

The Bus Strike

New Methods are Necessary

The usual calumnies are being levelled at the busmen of London by all sections of the press for their having dared to strike on Saturday afternoon. Heart-rending stories are told of housewives walking for miles in the rain loaded with shopping and of the thousands deprived of the pleasure of standing in the rain watching football.

The fact that 40,000 busmen might have had the opportunity of seeing football matches which they otherwise would not have seen, was not mentioned. All the press did was to pick upon a few unhappy incidents and present them as an over-all picture of a miserable London. Neither did any journalist seem to think that Lord Latham, London Transport boss, had behaved other than reasonably in flatly turning down the busmen's claim. And the claim is supported by the union, too, although the strike is not.

That the men have a legitimate case is fairly obvious, and it takes only a few minutes' conversation with any busman to find out more about it. But what is also obvious is that the partial nature of the strike makes it unlikely to succeed, and that in any case it is time the busmen learned from experience and tried other forms of direct action to fight the boss without alienating the sympathy of the public.

The men's case is that, because Saturday is the busiest day of the week, they always have to work in the afternoon and although, if they are not on the early shift, the time is part of their 44-hour week, they feel they should be paid time-and-a-half for Saturday afternoon work. What many of them really want is not to work on Saturday afternoon at all, but if they do, on a fair rota, to be suitably recompensed.

On present working, busmen are likely to get about three Saturday afternoons free per year. When they are working the early shift — i.e., from 5am to about 2pm, they are usually ordered to work on, and are, of course, paid overtime at time-and-a-half. But they would rather have the leisure, and apparently the union has been striving for years to have established a regular system of rota, whereby busmen worked their 44 hours and had the right to finish work whether their week ended on Saturday or not. One conductor I spoke to thought that

the recent reduction of hours from 48 to 44 was a mistake. He would have preferred a 5-day week, even of 48 hours, on a regular 5 days on — 2 days off arrangement.

But the Board will not accept this and have stubbornly refused any alteration in scheduling which would give the busmen greater freedom at the weekends.

Another source of irritation since the strike began, is the publication by some papers of inflated figures as to the wages earned by busmen. What these papers have obviously done is to publish the wages busmen *can* earn with overtime, without mentioning that this is above the basic wage. Thus the men are made out to be earning anything up to £1 a week more than they really are — with the consequent lessening of public sympathy for them.

What Chances for the Strike?

The chances of this strike succeeding, however, are not particularly bright. For one thing, it is not complete even as far as the buses, trams and trolley-buses go, and the Underground is operating exactly as usual. The union tactic of separating the workers up into neat little water-tight compartments is here shown at its best. Although about 85% of the road transport stopped running, while the trains continued, obviously the real effect was not felt. It is no use one section of London Transport coming out while another section virtually act as strike-breakers.

At those garages and depots where the busmen continued working, they did so not because they did not agree with the *causes*, but because their past experience of striking has discouraged them with the strike as a weapon — and in view of the fragmentary nature of London Transport strikes in the past, that is not surprising. They should realise, however, that a weapon must be used properly before its efficiency is judged.

The Strike an Effective Weapon

There is no doubt whatever that in a place like London the strike can be a terribly effective weapon if properly organised and conceived. The long distances to be covered, the vast crowds to be moved, all make the life of London absolutely dependent upon transport. Stop that, and the whole town is brought to a standstill. But it must be completely stopped. Buses, trams, trolleys, coaches, trains, taxis — stop all these for half a day and see how dependent upon its humble workers our great city is!

But other methods of striking at the boss must be developed. One way — we have suggested it before — is for the workers to work the transport, but to take no fares. This immediately puts the public on the side of the strikers! And hits the employers where they feel it most.

These other methods, however, must be worked out by the men themselves. One good feature of the present strike is that each garage has its own strike committee and is perfectly autonomous. It can decide whether or not to strike, but obviously to be effective the strike must be 100%. London's busmen have not much to learn about solidarity — but that must be learned.!

Postscript

Since the above was written, two developments have occurred. Mr Strauss, the Minister of Labour, has been approached to intervene in the dispute and, more important, Lord Latham has issued dismissal notices to all busmen failing to work next Saturday afternoon. In the end the strike threat was withdrawn.

8th January 1949



The Railmen Fight Back

It is undoubtedly very inconvenient not to be able to take the family to the coast, or get home to see the old folks on a Whitsun weekend. It is even more inconvenient to work permanently under conditions which are disruptive of one's own home life and frustrating in many other ways. The railwaymen are to be congratulated on not having fallen for the emotional appeals directed at them by press and union 'not to spoil the holiday', and for having shown their determination not to weaken in their resistance against the new lodging-out schedules.

Several weeks ago we prophesied that there was real trouble brewing up on the railways. It did not take great powers of prophesy to foretell that. For all the supposed benefits of nationalisation, the railwaymen remain among the lowest paid of workers, and the railways badly understaffed.

We have no intention here of cataloguing the grievances of the railmen — they are many and deep-seated. The present flare-up in the north east, spreading further south each strike-bound Sunday, was sparked by the introduction of new schedules entailing more nights away from home. The go-slow being practised in most London depots is a protest against the Rail Board's refusal to grant a wage increase.

We wish to state simply and briefly our solidarity with the railmen. The degree of responsibility which falls upon these workers is too often under-estimated. Only when something goes wrong and an accident occurs, is it brought home to us that every day many of us put our lives in the hands of these working men, that a handful of workers somewhere, every minute of the day and night, are responsible for the safe journey of thousands of the travelling public.

Is it too much for these men to be granted the modest demands they are now compelled to strike for? The Oaksey Report on pay and conditions for the police has been granted without demur by the Government, pledged to peg wages. The ordinary unproductive flatfoot is to get one guinea a week more at the start of his useless career. The railway workers who maintain and run the lifelines of an industrial society are denied an increase which they have already modified from 12/6 per week to 10/-. Why this difference? Because the police are paid from taxation, whereas transport costs are added to production costs in the selling prices

of our goods abroad, and railwaymen and all other workers must be sacrificed on the altar of the export drive.

All support to the railmen in the fight for their claims. But let us also look ahead. The struggle for today's conditions must be fought today — but also must be fought the struggle for tomorrow's free society. Let the means be direct action such as the railmen are effectively using now — but let the goal be workers' control!

11th June 1949

Railways: the Workers Face the State

It has often been demonstrated in the course of working class struggle, that the prognostications of politicians and the boasts of the union bureaucrats do not always accord with the facts as events unfold themselves. In the matter of the railway crisis we are very forcibly reminded of the fact that the predictions of the so-called leaders are based on the merest guesswork.

For years, at conference after conference of the NUR, there was automatically passed the resolution calling for the nationalisation of all forms of transport. The sponsors were primarily the full-time officials and the political stooges of the Labour Party. The arguments — nationalisation would bring about substantial economies to the good of the community. State control would mean that the wages and conditions of the railway workers would be secure; and it was confidently whispered that an adequate pension would surely come with a nationalised industry.

Mr Benstead, late secretary of the NUR, was a frequent performer in the annual rehearsal for the State railway phantasm held at the NUR conferences. Mr Allen, late secretary of ASLEF, came in later with a show at the conferences of that union.

Then nationalisation came; the union officials were rewarded with positions on the Railway Commission and the Railway Executive, and many railway workers, still obsessed with capitalistic ideas of success, believed this must be the beginning of a new attitude to the worker. Brochures and propaganda booklets

had been published by the unions to boost the qualities of these men and show their unswerving loyalty to the workers in the struggle for better wages and conditions.

But actually the leadership of the railway unions had run true to style — it had badly misled the railway workers, especially during the war years. Railwaymen were granted the least wage increase to cope with the mounting cost of living. When the end of the war came, railwaymen were, having regard to the increased cost of living, below the pre-war rates of wages. The leaders had served the State, and not the workers, and for their loyalty to the State and their capacity to frustrate any demands of the workers, they were appointed to the £5,000 a year jobs on the railway boards.

Now, another great illusion is being exposed. The nationalised industry is proving a more ruthless opponent of decent wages and conditions than the private railway companies, and precisely because the industry is controlled by the State. The full powers of the State can now be directed against the workers; the State power is vastly more powerful than the private employers; and it is no longer a question of profits *versus* wages, but the administration of the industry is interlocked with the general policies of the State machine. Because the conduct of economic policies in a world of chaos and want is being carried on in the same old capitalistic way of cut-throat competition, the State demands that wages costs shall not be increased. Relatively, to the continued increase in the cost of living, this means that the 'wages of all workers must come down'. In the year 1925, a Tory Prime Minister, Mr Baldwin, made the historic statement that "the wages of all workers must come down". The statement was clear, there was not the ambiguity about it as there has been about the wage freeze statements of the Labour politicians. It resulted in such a revolutionary upsurge among the workers that millions were ready and anxious to fight against the Government in defence of wages, as was shown in the 1926 General Strike.

The NUR was the union principally concerned with founding the Labour Party. It fostered the myth that putting politicians in power could bring betterment to the workers. Today it proudly boasts of its numerous members in public office as Labour representatives; of its Labour MPs. But the logic of events, the great contradiction of the worker divorced from the wealth he creates, and the intolerable burden of a gigantic State apparatus wasting the wealth produced by the worker in internecine political