

# DIRECT ACTION

**SYNDICALIST WORKERS FEDERATION  
INTERNATIONAL WORKING MENS ASSOCIATION**

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## MILL WORKERS REVOLT

LANCASHIRE MILL GIRLS are making a successful stand against the employers' attempt to lengthen their working week. In Ashton-under-Lyne and Stalybridge (Cheshire) the threat of direct action has already forced the bosses' hands, and the order for longer hours has been withdrawn.

Reporting this on January 3, the Manchester "Evening Chronicle" said:-

"Double-shift working on automatic looms in the Lancashire weaving industry is in danger of collapse.

"It was only two months ago that the new agreement for the extended working week was signed.

"Women in several districts have revolted against finishing at 10.30 p.m. because of poor transport and having to get up early the next morning to prepare the family breakfast.

"The position will be discussed next week by the weaving unions and the Cotton Spinners and Manufacturers' Association."

The decision to introduce longer hours was taken by employers and union officials - without the workers having been consulted.

First resistance came at the Wellington Mills, Ashton-under-Lyne - Main unit of the "C.P.A." Group. It was initiated by S.W.F. comrades.

When a notice was posted up in the mills by the employers, Gartside and Co. (of Manchester) Ltd., the girls decided the time had come for action. The notice, "to all employees at present engaged on double day shift hours," announced that hours, which had been  $37\frac{1}{2}$  a week, were to be increased to between  $38\frac{1}{4}$  and 40 on each shift. "The management," it added, "will readily answer any questions relating to this agreement and its implications as to wage payments, etc."

Immediately, a mass meeting of workers on the early shift was



January, 1951

called, at which speakers urged resistance to this attack on their conditions by the employers.

With the exception of two girls, the vote was unanimously in favour of fighting the decision of employers and leaders of the Power-loom Weavers Association. The two dissentients were told, in the plainest terms, that if they worked the extra time, they would work it alone. "That," as one of our comrades put it, "fixed them." Delegates were elected to inform the management that the increased hours would not be done by the early shift.

A meeting of the late shift, held on the same day, took the same decision, and a joint delegation visited the management. This meeting ended in deadlock. The bosses would not budge.

Another mass meeting of the workers then decided that all employees should hand in their notices if Gertside & Co. insisted on the extra time.

A statement to this effect, signed by all the workers, was handed to the management. The result of the ultimatum was immediate and effective. The order for longer working hours was withdrawn . . . a complete victory for the workers and for direct action.

News of the way the employers had been defeated was quickly spread to other districts. Next workers to move into action were those at Stalybridge. Since then other mills have followed suit. For once the capitalist press told the truth, when they reported the story under the heading "MILL GIRLS REVOLT ON TWO-SHIFT WORK."

As we go to press comes news that this latest attempt to drive a wedge into textile workers' conditions is well on the way to complete defeat. Just one more proof that direct action wins.

#### I.W.M.A. SECTION CONSTITUTED IN ITALY

The Syndicalist Union of Italy, U.S.I., was reconstituted as a section of the International Working Mens Association at a congress held in Carrara on November 4 and 5.

Greetings were sent by the Congress to all comrades of other countries, particularly to those persecuted in Spain, Bulgaria and other countries.

Fraternal delegates were John Andersson (general secretary of the I.W.M.A.) and Augustin Souchy (Mexico).

Secretariat of U.S.I. has its headquarters in Genoa.



Textiles Today, III

By J.O. FILLING

## THE 10 PER CENT INCREASE

Since the last issue of DIRECT ACTION, the weavers and spinners have gained a 10% wage increase. Let us look into the conditions under which this was granted.

There has been a world increase in cotton consumption, ranging from 5% in Britain to 58% in Japan, during the latter part of 1950, and while output is soaring - there is a weekly average of 60 million yards, against 57½ million yards in 1949 - the reserves are low enough to cause the distributors concern. India has had to ban all export of cotton yarn, in order to protect her own industry.

Naturally enough, "F.W. Tattersall's Cotton Trade Review," (Dec. issue) comments, "Prospects for the cotton trade are decidedly bright, despite disturbing world affairs."

The woollen side of the textile industry looks with envy on this picture, as they have to offset the low prices Britain pays her Oceanic Empire for foodstuffs by the high cost of their raw material.

1950 was a cotton boom year. Profits were largest since 1920 when, of course, there was no utility or price controls. \$7½-million profit was made by ten combines and 76 spinning firms. (most weaving firms are private companies and do not publish profits). This is a fourfold increase in the past five years.

So the operatives got 10s. on \$5.

Last November two mills bosses were carpeted by the Master Cotton Spinners Federation for giving 'profit-sharing' bonuses to their workers. J.H. McGree, chairman of Belgrave Mills, Oldham, one of the bosses concerned, said, "The industry has only itself to blame if, due to rearmament, we witness once again the drift of the workers from the mills to munition factories."

The bosses' organisation replied by saying that bonuses were "destructive of the whole system of collective bargaining." McGree was sacked from the federation, and said, "Willingness to include workers in good times would lead to better understanding in the industry."

The trade of his firm, however, was already independent of the Master Cotton Spinners Federation, and he was fearful that the reactionary nature of this organisation would prejudice his own firm's profits. But the Weavers Union asked for a 20s. flat rate increase, and were offered and accepted a 10% rise.

Already, Clayton-le-Moors Weavers Association, at their annual general meeting on January 3, criticised this as inequitable, as higher-paid workers get a bigger rise than their lower-paid colleagues, and more opposition to this type of rise



is to be expected.

The rising cost of living, rearmament, and the workers' knowledge of the huge profits made the rise inevitable. It is insufficient and, as we pointed out in an earlier article, only a levelling-up of the wage with the cost of living.

The pound flat rate that was unanimously demanded by many local unions should be backed up by direct action, for no REAL wage increase is gained without a strike or the threat of a strike.

Now is the time for an all-out offensive to consolidate our position while times are good. Already bosses in some districts are attempting to make inroads into our conditions by introducing longer hours. Mills at Ashton-under-Lyne and Stalybridge, by forthright, militant action, have put paid to this sort of thing (see front-page article).

Textile workers must unite to defend and improve their conditions by federated rank-and-file committees, both within and without the unions, according to local conditions.

## GERRY WILLIAMSON

IT IS WITH the deepest regret that we record the death of our indefatigable Belfast comrade, Gerald Williamson.

Gerry, who was also an active member of the IWW, never lost any opportunity to spread the ideas of revolutionary syndicalism. He was well-known among the Belfast workers, and had wide contacts with the dockers of that city.

Irish nationalism held no appeal for him. Commenting on the Irish elections early in 1949, he wrote in DIRECT ACTION:-

"As far as the workers of Northern Ireland are concerned, this election was merely a fight between two sets of exploiters, as to who would rule and exploit them . . . ."

"If the Irish workers throughout this island would but forget their religious and political differences of opinion, and unite in a general fight against their common enemy, the capitalist system, for a better living standard and full employment for all, then we should see the politicians, North and South, forgetting all about elections, and coming to grips with the workers in a fight to retain their ill-gotten gains."

Gerry had been fighting a losing battle with his health for a long time, and was confined to bed for weeks at a time.

He will not be forgotten, either by ourselves or by the many Belfast workers whom he counted among his friends. -K.H.

**DRAFT RESISTERS** Thousands of men throughout the country are dodging the draft by moving from their addresses. In the Chicago area . . . 1,500 such cases are on record. - "I.W."



## Principles of Syndicalism, LII

By TOM BROWN

## ABOLISHING THE WAGE - SYSTEM

IN THIS STUDY of the wages system we are not concerned with some imaginary system which does not, has never, and is not likely to exist. Nor shall we discuss what would be the effect of the wages system if it were entirely different. We are content with the scientific method of observing what exists and, from careful observation forming our observations. This is economics, not metaphysics, and economics ought to be objective. Primitive men seeing lightning and hearing thunder imagined them to be the signs of an angry God. The growth of scientific knowledge dispelled this view and enabled man to control this force.

We do not seek to explain economic manifestations by referring to good or bad employers or good or bad governments. We seek nothing less than the abolition of the wages system, for it is the system which is wrong. Without a knowledge of social economy we are as the savage facing natural forces. With knowledge of the subject we can control our social course.

WHAT IS WAGES? We live in a commodity society, where everything is made for sale. In other societies this was not the case. Savages and barbarians gathered or grew food for their own use and not for sale; built houses to shelter themselves and not to rent. Truly mediaeval society produced most things for consumption in the immediate locality, and even household, and sold only the surplus.

Capitalist society, however, produces everything for a market. The mill-owner initiates the manufacture of cloth not, like those of old, because he needs a coat, but to sell the produce on the market. Everything in capitalism is for sale. Books and beer, carpets and cosmetics, horses and haberdashery; and not only manufactured goods, but every human relationship is offered for sale . . . politicians and patriots, love and friendship, art and science, and (remember "Major Barbara") even the soul's salvation.

Thrust, at an unripe age, into this world market, the worker, the proletarian, the man without property, finds he can live only by buying and selling. But what has he to sell? Without patrimony, having no goods and lacking access to natural resources, he must sell the only thing left to him, his labour power, his ability to work. He sells his time, portions of his life. That part of his life which he hires to his employer is not his, he has sold that part of this life.... and the price of this labour commodity is called wages.

If we consider how the price of a commodity is arrived at,



we shall understand the nature of the wages system. In a free market, the final factors in fixing prices are supply and demand. Of course there are substantial economic reasons for the existence of any supply or demand but, for the purpose of this article, we shall be content to consider the final factors.

We all know if a certain commodity is scarce and the demand is great the price tends to rise sharply. If there is a glut of another commodity and a small demand (as herrings in the height of season) the price will fall, if the free market exists.

Wages, too, are so regulated in a free labour market. If labour is relatively scarce and jobs are plentiful, wages rise; but when depression comes and jobs are scarce with millions of unemployed seeking them, then wages fall.

The same principle applies to particular industries and jobs. A certain industry, as engineering in the 'twenties of this century, may have more workers than jobs; then wages fall in that industry. Another industry, as the building industry in the 'twenties, may have almost more jobs than workers; there wages will - compared with other industries - rise.

THE VANISHING CRAFTSMEN Another example we shall take is that of the craftsman. Before the war of 1914-18, craftsmen received wages about double that of labourers. (Provincial engineering craftsmen received 37s. to 39s. per week; their labourers 18s. per week). Now some persons believed that the employer paid the craftsman double the labourer's wage because he admired his skill. Some even believed that he did it to make the workers jealous of one another. The truth is that the employer could not hire men at less than the market price of 37s. per week. And if he paid more than he needed to, he would soon cease to be a capitalist. A worker does not pay 10s. for an article whose market value is 5s., nor can he hope to obtain it for 2s.6d. Likewise the capitalist does not attempt to put himself out of business by defying the principles of economics.

The truth of the foregoing is testified to by economic tendencies during and after the first world war. Engineering employers successfully fought to lessen the demand for craftsmen by creating semi-skilled and unskilled jobs through the further division of labour, by developing the use of machinery and the use of war-time dilutees, and breaking down the old-time apprenticeship system.

At the same time, the wages of many unskilled workers were creeping comparatively upwards by the slackening of the supply of cheap unskilled labour, much of which had come from overseas - as Irish labour in the chemical and constructional industries, and Polish labour in the Scottish mines and jute mills.



Further, certain sections of unskilled labour combined to limit the supply of labour to their job, as the dockers. So the tendency of economic development has been greatly to lessen the 100% gap between skilled and unskilled labour. I have known highly skilled craftsmen who threw up their engineering jobs at 1s.2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d. per hour, to take employment as dockers at 1s.6d. per hour. The development of the wages system has almost completely destroyed the craftsman myth.

Let us here generalise our views of the wages system by declaring that in a free market wages rise and fall with supply and demand. The worker may, by strike action, increase the one or lessen the other, but he cannot change the general tendency. During trade depressions the employing class allows the free labour market to operate, but during great labour booms - as during the last war - they seek to close the free market by the use of such measures as Bevin's Essential Works Order. Thus, while the worker may, once or even twice in his life, enjoy a boom period, the general tendency of the wages system is to push him down to subsistence level; that is, to allow him little more than sufficient to fuel himself for the performance of his master's work - and to raise more little wage slaves to replace him when he wears out.

REFORMS & THE WAGE SYSTEM Rather than oppose the wages system, reformists have proposed modifications and additions which leave the system substantially intact. The wages system mocks reforms. Let us consider a few examples of reforms which have but strengthened it. Free education has been on every Socialist reform list from Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto onwards. Such free education as the State supplies benefits the employers, not the workers. More general elementary education has increased the supply of apprentices and shop assistants. Scholarship matriculation has produced cheap clerks and vacuum cleaner salesmen. Working-class access to university degrees has lowered the wages of thousands of technicians to that of general labour, as the Association of Scientific Workers so often testifies.

Pensions are another good old standby of the reform merchants. Some years ago the granting of 10s. per week pensions to State-insured men over 65 years of age was hailed as a great step to the millenium. But the worker of 65 could not live on 10s. a week - he had to continue work. Many employers quickly reduced the wages of such men by 10s. per week. It was useless to try to disguise one's age, for the State issued special insurance cards to the 65's and over. The 10s. pension went to the employer, not the worker.

It was the same with war pensions. In the inter-war years it was common to read in Labour Exchange advertisements of jobs which ended "For disabled ex-servicemen only" or "only men with



disability pensions need apply. It was not gratitude to the men who fought which led certain employers to insert such clauses in their wants. A glance at the wages offered soon convinced us that only a man with a pension could hope to live on such work. The employer was the true recipient of the ex-soldier's pension. We all know cases of ex-policemen retiring on pension, and sharply contesting for the jobs of public house managers and night watchmen.

One further example of the negation of reforms by the operation of the wages system. There have been many attempts to raise or pay wages by Acts of Parliament or Trade Boards, but the solid fact remains that, in the trades and industries affected, wages fall during depression as they do in uncontrolled industries. To prove this, one could produce enough statistics to fill a hay wain.

**THE MACHINE & WAGES** Not only reforms but other doubtful forms of progress fail to benefit the wage worker. New machinery which, by increasing production, ought to enrich the worker and lighten his toil, serves only to enslave and impoverish him. Let us imagine the case of a factory owner who employs 100 men working on 100 machines. New machines which can produce twice as much are introduced, so that 50 men may do the work previously performed by 100. In a sener society, the 100 would cut their working hours by half, or increase their income by 100%. Not so in this case. Fifty workers are sacked and swell the ranks of the unemployed. The remaining 50 dare not demand a share of the increased productivity, because of the threatened competition of the 50 unemployed. Indeed, it often happens that the retained machinists are faced by a wages cut.

Is it not obvious that there is no hope of any substantial or permanent improvement of workers' conditions or solution of the social problem so long as the wages system exists?

**WAGES IN THE 15th CENTURY** Lest some of our readers are yet unconvinced, let us examine the progress of the wages system over the greater length of its existence. Bourgeois economists usually point to the period of 100 to 150 years ago and contrast it against today, crying, "Look at the wonderful progress we have made." They attempt to conceal the fact that, at that period, labour had sunk to its lowest economic level of more than 1,000 years. During the period in question, modern British capitalism was getting into its full stride and, in order to attain speedy supremacy, reduced the workers and peasants to almost unbelievable depths. To get a true comparison of the progress of the wages system, we must examine a longer period. Let us look back five hundred years.

Professor Thorold Rogers, in the best standard work on the



subject, "Six Centuries of Work and Wages," in illustrating the wages of the mid-fifteenth century takes as example a recorded building job at Oxford, 1449-1450. The head mason was paid 4s. a week and the other masons 3s. 4d. a week. What could be bought with the 4s. or 3s. 4d. then? Thorold Rogers gives a list of average prices for those years:-

Wheat 5s. 10d a quarter; oatmeal, 5s; beef, 5s. 1d the cwt; mutton, 4s. 6d; pork, 5s; geese, 4d. each; fowls, 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d. each; pigeons, 4d. a dozen; candles, 1s. 1d. the dozen pounds; cheese, one-third of a penny a lb; eggs, 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d. for 120; firewood, 1s. 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d the load; shirting, 6d. a yard; and cloth, 1s. 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d. Thus, a week's wage could purchase 112lbs of beef, or 12 geese, or 96lbs of butter, and so on.

Rent, now the largest item in a worker's budget, often one-third of his income, was in the fifteenth and earlier centuries, about a halfpenny or less a week. The peasant, for 2s. a year, rented a cottage and very large garden; he also had a share in the common pasture; he was able to keep poultry, pigs and a cow. He had the concession of collecting loppings and wind wood from the woods.

Rogers demonstrates that the working day then was of eight hours. "The artisan who is demanding at this time an eight hours' day in the building trades is simply striving to recover what his ancestor worked four or five centuries ago." Nor was the work very hard or wearisome, for tired or hurried men cannot produce good work.

**SOCIALISM & WAGES** Almost alone among the movements claiming the support of the workers, the Syndicalist Workers Federation opposes the wages system. While Marx opposed it, most of the parties calling themselves Marxist or Socialist support it. The Communist Party approves of it, and calls upon Marx to witness their orthodoxy while, in Soviet Russia, the wages system has been extended, consolidated and become more extreme.

The Independent Labour Party has never advocated its abolition. On the contrary, the I.L.P. at one time advocated a "Living Wage Policy" which they alternatively called "Socialism in Our Time." The Labour Party has never looked beyond nationalisation of certain industries in which, as we have seen in recent years, the worker is exploited through the wage system in the same manner as by a private employer.

Syndicalism fights against the existence of the wages system, against a method of distribution based upon mens market value, and for a society based upon their needs and the infinite capacity of society to satisfy them.

Next month:- "THE END OF THE MONEY TRICK"



# LET'S FIGHT THE BOSSES

by H. HARMER

Although World War II - the second 'war to end wars' - came to an end in 1945, there has not been much peace in the world since. We are apt to forget that it ever did end, because since then we have continually heard and read of 'War in Malaya,' 'War in Indonesia,' 'War in Palestine,' 'War in Indo-China,' 'War in Korea,' etc.

We are now very near to another full-scale war, which will be more disastrous than any previous one.

In World War II the Germans were the enemy, but now politicians of the Atlantic Pact Council believe it's O.K. to build up German militarism again and, this time, to use German workers to fight with their former 'enemies' against a new enemy - 'Communist Dictatorship.'

Yes, things are really going in full swing for war. General Eisenhower is back in the saddle as C. in C. of the Atlantic Army. As a professional soldier, of course, he doesn't care whom he fights - or, rather, whom he tells to fight.

If workers would stop and think for themselves, instead of lapping up the slimy propaganda of the scheming politicians, crooked trade union leaders and fanatical militarists, we could, perhaps, make this world a more decent place in which to live.

Consider these facts:-

Our wages our worth less each week;

The bosses' profits are ever-increasing;

If you strike, you are liable to imprisonment under National Arbitration Order, 1940;

People are unable to get married and have children, because they cannot get a place to live in - others live in dreary, tumbledown, disease-infested hovels;

Mothers of young children, who would be pleased to go to work in order to earn extra housekeeping money, cannot do so because there are not enough nursery schools.

Remember these are not only normal conditions in Britain, but those of the working class of the world.

It is only the workers themselves who can change these things - don't believe the politician when he says he will change them for you. When you have given him your vote, he will no longer worry about your conditions or desires. He will tell you what to do, that's all.

The workers of the world should stop fighting each other, and stand together to fight the parasitic ruling class. We must repudiate conscription, military or industrial, ignore anti-strike laws, and so defeat the boss class and their rotten system.

We will then show the kind of world we can build - one of healthy, happy, voluntary co-operators, working for the advancement of civilisation - not for the comfort and well-being of the few.