

REVIEW: THE STORY OF THE STUC

Ian McKay

Aitken, Keith (1997), **The Bairns o' Adam: the Story of the STUC**, Edinburgh: Polygon, pb, £14.99, ISBN 0748662006, 328pp.

Keith Aitken's book was commissioned as part of the commemoration of one hundred years of the Scottish Trades Union Congress. Aitken had access to the considerable filing system of the STUC and, while the book is packed full of facts and quotes, it isn't adequate to call it a 'history'. Aitken subtitles his book 'The Story of the STUC', and that is just what it is - a good story, well told.

The book chronicles the STUC through nine phases of its existence, a straightforward chronological route for the reader, but not presented as a dreary setting-out of the facts and figures. Aitken writes well, with the flourish of a popular journalist, but he has too the eye of a first-rate political correspondent in picking out the significance of the periods he describes.

The STUC is often portrayed as more 'red' than its sister organisation south of the border, and for those on the Left the account of the period from 1900 to the Russian Revolution and 'Red Clydeside' makes fascinating reading. Aitken describes and analyses with a lot of reference to actual minute books and speeches - a feature of the book which lends authenticity, though I for one empathised with what must have been an often dry and dusty travail for the author to come up with the nuggets he has.

But if the revolutionary fervour of 1919 catches the eye, students of our present period would do better to look at Aitken's earlier chapters on the establishment of the Labour Party and the STUC itself.

People don't join trade unions because they're revolutionaries or even because they are political. They combine to protect their interests as workers. It's an insurance policy, of greater or lesser relevance according to the prevailing

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industrial relations circumstances they find themselves in. The trade unions of one hundred years ago reflected this collective self-interest more openly, and perhaps more honestly, than the present day, but they found themselves often wrong-footed by employers more easily able to combine and use political power for their own ends.

The trades unions had to develop their ability to influence national questions - sometimes in opposition to the Scottish employers and almost as frequently in combination with the 'class enemy' to win work and investment for Scotland. When Aitken describes the furore of recent years when the STUC and individual unions became involved in quangos or struck deals with employers to encourage inward investment, we shouldn't kid ourselves that this is a recent phenomenon.

One of the main themes of the book is this development of the STUC as a voice for Scotland in attracting inward investment and state investment from governments of all shades of opinion. It is a strategy still very much to the fore, but Aitken points to its roots in the 1948 appointment as General Secretary of George Middleton, under whose leadership 'the image of the STUC as a tribune for Scotland, rather than merely for Scottish organised labour, would be burnished as never before'. Middleton grew into the job as the mass media developed in the 1950s, and proved himself an able media performer. He was backed up by Jimmy Jack, his Depute and ultimately his successor, and the progenitor of another great STUC tradition, the well argued brief.

Aitken is correct that this powerful combination set a pattern which was to serve the STUC well in ensuing years, and in later chapters the discussion of the influence of successive General Secretaries is both interesting and informative. However, the description of Middleton's appointment and period of office and its subsequent effects on the organisation might have been enhanced by a more overtly political analysis rather than concentrating on the personalities of the leading figures.

As Aitken points out, Middleton was a Communist activist who was appointed General Secretary for his pragmatism and political skill. He joined the Labour Party on appointment and proceeded thereafter to build the strength of the organisation through a structure of campaigns and alliances which could harness the strengths of both a right-wing General Council and left activists on the ground. With Jimmy Jack, he built a reputation for a dependable trade union 'line', whatever your politics. It would have been interesting had Aitken digressed a little into comparing this essentially

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practical process with the ideological discussions of the time, which saw the establishment of the 'British Road to Socialism' line among the Communist Party and broad sections of the Scottish left. Aitken's book hints at such developments, but perhaps someone else will take this discussion forward elsewhere.

Later sections of the book deal with the growth in importance of the national question and the leading role played here by the STUC. Aitken tells the story of the period of Jimmy Milne's then Campbell Christie's leadership as one where the national question came to dominate - a natural progression on the path laid out for the STUC by Middleton some 30 years before. But the story has more than one dimension. The role of the organisation on the national political stage is interwoven with a description of the greatest onslaught suffered by the trade union movement in fifty years, under first Margaret Thatcher then successive Tory governments. Aitken deals very well with this strange juxtaposition of increasing popular influence and decreasing industrial strength. He draws on a number of sources to look at what was happening behind the scenes at a time where the pressure on the trade union movement as a whole was intense.

The political pressure of an anti-trade union government saw membership of the STUC fall and continue to fall to below the level of their golden jubilee year of 1947. The STUC 'was shut out of the processes of governance', as its involvement in semi-governmental bodies was radically cut back and the doors of Government ministers were firmly closed to all but the most formal of communications. Damaging inter-union disputes, such as over the abortive Ford plant at Dundee or unionisation in the off-shore oil industry, soured an already depressed atmosphere as unions lost members and shed officers and staff.

The brightness at the end of this tunnel was an increasingly clear vision of an alternative future for Scotland, and the marshalling of forces - ever practically - to help bring that about. The role of the STUC in the establishment of the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly, the Scottish Constitutional Convention and a host of events and initiatives in between is well discussed by Aitken, and indeed this is one of the few places where the student of the present day can see a well-set-out and analytical presentation of how we got to be where we are now, on the brink of a Parliament.

Aitken begins and ends the book with a reference to Margaret Harding Irwin, the first real General Secretary of the STUC. Some have criticised the book for neglecting the role played by women in the STUC, but I don't think this a

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wholly fair criticism. Aitken's section on the establishment of the STUC Women's Committee in the Thirties describes those elements which set the Women's Committee apart, that is

the distinctive STUC practice of building and maintaining loose alliances with as wide as possible a range of civic bodies. ... Sixty years after the women's advisory committee first met, this shrewdly nurtured talent for making common cause would keep the STUC conspicuous and vibrant during the dark years of Thatcherism and beyond. The STUC owes a great deal to its women's committee.

It is unfortunate that Aitken does not devote more time to the 'rebirth' of the women's advisory committee in the late 1970s and early 1980s, since in many ways the work of the committee at that time saw history repeat itself. The women's committee set off in a very practical way to build alliances across a number of areas of work which by their very nature impinged on the social and political areas.

Aitken does describe very well the most important of these developments, the call for the Scottish Parliament to be established with 50/50 gender representation. The work of the women's committee in building support for this concept - among political parties, the trade unions and a large number of women's organisations unused to political lobbying - is described by Aitken as a 'signal victory' and he goes on to show the significance of the debate for subsequent discussions on the size of the Parliament and proportional representation.

Although the final product of 50/50 is no more than a moral duty on the political parties, it was a significant step. Again, it is often forgotten that the less trumpeted second half of the women's committee lobbying was that the working practices of the Parliament should ensure the fullest participation of women - a demand which has been almost fully accepted in the White Paper **Scotland's Parliament** and will go a long way to making the greater participation of women a reality.

For those of us active in the labour and trade union movement at any point in the hundred glorious years, this book helps us to remember, to set the record straight, setting down for posterity some of the significant moments of the Scottish labour movement. For other readers, Keith Aitken's good 'story' will help them understand why an organisation whose title half the population couldn't tell you what the letters stand for has become so deep rooted in a nation's psyche and a people's heart.

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