for about six months and so I tried to organise the health workers at the Newcastle hospitals to do things that would be good for them: to improve their morale and apply pressure to the employers. It was very easy to say to workers 'out' or at least it was then. It is very easy to get workers out on strike but it is very, very difficult to get them back in again with some pride, with some gain.

What I did learn was that strikes were not the only means of achieving an end and that actually getting people out was a huge step that could go drastically wrong. In 1986 for example, I had nurses in a private nursing home in Gateshead that had been trying to expose some outrageous care standards in this home. They went on strike and they were all sacked. This is the nightmare scenario of having a strike because there is no way back. So we got them to make a record, we got them to produce a play, and we got them touring the country with a play and a record about what was going on in their nursing home. Eventually a lot of the local authorities in the area found ways of offering these people jobs to get them back. So you had to find new ways of doing things, I mean making a record and play – *Sacked for Caring* – was quite imaginative, though I didn't dream up the idea myself. My colleague Keith Hodgson, who is now the education officer, was the ideas man and I was the doer. The same with other strikes where we had to stop privatisation of hospital services. We had a strategy in this region, and only in this region, of keeping the contractors out, and we succeeded for three years in keeping them all out. Not just by strikes but by a variety of things like occupations and publicity. We used to call it 'creative industrial action'. The key to it was finding out who was the decision-maker, the manager, that you had to target. Whose life did you have to make miserable in order to get the settlement. So you had identified, maybe the general manager of the hospital and then you targeted everything on him or her. It wasn't that you couldn't get people out, but that you needed to get them back in, so that was a tactic we experimented with.

I remember a long dispute in Belfast, in a hospital where the workers had just imposed sanctions. They weren't doing this and weren't doing that, and the dirty linen was building up all the way through the corridors of the hospital, so the general manager came in and said that he wanted all of it moved. The workers said that were not going to move it. The

general manager said that he wanted it all moved by the morning or they were all sacked. When he came in the morning, the corridors were all clean but when he went to his office and opened the door all this laundry fell out. Wearing them down and bringing some fun into it, so that people could not take it all too seriously - so that was the sixties and seventies I think.

ephemera: Strikes and this kind of organised direct action are not particularly popular today, apart from incidences such as the 'organised' political action in places such as Seattle, and also Melbourne, Nice and Prague. A couple of years ago we could have quite confidently said that organised political action is over or is in decline. What would you say about that today?

PL: I think that there are a number of issues there. One is going back to that generational idea that I was talking about. The generation who grew up in the eighties and early nineties grew up, in Britain anyway, under Margaret Thatcher and everything that she represented, which was nothing but a cultural and philosophical regression to selfishness, self-interest - everything that was opposite to collective action. And if you dared take any collective action then you were hit over the head with a big stick because she brought in all these laws to try and stop collective action happening. You are right to say that it had been in decline, although you could then throw in the example of about 1990, 1992 when the government announced that they were going to close all the remaining pits. There was not so much an upsurge of militancy in the pits, but they marched on London and were joined by people from right across the classes. They lost. There were moments when if somebody began some collective action people would relish joining in irrespective of what it was. But after so long without any kind of activity, to start it all over again it will mean starting in different ways, in diverse ways.

The fact that ecological issues and things like that are issues that motivate people now is no surprise. Global Warming is today's Vietnam War in some respects. I think that the work I have been doing with Cuba is a form of collective action, a very strange form of collective action, but it is about moving people into doing things. The possibilities are not high. When Vauxhall workers were faced with closure of their plant, there were very angry protests about it. Down the road at Dagenham, Ford says they are going to close the plant and the workforce there sign up for it. That would not have happened twenty years ago. Even with issues like Global Warming, ecology and feminism there aren't really many collective actions going on at all. What is the issue? I come back to this question of globalisation again. I think we will find eventually that everything is linked into that. Whether it be trade unionism, exploitation of groups, global warming: all those sorts of things are linked into that and it is an area to be explored to see whether we can actually motivate people into doing things. They are already doing it. We are talking big numbers in Seattle. Nice for example was an EU conference on the future, it wasn't a WTO conference or an IMF conference like Prague. But it attracted demonstrations and you look at what they were demonstrating against. The huge trade union demonstration was about improving the social charter. It wasn't about bringing capitalism down or anything to do with the conflict between labour and capital, it was about improving the EU social charter: more maternity leave etc. Which are fine objectives but it wasn't exactly revolutionary. So all these things are different, Nice is different to Prague, is different to Seattle, is different to Melbourne, is different to London. There is no answer to this question except to say:

yes, you are right that collective action had almost disappeared. Yes, it is appearing in sporadic areas but I don't think that it is co-ordinated or has a direction yet and I think that the politics of globalisation needs to be explored. I think that's it in a nutshell. Let's see what the issues are and let's see if that provides the platform to organise collective action.

ephemera: What is the future? What are the next things that you are going to do with SALUD?

PL: It is about involving more and more people *here* in, dare I say it, collective work with people *there*. So, for example, one hospital I have identified used to be supported by individual subscriptions from transport workers and cigar workers. We are looking to the Transport and General Workers Union and other transport unions to get their members involved in doing things to help that hospital. So that is one example. Because of the logistical difficulties and the fatigue amongst some in this country from collecting ambulances, I am going to go to Canada and Spain to speak to the trade unions there about doing what we have done with ambulances. Why Canada and Spain? Because there are scheduled Cuban ships that regularly visit ports in those countries, so we wouldn't have to divert one. It's about putting it all onto an organised basis.

I have ideas that I want to explore which are maybe too big, but I want to explore the possibility of involving corporate entities, or trade unions or whatever, here in supporting Cuban doctors in other countries. I think the one that I really want to try and tackle, but it is huge, is the question of AIDS in Africa. I was there in October 2000 and I was absolutely astonished, no that is not the right word, shocked, traumatised at the percentage of people in the country that are HIV positive. The figures that I got there were 1 in 9 of the population and 1 in 4 women between the ages of 18 and 28. And when you think of the consequences of a disease like HIV on that scale, it is unimaginable. I don't know any special cure for it but that is not what I am talking about. What I am talking about is whether with Cuban doctors and corporate financial assistance we could actually provide a resource there for the experts to use. It may not be practical but it is another thing I would like to explore.

Another thing that I am doing involves Cape Asbestos, a South African company responsible for the deaths of thousands, not just of its own workers from the asbestos mines, but also people who fitted out asbestos in ships on the Tyne or wherever and contracted the cancer that is caused by contact with asbestos. It is estimated that there are 70,000 potential cases and every time lawyers, presumably working on behalf of trade unions representing members in ship yards etc., have tried to take this company to court it has dissolved and appeared under another name in another country. Without going into all the details, as it is fairly confidential, it is estimated that there are at least 70,000 cases in South Africa, mainly miners and production workers, and they need to be registered so that they can pursue claims against Cape Asbestos. The situation now exists where it may be possible to do this. I have been asked if I can conjure up resources to find a diagnostic process or equipment to diagnose all these cases. I have to do that at the same time as the other work, and I come back to the balance with my family again, so I have to do this as much as possible by remote control. So that is where I find myself at the moment.

discussion

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