The Organisation of Organised Discontent: the case of the postal workers in Britain.

Abstract

The case of the postal workers in Britain is examined in order to develop our knowledge of intra-union oppositional groupings. Such groupings within the postal workers are shown to have influence as the result of the 'strategy' of a small number of activists within largely conducive circumstances of internal strife and worker combativity. However they do not accord to our normal understanding of factions, being better characterised as shifting and temporary networks and alliances.

The Organisation of Organised Discontent: the case of the postal workers in Britain.

Introduction

Recently it has been recognised that relatively little is known about the behaviour of union activists and informal political/quasi-political groupings within trade unions in Britain (Darlington 1998:58-59, Kelly 1998:54). In particular little is known about activists' collective oppositional behaviour as part of the processes of union policy decision making and mobilisation of resources for collection actions. Over the last fifty years, there have been only a small number of in-depth studies which take as their prime (or a main) concern factional and oppositional activities, although this is changing of late[i]. Other studies have considered these activities these issues more in passing[ii]. Indeed even amongst Marxists attention has been limited (see Hyman, 1975, Kelly 1988). Given that on the one hand divisions and strife in unions are often popularly attributed to 'left-wingers' and 'militants', and on the other hand, that Marxists espouse the critical role of union activists, this omission appears glaring. This needs rectifying because it represents an important weakness in our understanding of both unions as social organisations which are the sites of ideological conflicts, and as relatively indeterminate organisations whose goals and activities are guided by internal policy debates and power relations.

This paper adds to our knowledge by examining one of the most important examples of internal union groupings in the 1990s, the 'Not on the Agenda' (NOTA) group of 1995-1996 within the postal side of the Communication Workers' Union (CWU). NOTA emerged as a loose and specifically issue-based alliance of lay officials concerned with their union leadership's pursuit of long-standing unions goals such as shorter working

week and higher basic pay in return for a TQM-type agenda of teamworking, continuous improvement and flexible working methods. The group was instrumental in initiating and propelling forward the 1996 national postal workers' strike, against the wishes of their general secretary. These twenty or so activists were able to mobilise a significant proportion of members behind their agenda of union independence from the employer, safeguarding union power-bases and opposition to new work practices by organising meetings to exert pressure on the postal executive committee (PEC) to over-rule the general secretary. This was achieved by NOTA acting as both a ginger group to and a body within the PEC. However the group was less active and thus less effective in both the prosecution of the dispute during and after the strikes. This 'inactivity' and 'ineffectiveness' was a result of both a deliberate strategy and the internal-union mechanisms of running a lengthy strike. The strike itself was unusual and significant in that it was not only a lengthy one, involving 140,000 workers in a period of 'labour quiescence', but also one of the few strikes against teamworking in Britain and one which led directly to the departure of the incumbent 'New Labour' general secretary. Furthermore the strike, in a period of diminished union power, can be characterised as a partial victory, largely but not solely attributable to NOTA.

The paper seeks to provide a detailed account and analysis of NOTA by describing its origins and formation before considering its activities prior to, during and after the 1996 strikes. The context and nature of this intra-union formation is then analysed, before looking at NOTA's impact on the union and issues arising from NOTA in terms of factions and collective resistance. The data is derived from nearly eighty interviews with lay and full-time CWU officials[iii] from the postal side between 1995 and 2000, covering

the important axes in the union's branches and officials, i.e. politically ('left'/'right'), geographically (north/south) and by generation (older/younger).

The Postal Workers' Next Steps

In mid-1994 four branch secretaries (Bell, Furey, Ireland and Slocombe) and three PEC members (Kearns, Keggie and O'Hara) met to discuss problems postal workers were facing as a result of Royal Mail's (RM) drive to introduce TQM and what they saw as the leadership's inadequate response to this. The specific context was that the 1994 pay settlement contained a commitment from the union to enter into negotiations on flexible ways of working, ie the teamworking of what was to become the *Employee Agenda*. This grouping produced *The Postal Workers' Next Steps* document. Other lay officials and one full-time officer (Hayes) were involved but felt unable to put their names on the document. What was significant was not just what was argued but also by whom. The combination of the force of argument and stature of those signatories was critical to understanding the influence the document had.

The Next Steps identified in a sophisticated document that new management techniques (NMT) aimed to put greater responsibility on each individual worker, create self-supervision and competition between workers as well as remove the ability for independent representation and collective bargaining. Moreover it developed the notion of *workers'* quality criteria by which to judge proposals, i.e. do they give higher wages, shorter hours, greater employment security, and more effective control of the labour process? The document outlined three possible responses the union could take to NMT: acceptance, accommodation and opposition. The authors rejected the first option. In

some detail they rejected option two, given that this became a serious option as a result of the wide circulation of an academic study within the union. They forcefully came out in favour of option three.

All signatories had already marked themselves out as oppositionalists in the late 1980s, giving them an enhanced but largely local profile. Moreover all had or would play a major part in key strikes and in developing the union's policy of outright opposition to TQM/teamworking in union conferences in the early to mid-1990s. This gave them a national reputation of successful opposition to RM, at the time of union preparations for and then the actual negotiations on the *Employee Agenda* (that started in February 1995). The urgency and determination of this opposition was spurred on by the general secretary who, despite union policy on TQM/teamworking, was an *Employee Agenda* enthusiastic because it promised to achieve long-held union policy (of greater job security, a 5-day week, a shorter working week, longer holidays and increased basic pay) without industrial action. Following this, the CWU and RM signed a joint statement of intent on the *Employee Agenda* in March 1995. According to one of the document's authors the general secretary's response to *The Next Steps* was

… to go nuts and put pressure on Executive members, red-bait the rest of us [and] produce a circular that tried to respond to us but it was a big failure for him as it came across as patronising and unconvincing. He also began a series of educational schools to educate the activists on their line. Despite all that we swamped them at the 1995 conference and they lost.

The underlying reason for the document's success was that it reflected widespread and deep-seated fears and anger about the *Employee Agenda*. Following the 1995 CWU conference, and in particular the postal section of the conference, Alan Johnson (along

with the other joint-general secretary) attacked the left in an editorial in the union journal

(*Voice*, July 1995) by saying

Some branches seem to think the main objective for the week is to oppose the national executive policies and identify the scapegoats. It is a distorted and unhealthy approach which creates unnecessary divisions and wastes conference time.

and issuing the following challenge to the left

We can and will learn from the mistakes at our conference. The opportunity to do so will occur sooner than usual when we return in November for our first Rules Revision conference. We can hardly wait!

The establishment of NOTA

A special conference in late 1995 decided that unless there was a satisfactory outcome to talks on the staffing and the maintenance of deliveries by February 1st 1996 then a ballot on industrial action would take place. This was closely related to the impatience, unease and continuing opposition of the majority of members to teamworking, as under RM's proposals the prospect of redundancies through reorganisation of deliveries was largely dependent upon introducing teamworking. This mood led *The Next Steps* group to call a fringe meeting at the November 1995 Rules Revision Conference to discuss membership opposition to, and leadership acceptance of, teamworking. This meeting was called 'Not on the Agenda' from which the group of individuals who called it, for the purposes of clarity, are called NOTA. It is significant, however, and reflects the nature of the organisation itself, that it actually had no name. The meeting was attended by about 100 delegates including those from the *The Next Steps* branches (Cardiff, Liverpool,

Edinburgh, Bristol) and from London, south-east England and Newcastle. Their intention was to force the leadership to abide by members' wishes and union policy. A debate took place on how to move the issue forwards, resulting in the calling of an activists' conference for early March. The feeling of the meeting was that so far branches had fought own their own in isolated and localised ways but that to continue to do so would mean that the branches would collectively be 'turned over' on these big issues unless they pulled together.

Prior to the conference, NOTA widened itself out by involving other activists outside what may have been regarded as the 'usual suspects' and 'left' branches as well as reinforcing its base by moving from being branch to division based. This, and the organisation of the conference, was mainly carried out at three or four meetings in pubs in London attended by a group of about ten people (the *Next Steps* people, and divisional reps from London and the south-east) when those from outside London were at union headquarters on union business. During January 1996 some PEC members started discussing the need for a ballot on these issues to implement conference decisions. Meetings of divisional and delivery reps shortly afterwards heavily supported such a ballot. As pressure began to grow for a ballot, other members of the PEC, who had previously not taken positions or who had not clearly thought out their positions, began to do so. This lead to the first clear polarisation on the PEC, as a small number lined up with the group of six full-time officers (led by Johnson but with the exception of Hayes) who favoured a negotiated 'super deal' while the majority tended towards the 'opposition' in some measure or other. The contrasting positions became more elaborated and concrete as the year-long discussions between the CWU negotiating team (Johnson, Hodgson, Shaw, Hayes and Hogan) and RM were believed to be close to a

conclusion and there was a growing impatience and unease with their progress and potential results.

Invitations for the 2 March meeting were sent to all branches and PEC members. Johnson responded, saying 'The meeting is unconstitutional … Branches have no authority to spend Union money on either organising or attending such a gathering … [arranged by a] self-appointed clique, faction or grouping' (CWU branch circular 21 February 1996). In the event the 150 members from 40 branches (out of 90) attended with sponsorship from 31. The meeting's size and composition indicated a number of points. First not all branches sponsoring and attending were from recognised 'left' branches, although many were. As one attendee from Glasgow put it 'Nothing seemed to be coming out of the union so many branches that you wouldn't say were part of the left were there' (Scottish divisional rep). Second this was the largest 'unofficial' union meeting for more than a decade. Attendance was increased by the widespread publicity from Johnson's circular. However that more did not attend the conference may have been due to the following type of view from the Birmingham branch secretary: 'We didn't attend … because we didn't need influencing on the *Employee Agenda*.' Third those attending were union activists, holding various branch positions, many of whom were full-time lay officials rather than ordinary members and postal workers. Fourth those attending were delegated from branches rather than workplaces and several PEC members also attended in personal capacities. It thus was not a 'rank and file conference' (*Socialist Worker* 2 March 1996).

Speakers at the conference argued the *Employee Agenda* brings into 'question what sort of union we want? Do we want one that acts to pass on the demands from management

or one that defends the members' interests against a hostile employer?' (in *Socialist Worker* 9 March 1996) while PEC members warned of the need to be prepared for a hard fight. One, stressing the scale of the task faced, commented

Don't think we can scupper these plans by a resolution or a conference motion. The employer is determined to get its way and the union leaders are not prepared for confrontation. (in *Socialist Worker* 9 March 1996).

The aims and tactics of the conference NOTA were explained by one its initiators;

It was becoming clear that Johnson was going hell for leather for a deal. What we weren't sure of was whether the Executive would stand up. We knew the left on the Executive had a substantial position but it wasn't a majority and what we had to do was to ensure that it became a majority. We said to every Executive member if you support [Johnston] you'll find us on your doorstep. The conference was used to tip that balance and it did.

Emphasising a 'rank-and-filist' approach *Socialist Worker* (9 March 1996) opined that the conference did not produce a clear strategy aided by publicity materials on how to take the campaign forwards as well as out to the membership.

The following Monday, and despite Johnson's pleas, all lay PEC members and one officer member voted to reject any further negotiations on teamworking and set the negotiators a deadline of April 1 for concluding an agreement on a shorter working week and safeguarding deliveries. Failing that a ballot on industrial action would be organised. The motion, moved by Keggie, essentially meant the union was breaking off negotiations and calling a ballot given that there was less than a month settling. The PEC also rejected Johnson's request to put the 'offer' as it stood to a ballot or special recall conference. At the same time the PEC postponed a decision on whether to call a ballot on deliveries. Johnson viewed the situation in a very different way;

Just about February/March time the Executive started to get edgy about the mandate; Royal Mail had put out some really stupid publicity [which] cleared our pitch. That coupled with a [union] election meant that everyone who wanted to say they were a working class hero had to be against teamworking. … It was amateur hour stuff; Royal Mail weren't to give us all that for nothing in return.

RM's response was very hard-line, making it clear they would impose the offer;

The Employee Agenda is not dead. Regardless of CWU involvement we need to push ahead … It may take longer in the absence of CWU involvement and support but it will happen nonetheless. …We now intend to take a long hard look at our relationship with the CWU. Why spend many thousands of pounds supporting a union (through facility time etc) when it is only intent upon on pursuing its own agenda? (RM circular to managers, 13 March 1996)

In the light of this Johnson tried without success to overturn the PEC's position on 21 March. However the PEC was not prepared to call an immediate ballot so a state of 'neither war nor peace' prevailed. Essentially they were waiting to see if RM would implement its threats. During this period Blair, Labour Party leader, addressed the PEC. According to one PEC member 'He was very careful to say nothing about our dispute. But perhaps it was an attempt to remind everyone that the general election was coming and that New Labour does not want to see picket lines.' (*Socialist Worker* 4 May 1996).

Reflecting on their own positions and membership pressure, many PEC members were talking up the prospects of a 'big fight'. For example Keggie, soon to be dubbed 'the leader of the unofficial opposition', commented 'Unless Royal Mail change their minds … then we're on a collision course' (*Socialist Worker* April 27 1996). However one branch secretary remarked of those taking a pro-ballot, anti-teamworking stance, 'It is one thing to vote for defying management when you are nervous about losing your position on the executive. It is quite another to put yourself at the front of a struggle

which will probably be attacked by Labour Party leaders' (*Socialist Worker* April 27 1996). The PEC then, albeit several meetings and weeks later on May 2, authorised a ballot despite pleas from Johnson not to. RM responded by refusing any further negotiations while Johnston continued to lobby for the ballot's postponement- it was agreed that if a breakthrough occurred the ballot would be put into abeyance. He believed the negotiators were close to reaching a deal but the PEC refused to accept this because of the inclusion of teamworking, the deal being largely self-financing and the absence of guarantees on deliveries. Consequently the ballot was set for May 13. Nonetheless Johnson issued a circular on 11 May stating that talks were resuming, that balloting merely represented a 'contingency plan' and that if the talks produced a breakthrough the ballot would be cancelled or delayed.

The ballot ran, resulting in a 68% vote to strike on a 74% turnout which was widely celebrated, especially because of RM's attempts to sell deal with a barrage of material to postal workers' homes and predictions that job losses would ensue if the strike went ahead. However no dates for striking were announced as further talks were planned by Johnson. He explained

We were concerned that we didn't emerge from conference without another load of manacles stuck around us. My line was … don't make this dispute harder to resolve … don't get carried away with this euphoria. They gave us authority to discuss virtually everything and there was the obligatory no teamworking thing. We thought that we might be able to get round that.

To a Scottish branch secretary said this was 'a letdown. The tide is running with us and we should use it.' Further talks began on 10 June and led to a proposal to protect the pay of existing staff (with £25m of new money) and to water down teamworking. Nonetheless the PEC rejected this on 12 June against Johnston's advice and the first

strike dates were set (June 20 and 27) because of membership pressure to trigger the mandate within the stipulated 28-day period from the result's announcement.

After the Ballot

Once the ballot was called and the first strikes announced NOTA played a far less obvious and influential role. This was not essentially the result of internal disagreements about how to proceed. Rather NOTA's logic was to act as a short-lived, loose, largely informal 'ginger group', not as a formalised, on-going independent grouping on this issue. Consequently PEC lay members would act as the transmission belt for NOTA's views articulated through membership pressure exerted by the March meeting. Once this had been achieved NOTA members' presence on the PEC and the activity of certain NOTA members in various union forums would be used to drive the dispute forward in line with NOTA's wishes. Thus no attempt was made to recruit to NOTA and its positions.

To flesh this out, NOTA operated largely without its own meetings and instead by various occasions when leading members met for union business, or by personal contact and telephone. Examples were self-selected and essentially closed caucuses before PEC meetings and larger caucuses before national/regional meetings of divisional reps, branch secretaries, area and unit reps. Caucuses were held with the intention of influencing the forthcoming meetings, thus being rather reactive and uncoordinated. The only exceptions were two open meetings held which were less impressive than the March conference, judged by their turnout and business conducted. About 50 activists

met on 29 June in Liverpool after a demonstration for the city's striking dockers. About 80 met on 31 August in London in a similar fashion to the March conference, in that it was called by some 30 branches. Both meetings discussed ways to escalate the strikes but this did not appear to have a discernible impact.

Above all else the activities that did take centre stage for NOTA were the PEC's machinations. Keggie became the leader of the opposition (of around 10 lay members) to Johnson that from May to September resisted his drive to sign a deal. However this resistance was uncertain and hesitant, and directly impacted on the strikes and their outcome. In terms of striking, the action was slow to get started, there were long periods between strikes, various strikes were called off or scaled down with little notice, the strikes being one-day affairs had limited impact and then re-balloting was used to wind down the action. As a result there was no resolution of the dispute, other than that RM failed to achieve what it sought as did the CWU. Indeed the pay and teamworking issues were not resolved until 2000 after a new package called *The Way Forward* emerged from joint-working parties set up to end the dispute.

In essence the union's approach during the dispute vacillated back and forth between those directions argued for by Johnson and by Keggie. Johnson and his grouping were adept at pushing the dispute forward for their preferred policies, by taking the initiative and being determined and pro-active while Keggie and the opposition were hesitant, lacking sufficient confidence and reactive. They were better in 'defence' against Johnson rather than in 'attack', that is unwilling to take the 'game' into Johnson's half (and by implication into RM's half). This was illustrated by the re-balloting to wind down the strikes, and the ending of the new mandate for action as a result of the alleged spoilt

notification (the 'Tipp-Ex affair') to RM of the original ballot result, leading to the
likelihood of an injunction and damages against the union.

However to suggest that NOTA could have secured a more favourable outcome needs to
recognise that using the PEC to direct a long national dispute with 8 one-day strikes over
three months in opposition to the general secretary and officer corps is a different task
from just creating the momentum to start a strike through a ballot, particularly where the
strike was a political 'hot potato'. As such considerable energies were spent just keeping
the strikes going. Nonetheless to do this, NOTA would have required a tighter, more
coherent organisation which met far more regularly, issued publications and had a strong
and tangible basis amongst members, as well as one which formulated what it was for
rather than just what it was against. In particular a political defence against 'New
Labour-ism' was needed at certain key points eg Blair's recommendation to reballot or
Johnson's challenge to escalate the action. The obvious course for NOTA was to not
only win the PEC to escalating the strikes but also implement this with membership
support in order to create more leverage to break the 'log-jam' with RM.

But an obstacle to the putting NOTA on this basis was precisely because its chosen
strategy *seemed* to be working well (up to a certain point in time). NOTA was operating
in a legitimate (ie not unconstitutional) manner, in Keggie they had an articulate and
charismatic leader, they had defeated Johnson four times in votes on ending the strikes
and signing a deal, and latterly they won an escalation of the strikes. And all this was
achieved with little organisation and work amongst members because they had a
majority on the PEC. It was only towards the end of the dispute (on reballoting in
September) that it became clear that NOTA, operating through the PEC, had become

out-manoeuvred by Johnson operating through the officers, the media and the 'right' in the union. In short Johnson had gone over the PEC's head and mobilised members to influence the 'weaker' PEC members directly through membership meetings and indirectly through reps meetings. Thus NOTA's lack of roots and influence amongst members and lack of clear organisational membership amongst the PEC were exposed as shortcomings.

Another weakness of operating through the PEC was NOTA members' inexperience of oppositional activity. Previously the PEC had operated as a body that took it lead from the general secretary- it would be more accurate to say it followed the general secretary's lead. Opposition on industrial matters to Johnson had come from branch secretaries and divisional reps at conference, and although most PEC members had trod this path to get to the PEC, once they were elected they became rather isolated because they were assigned to jobs in headquarters and ceased to be field officers under the New Industrial Relations Framework Agreement (NIRFA). Furthermore, and despite PEC members knowing each other well and relatively little turnover in PEC membership, they usually (re)acted as a group of unconnected individuals, mostly elected not on the basis of a clear industrial or political stance but on personal appeal, their reputations as negotiators or geographic connections. This increased the propensity of opposition to Johnston being sporadic and inconsistent in terms of issues and made remote the forming of a semi-permanent opposition group. Thus when Keggie and others did just this, they entered unfamiliar territory in a state of relative inexperience, unpreparedness and lack of organisational resources. Moreover the opposition was unsure of itself because it was challenging the de facto legitimacy of the general secretary even though the PEC de jure was the superior body. Finally

NOTA's unity was greatest between March and June but it thereafter decreased. As one NOTA activist put it

There were different people in the group that represented different strands, tactics and strategies in the dispute. Some thought the fight had to be continued until Royal Mail had been battered into the ground, others thought, at the time of the reballot that was the time to stop. Some were happy working with and against the leadership, other were frightened by what they had done.

NOTA after the strikes

Given the basis of NOTA's foundation, it is significant that a semblance of it continued for sometime thereafter. This was largely due not to the persistence of the *Employee Agenda* in the working parties but the emergence of other important issues alongside the recognition that the *Employee Agenda* would not be dealt with quickly. Amongst these was action against the privatisation of RM's catering arm, where a newsletter and petition were organised by branches in Nottingham, Manchester, Chester, Cardiff and London in mid-1997. This group called unsuccessfully for a national day of action. The second and more substantial operation was against the closure of sorting offices. In September 1997 a London meeting called by Merseyside Amal. and a number of other left-led branches took place, attracting around 80 postal workers who were largely branch officials from 30 branches. However it also attracted Hogan and a number of PEC members who had switched from hostility to attending. Some delegates attacked Hogan but little positive in the way of strategy emerged, other than a vague idea that if threatened offices should strike as individual units then others would strike in their support. Following this two demonstrations against closures were held in Liverpool and Stoke. In the event the only office to strike was Liverpool in March 1998, from which it won an indefinite reprieve.

In these two cases some but not all of those involved in NOTA acted together in a manner similar, that is as an ad-hoc alliance of interested and like-minded activists. Inevitably the numbers involved were smaller given that the issues affected fewer postal workers in a direct and immediate manner compared to the *Employee Agenda*. However the reduced numbers may also have reflected a degree of pessimism after the inconclusive end to the 1996 strikes. Nonetheless the re-emergence of the (1992 NIRFA) *Strategic Involvement*, a form of social partnership, after the strikes provided an issue with the potential to re-invigorate NOTA activists. Given that much of the opposition to Johnson and the union's strategy in the *Employee Agenda* contained at root a criticism of the over-close relationship between the union and RM, there was an existing current amongst activists against partnership. In the event the 'failure' of new concrete and tangible issues to emerge from *Strategic Involvement* meant that NOTA was not rekindled.

More importantly NOTA's was shattered by a series of developments; the general secretary election, the emergence of the 'Southern Alliance' (SA) and the national agreements on deliveries and flexible work practices. The attempt by some activists to use the candidature of Hayes in the election to launch a united Broad Left (BL) in the union's postal and telecom sides and establish an influential BL in the postal section split the 'left' and NOTA. Around about the same time the divisional reps in London, the south-east and south-west of England met and formulated a document arguing that the PEC was out of touch with the membership (evidenced by the frequent rejection by members of national deals recommended by the PEC) because they ceased to have regular contact with members. This group of people advocated a revision of union

structures so that field officers like divisional reps had a greater input into policy and decisions making. They became known as the SA. The response from those outside the south was to suggest that either this was a political move rightwards or the south was trying to end the sizable influence of the north of England and Scotland. In essence the SA split London, Oxford, Bristol, Milton Keynes and Southend into one camp and Cardiff, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Newcastle into another. This division was then deepened and widened by the debates on the delivery agreement (headed by Hayes) and *The Way Forward* (headed by Keggie). Those on the former reflected the regional nature of labour markets (essentially south of England compared to Midlands, north of England, Wales and Scotland). In the latter both camps originally organised against the proposals leading to their defeat. Upon their subsequent revision, the southern branches organised the opposition that narrowly lost. Here the disagreements centred on the amount of new money available, the new work practices and a new tier to dispute resolution.

The Organisational Nature of NOTA

NOTA was set up as a 'loose gathering of people against the *Employee Agenda*' (Bristol branch secretary) rather than a traditional BL. This meant it had no formal membership, policies, secretariat or organisational structure. Its modus operandi was more 'chats in pubs' and ad hoc meetings than formal conferences with motions. This resulted from an analysis which posited that the NCU in the 1980s, with a powerful BL, was weak and had suffered defeats over job losses and privatisation while the UCW, without a BL, was strong, had taken more industrial action and had won a number of important victories. Moreover BLs were seen as sectarian, faction-ridden election machines, without credible

industrial bases and concentrating on political rather than industrial matters. For these reasons attempts to establish a credible UCW BL were believed to have failed. A number of NOTA participants explained its rationale;

Its an 'as and when thing' amongst people who share certain values who met over certain issues. It's more a network and semi-informal.

There's no rules, no constitution, no standing orders and what we do today doesn't commit us to act in a certain way in the future. We come together on certain issues as like-minded people.

Because the Broad Left was always tarred with the brush of being more hard left we could never make the leap to other people. People are more comfortable with the way we're operating at the moment. We're all 90% the same but if we were in a Broad Left, it's the 10% we'd have a difficulty with.

While NOTA represented a coalition of like-minded officials, its members came to this from different routes. Some had been members of Militant in their early twenties and had rejected organised left politics (eg Ireland, Slocombe). Others were still in 'hard-left' groupings either inside or outside Labour like the Scottish Socialist Party, Socialist Labour Party, Campaign Group or Socialist Action (eg Bell, Durkin, Hayes, Browne) but recognised their isolation and others' rejection of BL-ism so were willing to work in a united front. A number of others were from the 'soft-left' inside Labour and were becoming more 'industrial' in their outlooks (eg Candy, Gibson, Farnam, Kearns, Ward) as was the 'New Labour' moderniser (Keggie). Nonetheless what united them was the priority they gave to the immediacy of trade union action and on this basis and in this period they were keen to work with each other towards an agreed goal.

The Context of NOTA

Key issues in examining intra-union groupings are those of; what are the relationships between activists and members in terms of leading and/or reflecting member concerns, and what is the context of these relationships? As with other groupings or factions that appear to be at the head of disputes, NOTA neither entirely created the membership's concerns nor manipulated them (see also Darlington 1998:59, Hyman 1989). However the strikes and opposition to Johnson were not spontaneous and unorganised actions. NOTA illustrates that in certain circumstances, a group of individuals can organise and lead actions that take events in a different and more combative direction than would have otherwise been the case (cf McIlroy and Campbell 1999:24). In NOTA's case this was dependent upon tapping into members' and activists' concerns, articulating them and agitating around them so that they became widespread and legitimate.

A number of specific components are essential to explaining this ability and outcome. The first concern the issues of the *Employee Agenda*. With regard to teamworking, the majority of members, activists and lay officials were not only affected by it but also viewed it as detrimental and were against it. This contrasts quite markedly to the less clearly defined national schisms that the issues of national productivity deals (1994), branch reorganisation (1992), NIRFA (1992) and the Difficult to Recruit Areas Supplement (1988) gave rise to. The debates on teamworking had a considerable history such that member opposition was solid and well-informed. Added to this NOTA was defending, and was seen to be defending, national union policy, which had been re-affirmed annually. Furthermore this policy had been successfully implemented, thus stopping RM from introducing different forms of teamworking in 1988, 1990, 1991 and 1994, and giving postal workers some confidence in this

position. This highlighted to them that RM was dependent on their cooperation to implement teamworking so they had the power to resist. The other main *Employee Agenda* issue was pay[iv]. RM had presented its case as one in which every postal worker would gain. However, as Johnston later admitted, RM had 'ruffled too many feathers' not only by proposing to make wholesale changes to every postal worker's pay and allowances at one time but also doing so without any substantial new money. This meant abolishing many allowances and premiums, which workers relied upon to supplement their basic wages, in order to fund relatively small increases elsewhere which themselves had strings attached ie teamworking. Consequently RM created a hitherto unseen alliance against itself. Workers' fear over second deliveries, redundancies and casualisation further solidified this alliance.

NOTA was thus able to 'frame' (Kelly 1998) the issues in a way supportive of its case and in contradiction of Johnson and RM. It tapped into and projected that view that everyone was similarly and detrimentally affected, whether involved in processing, delivery or distribution, and particularly on pay and work practices. This enabled it to carry forward its central concern about workplace autonomy and union power within and on the back of these issues. This was not to engage in subterfuge but rather to construct to construct an alliance of concerned members, recognising that by branch and sections of membership different accents and emphasises were necessary.

The second component concerns those factors informing the wider environmental context that increased the confidence and willingness of the postal workers to resist both RM and their general secretary. Local and unofficial strikes (which won many of their objectives) had increased from 1993 (cf Blackwell 1990) after a fall from 1988[v].

In particular NOTA was associated with, and drew on, the most strike-prone and 'militant' of these areas (eg Liverpool, London, Edinburgh, Milton Keynes, Cardiff and Newcastle) where left-inclined milieu dominated. Linked to this workplace combativity was the success of the 'left' in mobilising members in ballots in 1993 and 1994 against the 'right'/leadership over productivity deals, as well as their achievement of carrying rejection of leadership recommended policies and majority support for its own policies at consecutive annual conferences from 1991. This reflected more generally the lessening of the general secretary's and officers' powers to determine policy, which itself was an outcome of the branches' increased role and power as a result of the 1988 national strike, the further decentralisation of collective bargaining and the union reorganisation in 1992. Thus a new locus of power had been established at the local, activist level. RM workers' unity had also been maintained through the continuation of national bargaining which also allowed for the development of workplace bargaining. Finally the union had defeated in 1994 the Conservative government's plans for privatising the Post Office and had remained unbowed after achieving a compromise in the 1988 national strike. Therefore a considerable current of oppositionalism already existed amongst postal workers.

These 'historical' factors have also been supplemented by more on-going and 'contemporary' ones which revolve around postal workers' technical *ability* and organisational *capacity* to take effective action to resist managerial initiatives. *Ability* concerns the nature of the service and the mail system. The monopoly provision of an essential service, the specificity of individual mail items, the fixed geographical location of deliveries, the 'just-in-time' and integrated nature of processing, delivery and distribution all contribute to the immediate, discernible and visible impact of

strikes. *Capacity* concerns postal workers' capability to deploy this configuration to their advantage as a result of near total unionisation, strong workplace union organisation, high degree of labour intensity, workforce grade and culture homogeneity and increased traffic volumes.

However these are necessary but in themselves insufficient to explain postal workers' resistance to RM and their general secretary[vi]. Swimming with the tide does not explain being able to direct the tide. Critical here is the existence and nature of the branch secretaries, divisional reps, PEC members and the relationship between them. The branch secretaries play a vital role as industrial and political organisers by forming and articulating positions within the branch and the wider union. Those associated with, or and supporters of, NOTA were of a milieu that was oppositional and assertive in carrying out these functions. From their number the divisional reps are elected (on a geographic basis) who again play vital industrial and political roles. Because the divisional reps are both field officers and ex-branch secretaries, they worked with the activists and articulated their concerns particularly within the union's higher echelons, with which they had more contact. This alliance, in terms of union position and views, was able to pressurise the PEC, reminding them of the need of their support as well as where the PEC's loyalties should lie, having risen through the branch activist route. Several specific components are worth noting. One is the centrality of the branch and divisional officials to the determination of workplace governance as a result of the NIRFA/decentralisation of collective bargaining and the increasing autonomy of the branches. Another is that these officials culturally have been and remain 'of' the postal workers, in that they have all been postal workers with

the branch secretaries receiving the same wages and conditions as their members. There is thus considerable member deference to these officials.

NOTA's impact

A number of union activists believed that NOTA had forced the PEC 'to the 'left'' and this reflected an overall change in the direction of the union. Looking at the PEC, if there has been a change, it has not been because of large numbers of new members being elected but the result of existing members changing their positions: the PEC's composition in 1995/1996 was essentially the same of early 1992 onwards. Eight members had been on the PEC for the previous four years by 1996 (including Kearns and Keggie). Of those who had left the PEC, the majority became full-time officers (including Hogan and Hayes). What is true of all of them is that to a greater or lesser degree they had largely supported Johnson until 1995/1996. The PEC's turnaround did then reflect that it was subject to 'pressure from below', primarily from the activists, and branch secretaries and divisional reps in particular.

That said, the longer term impact on the PEC appears to be of some significance but of an industrial rather than political nature and part of an existing trajectory of growing independence from the general secretary, having its origins in the 1986 introduction of annual postal ballots for the PEC and the creation of a small number of influential branches after the 1992 branch reorganisation. Some comments bear this out;

The PEC will never go back to what it was but this is not a left-wing thing; it was a purely industrial dispute.

When I came on the PEC there were a lot of nodding dogs who supported the

leadership regardless. [P]eople ask many more questions now. There's definitely a move towards the yearly elected people [the PEC] having more power than the five yearly elected people [the officers].

One clear result of the NOTA group's activities was that Keggie easily won the deputy-general secretary (postal) election in early 1998. This is of note because there were several widely acknowledged right-wing candidates standing, one of whom (Hogan, the incumbent) easily beat Keggie two years earlier in another election. Within the CWU postal side this is the key position and as such Keggie was responsible for concluding the dispute with *The Way Forward*. His response here indicated the limits to any 'radicalisation'.

Turning to the membership, it is fairly clear that NOTA and the *Employee Agenda* strikes had little radicalising political impact and did not lead to an increase in further strikes[vii]. Thus no new or sizable left-wing current emerged. However, if NOTA and the strikes are put in a longer perspective, namely changes in the union between 1990-2000, then two points emerge. First, power in the union is now noticeably trifurcated between the general secretary and officers, the PEC, and a milieu of divisional reps and branch secretaries. The latter in particular are much more assertive, although largely in industrial rather than political terms. Second, to the extent that there have been political changes in the union relates more to the initial accommodation to existence of a Labour government and then the first signs of a left-leaning disillusionment with the government over privatisation and commercialisation. This contrasts to the union's previously loyalist position to Labour.

Parties, Factions, Alliances and Networks

The paper now turns to examine some of the wider issues which NOTA raises. NOTA existed far more as a faction than as a party, in terms of not having a name, not seeking to win office, not being accorded legitimacy and not having a stable organisation (Dickinson 1981). However it would be more accurate to characterise NOTA and the other groupings as alliances, coalitions or networks of a relatively delimited group of activists. Factions, drawing on the British experience of quasi-political factionalism within unions, can be defined as having a number of characteristics. Firstly they are 'power-seeking groups' (Seifert 1984:374) in terms of policy and office. Secondly, and particularly if an acting as an extension of or emanating from an outside political organisation, they have an organisational coherence in terms of membership, rules, publications, a secretariat and local groups. Thirdly they espouse distinctive political perspectives, which are commonly shared amongst their membership. Fourthly by intent they seek to be a relatively long-lived or 'semi-permanent' groupings (Undy *et al* 1996: 183). Fifthly they are usually cross-sectional within the union (cf Carter 1991).

By contrast the NOTA did not conform to these. As a group it did not seek election to the PEC but did seek to influence it in order to provide alternative leadership in a single dispute. In this sense it acted like a ginger group, which sought to enliven its parent body. NOTA exhibited little organisational coherence and had no 'outside links' to political groupings. It existed in a semi-covert manner whereby many CWU members did not know of its existence although some were aware of the divisions on the PEC (that NOTA was involved in). This form of operation resulted not only from a rejection of BL-ism but also from the combination of a dominant union culture hostile to internal organised groupings and an unfamiliarity with organising such

groupings. NOTA's raison d'etre was a single and overtly industrial issue, existing on an explicitly temporary basis and only within RM and not within Parcelforce, Post Office Counters or the telecom side[viii]. NOTA's leading lights embodied the separation of 'politics' from 'economics' that the relationship between the unions and Labour often represents. However at some points this shaded in to a form of syndicalism, in as much as they told to Labour to keep out of their affairs and they became pre-occupied by the dispute and 'industrial politics'. To quote a leading officer

[T]there's been an increase in industrial militancy [but] not … an increase in political militancy … [T]he best elements have displayed syndicalist tendencies …arguing that Labour doesn't matter anymore, we need to break away from it and its only the industrial struggle that matters.

Therefore NOTA approximates more to Dickinson's (1981) conceptualisation which stresses that factions arise from crises and thus tend to be transient and have neither a name nor a (political) platform. This is because Dickinson's (1981) definition of a faction is more akin to a network or alliance concerned with largely industrial matters. NOTA also approximates to Edelstein and Warners' (1975:188, 190-1) broader definition of special purpose political groupings which encompass loose and semi-overt communication networks of like-minded, usually politicised, officers and activists. NOTA can be further examined by reference to the National Seaman's Reform Movement (NSRM) in the seafarers' union (see Hemingway 1978:33-81). Similarly NSRM sought to influence the conduct of an industrial dispute and lacking a coherent and tangible structure and membership, it also operated in a loose and informal manner with a small number of key activists. However NSRM went further by identifying that a more robust response to the employers in this dispute and others

required not only the clearing out of the 'old guard' from office but also the introduction of elections for delegates and the creation of a shop-steward system. This necessitated a longer-term operation in which the NSRM became a faction and contested executive elections and the appointment of officials. This culminated in the Reformers controlling the union by 1973. Although the general secretary resigned and Keggie and others (Kearns, Slocombe) are now leading officers, this was not part of NOTA's activities. NOTA also contrasts with Blackwell's (1990:28) analysis of the 'Opposition' in the bakers workers' union which 'was essentially an expression of a change in membership goals that occurred independently of the organising efforts of any groups or group leaders.'

Conclusions

A number of broad conclusions can be drawn from the formations within the postal workers. Firstly detailed and nuanced analysis of both 'circumstance', i.e. material conditions, and 'strategy', i.e. human agency, are needed to explain the evolution and activity of such groups which emerge as key junctures and play critical roles in worker mobilisations. Likewise their demise needs to be examined in the same way. In NOTA's case there was no quasi-political weltanschauung or wider goals, like a reform movement perspective, to keep the alliance together. Secondly attention has normally focused on (political) factions. This may blind us to the existence of equally important shifting alliances and networks that exist without reference to political groupings. Indeed they may result from the rejection of political groupings. Thirdly the case of NOTA provides a case can most credibly explained by mobilisation theory (Kelly 1998) in terms of its constituent parts such identification of grievance,

attribution, a body of people willing to act and opportunity to act. However the contextual element of worker confidence to link up the components for mobilisation is missing (Gall 2000). Postal workers by dint of the particular conditions in RM do exhibit this necessary confidence. Fourthly, and given that we are dealing with indeterminate processes and human behaviour, by reference to other factions and groupings is it possible examine the conditions under which more favourable outcomes for union members may have been produced (than actually were).

Notes

[i] See Bealy (1977), Blackwell (1990), Campbell et al (2000), Darlington (2001), Edelstein (1965), Edelstein and Warner (1975), Hemingway (1978), McIlroy (2000), McIlroy and Campbell (1999), McIlroy *et al* (2000), Seifert (1984), Undy (1979) and Wooton (1961).

[ii] See for example Allen (1981), Carter (1991), Darlington (1994, 1998), Fairbrother (1994), Martin (1968), Richter (1973) and Undy *et al* (1981).

[iii] There are three types of lay officials; 15 PEC members and 18 divisional reps (both of whom are on full facility time but only the latter are field officers) and 90 odd branch secretaries who are normally on full facility time (funded jointly by the branch and RM).

[iv] Further details of the *Employee Agenda* can be found in Martinez et al (2000).

[v] This appears due to the 'peace' following the 1988 national strike and the impact of the Employment Act 1990 which 'banned' unofficial strikes.

[vi] In the 1990s few other groups of workers have shown such resilience, combativity and intra-union groupings. The only other examples are the firefighters and rail and underground workers who also approximate to many of these features but are organised around more conventional politicised factions.

[vii] This is partly also explicable by the 'peace' following the strikes, although in 2000 strikes reached their highest level since 1988 as result of *The Way Forward's* . implementation.

[viii] The weakness of union organisation in Parcelforce/Post Office Counters and long-standing enmity and indifference between postal and telecom workers made NOTA's crossover into these areas unlikely. On top of this workers outside RM face different issues from those inside RM.

References

Allen, V. (1981) *The Militancy of British Miners*, Moor Press, Shipley.
Bealy, F. (1977) 'The political system of the Post Office Engineering Union' elections' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 15/3:374-395.

Blackwell, R. (1990) 'Parties and factions in trade unions' *Employee Relations*, 12/1:23-31.

Campbell, A., Fishman, N. and McIlroy, J. (2000) *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: Volume 1: The Post- War Compromise 1945-64,* Lawrence Wishart, London.

Carter, B. (1991) 'Politics and process in the making of MSF' *Capital and Class*, 35:35-71.

Darlington, R. (1994) *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism: shop stewards' organisation in three Merseyside plants*, Mansell, London.

Darlington, R. (1998) 'Workplace union resilience in the Merseyside Fire Brigade' *Industrial Relations Journal*, 29/1:58-73.

Darlington, R. (2001) 'Union militancy and left-wing leadership on London Underground' *Industrial Relations Journal*, forthcoming.

Dickinson, M. (1981) 'The effects of parties and factions on trade union elections' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 19/2:190-200.

Edelstein, J. (1965) 'Democracy in a national union: the British AEU' *Industrial Relations*, 4:105-125.

Edelstein, J. and Warner, M. (1965) (eds) *Comparative Union Democracy; organisation and opposition in British and American unions*, Allen and Unwin, London.

Fairbrother, P. (1994) *Politics and the State as Employer*, Mansell, London.

Hemingway, J. (1978) *Conflict and democracy; studies in trade union government*, Clarendon, Oxford.

Hyman, R. (1975) *Industrial Relations; a Marxist introduction*, Macmillan London.

Hyman, R. (1989) *Strikes*, Macmillan, London.

Gall, G. (2000) 'What is to be done with organised labour?' *Historical Materialism*, 5:327-343.

Martin, R. (1968) 'Union democracy: an explanatory framework' *Sociology*, 2/2:205-220.

Martinez Lucio, M., Jenkins, S. and Noon, M. (2000) 'Management strategy, union identity and oppositionalism: teamwork in the Royal Mail' in Procter, S. and Mueller, F. (eds) *Teamworking*, Macmillan, London.

McIlroy, J. and Campbell, A. (1999) 'Organising the militants; the LCDTU, 1966-1979' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 37/1:1-31.

McIlroy, J., Fishman, N. and Campbell, A. (2000) *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: Volume 2: The high tide of trade unionism 1964-79*, Lawrence Wishart, London.

Kelly, J. (1988) *Trade unions and socialist politics*, Verso, London.

Kelly, J. (1998) *Rethinking Industrial Relations: mobilization, collectivism and long waves*, Routledge, London.

Richter, I. (1973) *Political Purpose in Trade Unions*, Allen and Unwin, London.

Seifert, R. (1984) 'Some aspects of factional opposition: rank and file and the National Union of Teachers 1967-1982' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 22/3:372-390.

Undy, R., Ellis, V., McCarthy, W., and Halmos, A. (1981*) Change in trade unions: the development of UK unions since 1960*, Hutchinson, London.

Undy, R. (1979) 'The electoral influence of the Opposition Party in the AEUW engineering section 1960-75' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 17/1:19-34.

Wooton, G. (1961) 'Parties in union government: the AESD' *Political Studies* 9:141-156.