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# **—SOLIDARITY**

**FOR WORKER'S POWER**

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# THE 'BROTHERHOOD OF MAN'

'The principles of our policy are based on the brotherhood of man.'

Clem Attlee,  
July 26, 1945.

'I take the opportunity of making it quite clear that this Government, like any government as an employer, would feel itself perfectly free to take any disciplinary action that any strike situation that might develop demanded.'

Sir Hartley Shawcross, Feb. 2, 1946.

Ray Gunter MP, Labour's 'shadow' Minister of Labour, has recently been writing in Socialist Commentary. He has been hinting at how a future Labour government would cope with industrial disputes. He proposes State Courts, with judicial power to settle disputes 'if the unions do not face the facts of life'. Gunter's proposals have been welcomed by big business as 'bold', 'imaginative' and 'far-sighted'. They have also given rise to pathetic little squeaks of dissent from sundry other trade union leaders, who doubtless feel that the cat should not be let out of the bag until after the General Election.

But all this is nothing new. There is the whole experience of 1945-1951 to go on. During this period the Labour Government was prepared to use every single institution of the capitalist State (Parliament, the B.B.C., the press, injunctions, the Courts, the prisons, the police and even troops) against the working people, whenever they took action into their own hands, in defence of their most elementary interests. They did this not once, but repeatedly.

All this may be new or surprising to many young people now active in the working class movement. It is therefore essential that the story should be told again - and as fully as possible.\*

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\* In writing this article I have found the following sources most useful:

- 1) 'How Labour Governed: 1945-51'. Direct Action Pamphlet No.5, published by Syndicalist Workers Federation. Obtainable from Bill Christopher, 34 Cumberland Road, London E.17.
- 2) 'The British State' by J. Harvey and K. Wood (Lawrence and Wishart, 1958) and 'The Labour Government' by D.N. Pritt (Lawrence and Wishart, 1963). These Stalinist sources provide much useful factual information but tend to under-emphasize strike-breaking by the Labour Government between 1945 and 1948 (during which period the Communist Party was giving 'full support' to the Labour Government). Nor do these books mention the industrial role of the Communist Party during these years. This would require a study of its own.
- 3) The files of the Daily Telegraph and of The Times. These provide many shrewd assessments of industrial relations, as seen by the more sophisticated sections of the employing class.
- 4) The 1948 file of the Socialist Leader, particularly Wilfred Wigham's 'Trade Unionist's Notebook'.

LONDON DOCKS

AUGUST 1945

The Labour Government took office on July 27, 1945. Within a week it was to send conscript troops into the Surrey Docks, London, to help break a dockers' 'go-slow' which had been going on for ten weeks. An ominous beginning...

The dockers were demanding a basic rate of 25/- a day (as against 16/- they were receiving) and a revision of loading and discharging piece-work rate schedules. Even J. Donovan, National Secretary of the Docks Group of the TGWU, admitted that the dockers 'were in a worse position financially than the workers in industry generally', and that 'their basic rate represented a rise of only 23% during the war... the lowest of any industry'.

After a few weeks, unloaded cargoes began to accumulate and the go-slow began to have a very telling effect. An infuriated but helpless Daily Telegraph reporter described it quite graphically:

'In everything they did the men were unhurried in a way that looked deliberate. There was evidence that their actions were planned. True, the cranes were working and goods were passing from the dockside to the ship, but there was a leisureliness about the proceedings that made everything seem half-hearted.

'I soon learned the reason. At the moment bags of sugar were going aboard in slings. But it was pointed out that the slings were carrying only 4 at a time instead of the normal 12. Yet even the reduced number seemed to take just as long to be freed and the sling returned for more. Meanwhile the men on the dock below waited patiently until it came back, standing or sitting and chatting. Sometimes, after a load had been fixed and the crane had started lifting, a fault appeared to be observed. There was a call to the craneman and down it came again to have the hooks seen to.

'The men who brought the goods from the warehouses to the dock were equally leisurely in their movements. There were always several with nothing to do at all outside the ship.

'Any excuse appeared to be good enough as an excuse to stop work. There was a general stoppage for instance when I and my P.L.A. (Port of London Authority) guide approached. It was obvious we were the subject of discussion. The men were frankly suspicious. Only a day before a press cameraman visiting another dock was mobbed. The men became very ugly in their attitude and hurled epithets at him and the press generally. But for the protection of a dock policeman he might have been maltreated or at least have lost his camera.

'The effect of the 'go-slow' working, said a Port Officer, is not only causing ships to be held up in London Docks for weeks before they can be dealt with, but it results in losses to the contractors who are employing the men. Under normal conditions a gang of 13 men could load or discharge 200 tons of sugar a day. Now the tonnage seldom exceeds 50. They could deal with 125 tons of timber, now it is about 25.' (July 13, 1945).

On July 13, following a conference of dock employers and top union leaders, Mr. Butler, then Minister of Labour, issued an appeal to return to work. 'The unions have made it clear that men guilty of the go-slow method are doing harm to all members of the unions', etc, etc. This touching solicitude for the welfare of 'all members of the unions' may well explain why Rab is so suspect a figure to his fellow Tories!

The Butler appeal had no effect whatsoever on the dockers. The employers then used the big stick.

On July 17, 1,000 London dockers and stevedores were returned by the Port employers to the National Dock Labour Corporation's 'reserve pool of labour'. At the Royal Dock alone, 500 men were told they were being returned to the pool, with adverse reports. The men were ordered to leave the ships and were given forms on which - within 72 hours - they were to offer 'explanations' of their recent conduct. If these were not deemed satisfactory the men were threatened with dismissal or suspension.

According to the Daily Telegraph (July 19, 1945) the threat had a 'mixed effect' on the men. 'Many persisted in their delaying tactics'. A more interesting response was that four London dockers (T. Powell, C. Stebbing, Ted Dickens, and Bert Brice) went up to Liverpool to explain the case of the go-slow to dinner-time meetings outside the Alexandra and Gladstone Docks.

Union officials in London were meanwhile doing their nut, trying to get the men back to normal work. A mass meeting of dockers was held at the Poplar Palace, Mile End Road, on July 23. It was addressed by J. Donovan, (already referred to ) and by T.W. Condon (London Area Secretary of the TGWU) and Dick Barratt, General Secretary of the NASD. The meeting was quite lively.

'One section had the fixed idea that a new basic wage must be guaranteed at once and were in no mood to trust to promises. They interrupted so much that the speakers left the platform'. Donovan in particular was given a very rough passage after he had 'warned his hearers that they were likely to loose their jobs altogether unless they relied on their leaders'. His resolution urging a return to work had been 'drowned in cat-calls'. A manoeuvre was then attempted. Condon proposed an amendment 'urging the claim for 25/- to be prosecuted with the utmost vigour and celerity. A great chorus of "aye" followed. But another speaker in the hall made it clear that he and his friends would support the amendment and resume normal working only if the 25/- basic rate was guaranteed at once. A hurried conference on the platform followed and Mr. Condon asked the meeting if they would go back and leave the union officials to negotiate. There was an almost unanimous "No". Asked if they would go back and work as they had been doing recently, the answer was "Yes". "Then the meeting is closed and will not resume" was Mr. Condon's reply and the crowd filed out.' (Daily Telegraph, July 24, 1945).

The meeting showed quite clearly the will of the men.

That same evening the Ministry of Labour announced that 'No avoidable delay can be permitted' and that all necessary steps would be taken 'to ensure expeditious handling'. The Daily Telegraph explained that 'in industrial circles' this was interpreted as meaning that the Government was prepared to bring in the troops. Without batting an eyelid it stated that the proposals drafted the previous week at the Ministry of Labour by representatives of the Port Emergency Committee, the London Port Employers and the TGWU 'were considered fair by all except the recalcitrant dockers' (i.e. by everyone... except by those to whom they applied!).

Threats of disciplinary action had failed. The trade union bureaucrats had proved incapable of controlling the men on behalf of the bosses. The ruling class was now determined to break the go-slow at any cost. Several methods were used.

On July 25 it was widely reported that troops had been brought to London from the North East and would be available for discharging and loading ships if the go-slow dockers persisted in their tactics. On July 26 it was claimed that 'trained Army dockers and stevedores of the Royal Engineers and Pioneer Corps were standing by in barracks in the London area, awaiting an order to move to the Surrey Commercial Docks'.

The employers then began to resort to lock-out tactics. Dockers stated that the mates of ships where they had been told to work had received orders not to raise steam in the winches. Attempts were made to get the dockers to do piecework. Day rates, to which the men were entitled, were refused in many instances.

On July 26 the results of the General Election were announced. The Labour Party was in with a tremendous majority. That same evening, Clem Attlee addressed a mass rally at the Central Hall, Westminster. 'The principles of our policy are based on the brotherhood of man' he announced.

On July 31, five days later, 600 'brothers' (in uniform) were ordered into the Surrey Docks and began discharging such vital 'foodstuffs' as timber and resin. Mr. J. Donovan gave the operation his reluctant blessing. 'It is regrettable that troops should be there' he said, 'but we realise it is essential that ships should be discharged'.

The Government had changed. The 'Red Flag' had been sung in the House of Commons. But the policy decided on and planned by one set of rulers was smoothly carried out by the next.\*

On August 2, the Daily Telegraph reported that 1,000 London dockers and stevedores who were persisting in go-slow tactics were to be 'disciplined'. 'Negotiations, warning by the Government, advice from union leaders, the introduction of troops and firm promises of full discussion of

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\* On August 6, as a further illustration of the 'brotherhood of man' the first Atom Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Tens of thousands of 'brothers' were incinerated. The decision had been discussed a few days earlier at the Postdam Conference, which had been attended by Mr. Attlee.

the men's grievances had failed to influence the dockers. The Dock Labour Corporation has thus been compelled to take disciplinary measures'. On the same day 150 men at the Free Trade Wharf were also returned to the 'labour pool'.

The response of the dockers to the introduction of troops was immediate.

'Tally clerks and lightermen at the Surrey Commercial Docks, London, stopped work yesterday when troops began to unload ships for the second day in succession. Royal Engineers and Pioneers were discharging cargoes of timber, sugar and resin from seven ships ... When the stoppage extended to the clerks, whose job is to check outgoing cargo, troops were hastily instructed in tally-keeping'. (Daily Telegraph, August 2, 1945)

Certain difficulties were encountered. 'Barges were moved by the troops who had been loading them. But the craft need pumping and will be difficult to move if left long at the quayside. During the morning seven soldiers met with accidents and were taken to hospital. Regular dockers and stevedores stood about the entrance to show they were available for work. Military police were on board in each ship and on each quay, presumably as a precaution'.

On August 4 the appointments were announced of J.A. Isaacs as Minister of Labour (£5,000 per annum) and of J.J. Lawson as Secretary for War (also £5,000 per annum). In the same week many dockers who had been involved in the go-slow were refused attendance money, despite the fact that lock-out conditions had prevailed on a number of ships. A prolonged Court case followed which was lost by the men.

The struggle continued for another ten days. The combination of military action, the press ballyhoo, the suspensions and the forfeiture of attendance money eventually broke the backbone of the dispute. A ballot was held among London members of the NASD. It was decided to end the go-slow.

The Labour Government had shown its true colours. It had won its first victory over the working class.

<p><u>NATIONAL</u> <u>DOCK STRIKE</u></p>
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In SEPTEMBER 1945, another dock strike started this time in Birkenhead. The portworkers were asking for an increase of 9/- on their basic daily wage of 16/-. Even when working a full week many were getting less than £5.0.0. per week (if there was no work they got just over £3.0.0. 'signing-on' money).

By early October this strike had spread to Liverpool, the Tyne, the Tees, the Humber and some of the London Docks. Later it spread to Glasgow, Leith and Avonmouth. At one stage over 43,000 dockers were out. The dispute lasted till November 5.

The Labour Government sent 21,000 conscript troops to break the strike. George Isaacs, Minister of Labour, proclaimed that 'the action of the strikers cannot be defended'. He refused to meet their leaders. So arrogantly did he behave that a Labour backbencher, David Kirkwood (Dumbarton) was to ask in Parliament: 'Why should not Ministers come down off their pedestals when it was a question of dealing with the working class? This has been the lot of the workers right down the ages'.

The final settlement was for 19 shillings a day.

SMITHFIELD

1946

On April 8, 1946, six hundred provision workers at Smithfield Market came out on strike against an award by the Joint Industrial Council. On April 15, troops were sent into the market, as blacklegs. Three thousand meat porters struck

work in sympathy. This was to establish a pattern that recurred again and again. The use of troops doesn't break a strike - it ensures its extension.

SOUTHAMPTON DOCKS

In JULY 1946, Southampton dock workers came out on strike. These dockers had not taken part in the dock strike of the previous autumn on the ground that 'it would bring discredit to the

government they helped to elect'. The Labour Government showed no gratitude. It sent troops in to unload cargoes.

ROAD HAULAGE

STRIKE

On January 8, 1947, over 20,000 drivers, including 400 at Smithfield, were involved in a road haulage strike. On January 13, the Labour Government sent troops into Smithfield Market.

Thereupon all meat and provision workers came out in sympathy. The blackleg labour made a right old mess of the market!

1947 : THE MINERS

The year 1947 saw considerable restlessness develop among the miners. Nationalization had not proved the panacea they had been led to expect. Many local disputes arose and as usual,

when there are conflicts, absenteeism increased.

The union officials and the National Coal Board joined hands in denouncing the men. The 1947 Annual Conference of the National Union of Mineworkers was addressed by that well-known pit-face militant Lord Hyndley (Chairman of the National Coal Board, Managing Director of Powell Duffryn, Director of Guest Keen and Nettlefold and of Stevenson Clarke's, ex-director of the Bank of England, etc, etc.). Union bureaucrat Will Lawther thanked him and, speaking about absenteeism, proclaimed: 'No one is more sick than we are of these fellows who provide absurd and ridiculous alibis for their conduct. We say to you and your colleagues: Go ahead and take



whatever action is essential to meet the position. We are confident that in doing that you will have the wholehearted support of the great majority of our membership'. Never before had the union bureaucracy so openly incited management to take action against the men.\*

In August 1947 a strike broke out at Grimethorpe Colliery and soon spread to most of the Yorkshire coalfield. It was in protest against an attempt to impose an increased working stint. The Socialist Leader (September 13, 1947) put the issue quite squarely:

'The miners at Grimethorpe are digging  $13\frac{1}{2}$  tons of coal per man per shift, working in seams that average 45 inches high. The rate of payment is 2/2d. per ton, which approximates to £7.0.0. per week. The present price of coal to the housewives of London is £5.4.0. per ton.... The National Coal Board wants the men to dig more coal. The men answer that this is an impossibility.

'To be told by gentlemen whose only manual labour consists of carrying briefcases to meetings and conferences that they must attempt to mine more coal before their case will even be considered is not calculated to make the average miner at all kindly disposed to the Labour Government or its hirelings.

'Mr. Horner, Secretary of the NUM, has now openly condemned the miners and keeping strictly in accord with the Communist 'line' on this dispute (which is to sit on the fence) discreetly stays away from the centre of trouble and goes about his business as if all is well.'

The National Coal Board, which had replaced the private owners to hallelujahs from all the 'left', then showed its true colours. It claimed damages against 40 Grimethorpe miners under the Employers and Workers Act of 1875! When it's a question of digging the statute book for anti-working class legislation, the Tories clearly have no monopoly.

In Barnsley Magistrates Court, on December 19, 1947, the miners were found 'Guilty'. Damages of £304 were granted against them. This was to be withheld from their wage packet, at the rate of 10/- a week, as from January 16, 1948.

A few weeks later (March 18, 1948) two miners were each fined £39 at Neath County Court for taking part in a stay-down strike 'trespassing on National Coal Board property'. So much for the myth that property forms determine the class nature of a given regime!

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\* Those who claim that the trade union bureaucracy, in some distorted way, still 'represents' the working class should remember episodes like this. So should those who claim that the Labour Party is a working class party 'because it is based on the trade unions'. The Labour Party, it is true, is still largely based on the trade union bureaucracy. But this bureaucracy 'represents' the workers about as much as a screw 'represents' the prisoners.



THEY'RE STOKING  
THE BOILERS AT  
BUCKINGHAM PALACE

On MARCH 15, 1948, thirteen hundred Ministry of Works employees, engineers, boilermen, liftmen, etc, struck in protest at delays in settling a wage claim. Three days later troops were sent to stoke boilers at Buckingham Palace. The shop stewards thereupon decided to call out all

engineering grades if troops were not withdrawn. They were. This little episode should be remembered. We suggest a new definition of Labour Party socialism: using conscript labour to keep the Monarchy warm.

THE ZINC OXIDE  
STRIKE

In JUNE 1948 London portworkers claimed the usual special payment for handling zinc oxide. There were delays and some men refused the job. Eleven dockers were then suspended for a week, without pay, by the National Dock Labour Board

and their guaranteed week suspended for 13 weeks. On June 14 a spontaneous strike broke out against these vicious sentences. The strike later spread to Merseyside. It lasted 16 days and at one stage involved nearly 32,000 dockers.\*

The capitalist press made some extremely shrewd assessments of what would happen. The Manchester Guardian Weekly (June 24, 1948) commented: 'It is plain from the way the strike has spread - within a week, in the face of every discouragement from officials of their trade union, the numbers out have grown from 1,500 to 15,000 - that there is fairly widespread discontent with the way some parts of the scheme are working. So broad a movement would hardly have sprung from so small an occasion if there had not been already a big head of pent-up emotion looking for an outlet before the incident of the zinc oxide cargo gave it one'.

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\* Of the capitalist dailies only one, the News Chronicle (June 21, 1948), sought to discover the real causes of the strike. It interviewed Conn. Clancey, one of the 11 suspended dockers. The gang, Clancey explained, had been loading a ship with zinc oxide from canal barges. 'There were 3,000 hessian sacks of the stuff, weighing 50 tons. We had done about 700 sacks and were getting very dusty and dirty. Down the hatch it was impossible to see. The stuff penetrates everything. It gets in your nose, mouth, eyes and hair and turns one blue'. (This is the cargo of which Clem Attlee had said, in a nation-wide broadcast: 'It happened to be a little dirty').

'Eventually', said Clancey, 'we asked if there was a rate laid for the job. While enquiries were made we went back to general cargo work. It was a job for the View Committee. They said 3/4d. a ton was a proper rate. We were suggesting 5 bob although we expected to come down a bit. Another View Committee came next morning and we went on loading the zinc oxide. They still made it 3/4d. so we said there was no alternative but to talk it over with 'the men on the stones' - the other dockers. They voted we should finish the consignment and then have the matter looked into.

'We went back and finished the job that afternoon. Everyone thought the affair was finished but in the morning I had a letter saying I was suspended. The penalty was like a smack on the ear when the fight was over. We finished all the zinc oxide. There was no time lost. While there was work to do we worked.'

The Times (June 29, 1948) proclaimed that the dock strike was 'a challenge to be resisted as resolutely as the threat of attack by a foreign power'.

This is exactly what the Labour Government did. It drafted freshly conscripted troops into the docks. On June 29, it proclaimed a State of Emergency. The 'party of the working class' used the Emergency Powers Act of 1920. This was a vicious piece of class legislation (for the other side) which had been introduced at the end of World War I by the Tory-dominated 'hard-faced Parliament'.

The intimidation worked. The solidarity strike ended before His Majesty's 'socialist' ministers really got down to churning out further 'emergency' legislation. This Tory Act, incidentally, is still on the statute book. It provides handy dictatorial powers to any government seeking to cope with any kind of mass working class activity, particularly any kind that might challenge established society. It was recently renewed (by a strange coincidence just before the go-slow in the power industry) in a slightly amended form, which gives the government still further powers for the use of troops.

DOCKERS AND THE  
CANADIAN SEAMEN'S  
STRIKE

MAY 1949 saw the most vicious piece of strike-breaking in the whole history of the Labour Government. The Canadian Seamen's Union was involved in a strike against wage cuts. On May 14, the 'Montreal City', which had been worked across the Atlantic by a blackleg crew provided by the International Seafarers' Union,\* arrived at Avonmouth. Dockers refused to unload the 'black' ship. On May 16 the employers threatened to penalise the dockers for this refusal. This brought out all Avonmouth dockers, in a lightning strike. The employers then said they would hire no labour for other ships until the dockers handled the 'black' ship. The strike had become a lock-out.

On May 22, 600 Bristol dockers came out in solidarity with the Avonmouth men. Three days later lockgate men and tugmen in Avonmouth also came out in support, refusing to handle ships until the Avonmouth dockers were allowed to work again. They were promptly suspended. On May 27, the Labour Government sent troops to unload a banana ship in Avonmouth. Crane drivers promptly refused to work alongside the troops.

The same day a 'black' ship was diverted from Avonmouth to Liverpool. Merseyside dockers refused to handle her and 45 of them were suspended. One thousand Liverpool dockers then joined the strike. On May 30, 1,400 more dockers in Liverpool came out. The Avonmouth men instructed their 'lock-out Committee' to seek support from other ports.

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\* An organization affiliated to the American Federation of Labour and having very few members on Canada's Eastern seaboard.

On June 2, troops began unloading all the ships lying in Avonmouth dock. About 11,000 dockers had by now joined the strike. On June 6, merchant seamen manning the 'Trojan Star' refused to sail her out of Avonmouth because the lockgates were manned by troops. Other seamen also joined in. On June 14, the Avonmouth dockers returned to work. But the struggle had meanwhile flared up in London where employers refused to hire labour for newly arrived ships unless the 'black' Canadian ships 'Argomont' and 'Beaverbrae' were unloaded. By July 5, over 8,000 London dockers were on strike.

On July 7, troops were moved into various London docks to unload ships. Drivers of meat haulage firms and fruit and vegetable firms said they would not carry goods unloaded by troops.

On July 8, the Labour Government announced it would proclaim a State of Emergency on July 11. The only effect was to ensure that Watermen, Lightermen, Tugmen and Bargemen also joined in. Over 10,000 dockers were now on strike. On July 12 the Government started pouring blackleg troops into the docks. Another 3,000 dockers came out. The Executive of the Lightermen's Union told their members not work alongside the troops.

The Labour Government had got itself into a thorough mess. It now started issuing Emergency Regulations. It set up an Emergency Committee, headed by a former Permanent Under-secretary at the Home Office, Sir Arthur Maxwell, to run the docks. It is not known if Sir Arthur was later issued with an honorary membership card from Transport House ... for services rendered.

By July 20, over 15,000 men were on strike. They only returned to work on July 22 when the Canadian Seamen's Union, having obtained certain concessions, withdrew their pickets from certain ships and announced that they were terminating their dispute, so far as Britain was concerned.

POWER STATIONS  
BELFAST AND LONDON

On SEPTEMBER 16, 1949, men in Belfast power station came out on strike. Troops were immediately drafted in. On December 12, 1949, one thousand men struck work at three London power stations. Troops were immediately sent in. A

further 1,600 men at Barking Power Station then came out in protest. New agreements were rapidly negotiated.

THE EXPULSIONS  
STRIKE

In MARCH 1950, the TGWU bureaucrats expelled three dockers from the union because of the active part they had played in the Canadian Seamen's strike a few months earlier. A mass meeting of dockers was called by the Portworkers

Defence Committee, an 'unofficial' rank-and-file body. On March 26, a ban on overtime was decided. The ban was temporarily withdrawn on April 3, but when, on April 18, the appeals of the three expelled men were rejected a protest strike started in the Royal Group. By April 21, 9,000 dockers were out. Mass meetings called for a ballot of portworkers to decide

whether the action of the union leaders should be upheld. On April 24, the Labour Government moved troops into the docks. It worked like a charm: a further 4,500 dockers joined the strike.

The London Dock Labour Board then made threatening noises. All those who didn't report for work by May 1st would 'have their registrations cancelled' (i.e. would be expelled from the industry). On April 29, a mass meeting decided to return to work and to fight the expulsions through the branches.

SMITHFIELD

AGAIN

On JUNE 24, twelve hundred meat drivers based on Smithfield Market came out on strike in protest against delays in settling their claims for a wage increase. On June 28, the Labour Government used troops to carry corned beef from meat storage depots to butchers (we'd have thought the troops would have been sick of the sight of the stuff). Later the troops were moved into the market itself. Nine hundred porters and market men immediately walked out, followed by provision porters, shopmen and poultry pitchers. Workers at several cold stores refused to work alongside the troops. By July 5, 3,400 men were out. Two days later 200 drivers employed by British Road Services at Brentford joined the strike.

A meeting of the unofficial rank-and-file body - the London Road Haulage Stewards Association - decided to call out all general road haulage drivers within 48 hours. The usual screams went up about 'communists' and 'agitators'. On July 10, having obtained certain promises from Deakin, the stewards recommended a return to work. On August 21, several leaders of the Smithfield strike were suspended from union membership by the Executive of the TGWU. On August 28, the Industrial Court awarded a wage increase of 8/- a week to all the workers concerned.

THE GASWORKERS  
AND ORDER 1305

On SEPTEMBER 1, 1950, men at nineteen London Gas Works came out on strike in support of a wage claim of 4½d. an hour. (This had been presented in March, but the men had had no satisfactory reply). On September 4, the gasworkers returned to work but decided to put a ban on overtime and shift work until such time as the Gas Council had made a reply to their claim and this had been accepted by a mass meeting of the men involved. On September 14, the Gas Council and the union leaders 'agreed' on an increase of 1½d. an hour. Next day the men at Beckton Gasworks downed tools in protest and men in 13 other works followed suit shortly after. By September 20, some 1,500 men were out at 15 works in the North Thames Gas Board area and at 3 works in the Eastern area.

On September 26, Sir Robert Gould, Chief Conciliation Officer of the Ministry of Labour, wrote to the General Secretary of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions. Showing his concern for the predicament of the union bureaucracy he pointed out that the strike was

'a challenge to the authority of the unions'. Action followed. On October 3, naval ratings from Chatham barracks took over maintenance duties at Beckton and Bromley Gasworks and the Labour Government issued summonses against 10 of the strikers. It then arrested them under the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act of 1875 (sic!)\* and order 1305.\*\* 'Justice' was prompt. Within 2 days the workers had been sentenced to one month's imprisonment. They were given leave to appeal.

On October 5, a mass meeting in Hyde Park called for a nation-wide campaign to repeal order 1305. On October 9, an agreement was reached (no victimisation, withdrawal of troops, immediate negotiations on a bonus scheme) and the men returned to work.

On November 22, the Appeal Court reduced the sentences of imprisonment to fines of £50 each. A delegate Conference called at very short notice had, a few days earlier, been attended by delegates representing 194,000 trade unionists, 9 District Committees, 161 trade union branches, 5 Trades Councils and many important shop stewards committees. It had elected a committee to launch a national campaign for the acquittal of the ten gas workers, the repeal of Order 1305 \*\*\* and the disbanding of all police organizations set up to spy on trade unionists.

Some evil-minded people suggested that this developing movement of protest had had something to do with the decision of the learned Court!

<p><u>LABOUR PROSECUTES</u></p> <p><u>THE DOCKERS</u></p>
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A major dock strike had broken out within days of the Labour Government assuming office. Another one was to see the Labour Government out. On FEBRUARY 2, 1951, 2,000 Birkenhead dockers came out on a wage issue. Within a few days the strike had spread to Liverpool and Manchester. Within

less than a week some 12,000 were involved, including 450 in London, who had come out in sympathy.

On February 8, the Labour Government tried out the tactic of selective prosecutions. It arrested seven of the dockers' leaders (four in London and three in Liverpool) and had them charged with 'conspiracy to incite dock workers to strike in connection with a trade dispute, contrary to the provisions of Order 1305'. The response was instantaneous. The same evening 6,700 London dockers were out in solidarity!

The Government's bureaucratic bungling then reached its peak. Order 1305 dealt with 'trade disputes'. But the present strike was primarily

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\* very sick!

\*\* Order 1305 was issued on July 18, 1940, during the war 'for democracy'. The Minister of Labour at the time was that well-known spokesman for the working class: Ernie Bevin. He promised that the Act would be repealed at the end of the war. The Labour Government somehow 'forgot' to do so.

\*\*\* Order 1305 was finally withdrawn on August 14, 1951.

due to a dispute between the rank and file and the TGWU 'leadership', the latter having accepted a wage offer which the former judged unacceptable. The Government tried to wriggle round this one, by hastily slapping in additional charges such as 'conspiracy, otherwise than in contemplation or furtherance of a trade dispute, to induce dock workers to absent themselves from employment without their employers' consent'. Also 'conspiracy to obstruct dock employers in the conduct of their business by inducing dock workers to absent themselves'.

On April 9, the case came up for hearing at the Old Bailey. TGWU officials gave evidence against 'their' members. Sir Hartley Shawcross, Labour Attorney General, led the prosecution against the workers on behalf of the 'party of the working class'. 10,000 dockers were on strike. There were large, noisy demonstrations outside the Court. Thousands of dockers would stop work each day and assemble outside the Old Bailey - 'in deference to the brothers in Court'. The jury failed to agree as to whether there was a 'trade dispute' or not. The charge based on a breach of order 1305 (which implied that there was a trade dispute) therefore could not be sustained. But the jury didn't decide that there wasn't a trade dispute either. The other charges therefore could not stand either. The whole works were well and truly gummed up. The Labour Government had to drop the whole prosecution. It had been made to look not only mean and vindictive but also extremely stupid.

There is no doubt that this list could be lengthened. I hope to have shown however that when it came to dealing with workers in dispute the Labour Government acted exactly like every other government before it. Those who now tell us to 'vote Labour' should at least not kid themselves on this score. The leopard hasn't - and cannot - really change its spots.

M. BRINTON

## SOLIDARITY

## MEETINGS

SUNDAY, MAY 31, 3 pm.

'WORKERS POWER - HOW?'. A general discussion to be opened by J. Thomas (NATSOPA). Industry today. The shop stewards movement. What kind of programme? Socialist consciousness. Etc.

SUNDAY, JUNE 28, 3 pm.

'THE CRISIS IN THE ANTI-BOMB MOVEMENT'. Opening speaker to be announced later.

Both meetings will be at Jon and Mary Tinkers' flat, 22 Clifton Gardens, W.9. (2 minutes' walk from Warwick Avenue Tube station) \*

\* Open to all Solidarity readers and supporters. S.W.F., anarchist and ILP comrades cordially invited.

Just to show how far Solidarity has degenerated into a disgusting, cynical, racialist, anti-working class, anti-semitic, anti-american and anti-maoist propaganda outfit, we are delighted to publish 'THE YELLOW PERIL', by Dick Wilcocks, our Peking correspondent.

Myriads of malevolent chinese, chanting in strings  
of monosyllables their red square prayers thanking  
chairman mao for daily bread and freedom from u.  
s. imperialism the looming figure  
himself the terrible tung black tufts of greasy  
chinese hair growing from his ears sna  
p of his fingers the red-eyed yellow ants  
preparing to cascade over asia on account of a  
dead russian calling himself steel ridiculous  
spontaneously they stream in millions like  
ants is a good metaphor

one treads on ants  
and cram peking with wild dancing, whirling  
silk scarves stained scarlet with the blood  
of filthy capitalists, while chairman mao chants  
the rhythm thuds the tom toms all stomp up  
down round round throbbing tom toms  
fill mongolia with photos of chairman mao and  
joseph stalin bobbing up and down with long sick streams  
of strange and weird oriental sinister slogans

red slogans  
see the dragon in his lair  
the flat-faced chink with the uncombed hair.  
and high cheekbones  
look at them whirling, the mao-drunk hordes  
eating fire and swallowing swords

I'm suspicious of orientals. We've seen what they can do.  
hahaha  
(prominent front grinning teeth and goldrimmed spectacles)  
you die now yes?

With sounds of gongs the cummeunists  
mass ready to annihilate heaven  
Trained to trample on crucifixes and spit in  
churches, chewing energy pills,  
pulling out their hair and watching the blood-  
impregnated saliva slip from the corners of  
each others mouths they mass  
Ready to be liquidated by america's sweet-blooded  
sinewy athletic youths, by the true pioneers  
of democracy free from lies, guns on hips,  
striding fearlessly into heaven  
Ready to be put down by true catholic  
crewcutted gunboys anxious to  
prove that america's virgins are not  
a dying race

chinks worse than chews



# THE SHOP STEWARDS-3

We here continue the discussion on the shop stewards begun in our last two issues. All taking part have had considerable personal experience and knowledge of what they are talking about.

Our contributors to this issue are Bill Hierons, an A.E.U. branch secretary who works in a motor firm in Coventry, and Jock Graham, a rank-and-file militant working at C.A.V.'s, a big engineering factory in North London.

We invite others with experience in industry to come in on this discussion.

Your recent articles about the shop stewards organization prompt me to say something about the stewards as I find them.

## 1. ATTITUDE TO THE SHOP STEWARDS.

The shop stewards and their committees, working in the large combines within the engineering industry, are usually more respected by the employers than by the workers they represent. This state of affairs is brought about by many factors, such as mistrust by the workers, the overbearing attitude of some shop stewards, the senseless state of affairs of stewards belonging to different unions in a given industry, etc.

Many workers in the engineering industry feel that many of their shop stewards are only holding their positions because nobody else wants the job. In a number of instances, this is correct. I find this within the Combine I work for. It is partly brought about by the workers themselves, who have little interest in their own organization. Many feel they are forced to become members of the union against their will.

Furthermore workers often assume that their shop steward takes on this job for his own interests and for the perks, derived from the job, and that they abuse the position by contributing very little in the way of labour towards the bonus of the gang they represent.

## 2. SHOP STEWARDS COMMITTEES.

These Committees, which we cannot do without in any industry, are the mainstay of our fight for better wages and conditions, especially in the motor industry. But for the reasons already stated their recommendations may be viewed with suspicion by the workers they represent.

This situation puts these Committees in a position of not only having to deal with management but also with the people they represent, not to mention the union officials, whenever a stoppage of work occurs, or any other action is taken which reduces production.

In the majority of cases where action was required and undertaken by the workers-we have found that our aims were defeated through inefficient leadership, brought about by conflicts resulting from the fact that stewards and convenors belong to different unions. This may prevent all the relevant facts being put before the workers when action is recommended by the shop stewards.

Workers who are urged to take any action which means loss of wages may be very reluctant to do so for the reason already stated. I have found myself, in the motor industry, that though the men would like to get better conditions, they are also reluctant to support other sections to achieve these better conditions, unless it shows immediate benefit to themselves.

This mutual feeling of no confidence between the workers and their representatives puts the management in a very strong position when bargaining with Shop Stewards Committees. Another result is that one type of steward is very cautious, but the dominant type very bold, when putting recommendations to the shop floor.

When the workers are looking for a lead on any serious decision, they often find leadership lacking. On the other hand I have experienced situations where shop stewards have been sent in by the workers with an ultimatum to the management. When the management have refused to concede the men's wishes, and even threatened counter-action, the men have climbed down, putting their stewards in an embarrassing position.

It is my opinion that the majority of Shop Stewards Committees are responsible bodies, usually hampered by insufficient support from the workers they represent, and by career-seeking union officials. The officials hold tremendous power, and this power feeds on the lack of interest taken by the workers in their own organizations. The more powerful the union officials, the less interest the men take in union affairs, as they feel they have little say. This in turn leads to the position we now have in many combines.

National Joint Councils are slowly pushing the Shop Stewards Committees into the background, especially when it comes to major issues, which have to go through the procedure agreed 'on behalf' of the workers - but usually without consulting them - by the national officials. In many cases these officials are completely out of touch with the many different situations daily cropping up in the various types of engineering establishments where their members work.

### 3. A COMBINE COMMITTEE.

At my place of work we have had for a long period of years an excellent shop stewards organization which had, through efficient convenors belonging to different unions, managed to form a Combine Shop Stewards Committee made up of stewards from the Combine factories in the different parts of the British Isles.

This Committee was formed in the face of opposition from many shop floor workers who had no interest in 'getting mixed up' with the troubles of other workers and looked upon the meetings of the Combine Committee as an excuse for a joy-ride for our delegates, when they had to travel to various parts of the country for Combine meetings.

For obvious reasons the Combine Committee was never recognized either by the management or by the union officials. The union officials will not tolerate any organization which might eventually replace them. They are therefore always on the look-out for mistakes made by the leaders of these committees which might give the union leaders an excuse to remove stewards from their union positions. This happened in the case of (in my opinion) the most important leader of our Combine Committee.

The successful removal of a steward from holding an official position within his union, without any action being taken by the shop floor workers within the Combine, shows again that many workers are not only prepared to concede full powers to the union leaders, but are quite prepared to see their own leaders on the shop floor removed from office.

This situation has resulted in virtual breaking up of the Combine Committee to such an extent that an agreement has now been made by our Joint Shop Stewards Committee and the management to the effect that in future each factory in the Combine will look after its own interests only.

Shop Stewards Committees are only as strong as the workers they represent will allow them to be. At the moment, unfortunately, they are not very strong.

Bill Hierons

## WHERE HAVE ALL THE REBELS GONE ?

by Jock Graham.

The shop stewards in the factory where I work fall mainly into two categories.

1) The older men, who see no real cause to complain. They have been through 'hard times' and conditions to them have become 'paradise' compared to 'the old days'. These men are just getting used to the idea of being 'respected' by the boss. They sit on the J.P.C.s,\* take tea and biscuits at the SAFETY and T.W.I.\*\* courses and are generally absorbed into the 'team spirit' so vital to modern capitalism.

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\* Joint Productivity Councils.

\*\* Training Within Industry (courses originating in the U.S. during World War II).

2) The others, who are stewards because they feel that the old men have had their day and therefore could not represent them. It would be wrong to imagine them as militants. In the main they are 'section minded', and merely speak for the department they represent. They rarely seek to link groups. Demarcation of disputes is very much the rule.

It is towards the latter group that the whole concentration of propaganda is aimed. The boss knows that the older stewards must eventually drop out.

The rank and file at first appear to be completely dead. However this is deceiving. Like Jesus they are capable at times of a swift resurrection!

### 1. A DISPUTE.

Last week the store keepers in the main factory walked out. They had the peculiar idea that, as in the past their wages had dropped when productivity had fallen, now, with production hitting an all-time record, that their bonus should also go up. The stewards 'reasoned' with them to return to work, pending a meeting with the bosses. A vote was taken. By 85 to 11 the stewards' advice was ignored. The stewards despaired. Out went the men and they go what they asked for: a rise in bonus.

Although the walkout only lasted a day and a half reactions were quite interesting. One factory, some 400 yards from the main works, failed to support the storekeepers although doing the same job, and getting even less than the men in the main factory. When the night shift arrived at this particular factory and heard of the dispute, they came out smartly, encouraged by their steward (he's new, he'll learn). The dayshift arrived at 7.30. The mice turned into lions. What had been 'none of their business' yesterday had become vital overnight. The night shift would be shown that they could walk out too. They did just that.

The factory slowly but surely ground to a halt at least as far as production was concerned. No drawings, metal, gauges or tools of any kind could be issued. Lorries were turned away. Goods that had been delivered the day before were left unpacked. The inspectors with no work to inspect sat at their benches reading, talking and enjoying the novel position of being paid for nowt. The foremen, unsure of procedure, looked helplessly on.

### 2. THE 'UNOFFICIAL' STEWARDS.

The stewards can only be effective once the mass of the workers stir themselves. Then, like jockeys, they must leap astride the charging force of militancy and try to steer it's head in what they consider to be the right direction. There are scattered about the factory various people, men and women (not always union members) who keep the stewards on their toes. These workers are much nearer the point of production than most of the stewards. They keep them informed of situations that arise, and can be

relied upon to see that foremen, chargehands, etc, do not pull any fast ones on new workers or trainees.

The stewards look upon these workers as a 'mixed blessing'. On the one hand these people always provide a bridge between the stewards and the shop floor. They can usually be found passing on information supplied by the stewards and are often used by the stewards to test a policy which the shop stewards committee have agreed to put in practice. On the other hand these 'unofficial stewards' are a peculiar phenomenon. They are not usually linked in any way with their opposite numbers in the next section or department. They seem to occur quite spontaneously, appearing almost from nowhere. One is always aware of their presence. Some profess to be Tories, some are religious; it is a fallacy to assume that all progressive industrial leadership is necessarily 'left-wing'. Some of these militants are very inconsistent. They will support some stewards - and will fail to support others - on a personal basis, irrespective of the principles involved. This I have found in workers generally. When one appreciates the influence that these 'spokesmen' can wield over their fellow workers one understands why sometimes a strike which on paper cannot appear to fail, flops miserably. Communication of ideas and the necessity of a newsheet is therefore of paramount importance to a militant shop.

### 3. ATTITUDES OF THE SHOP STEWARDS.

The shop stewards here are no better and no worse than in any other big London engineering factory. They are just men who feel they are doing a good job. The meetings they attend are looked upon by them as eye-wash. However it makes a break in what would be a monotonous routine. Some of the courses they attend are informative and give them certain facts and figures the possession of which arms them with a superiority complex with which they like to swamp certain workers who doubt their capability for the position of steward. This of course does not apply to all.

They reflect the mass they represent. They have no ideas regarding automation. Their attitude towards the management, towards the colour-bar and their general apathy (other than financial) towards other workers in dispute is much the same as elsewhere. The BLSP shop was unique and anybody who thinks that the situation which prevailed at Rootes is general throughout the engineering industry has been reading too many 'Newsletters'.

The stewards have their own problems too. Due to their sometimes only temporary presence on the shop floor they have not been completely absorbed by the management, as some people are apt to think. Neither are they striving militants. They are something in between, a safety valve on occasions, a vanguard on others, as circumstances or the workers dictate. Due to this unusual situation they develop a special attitude towards both workers and bosses, which in turn emphasises their apparent separation from either camp. They are 'neither fish nor fowl'.

To the militant of 1964 I would say: 'If the shop is good, be a steward. If not, gee them up outside the "official" channels'. A steward can only be inactive if he is left alone by a dormant group of workers. Although not gaining financially from his position, he is very loath to lose it, and any competition for the post usually results in a show of unprecedented spirit, however short lived.

## LABOUR ADVERT ?

Let's get things clear!

The Labour Party believes in preparing for war. The Tories say they believe in it: but look how they go about it. They chop and change. They have no plan. And, worst of all, they land us in the folly of the Independent Deterrent.

Labour's way would be different. We don't want Britain to go in for all this costly independence. Ever since it began the Labour movement has lived by the principle of cooperation.

We will cooperate with anyone. With anyone, that is, who is willing to join us in preparing for war (except, of course, the other side). We will work with the Pentagon. We will work with France, with West Germany, and with Portugal. In fact we will work with anyone sufficiently nasty to agree with our foreign policy.

But we'll do more. We'll make a fresh start. In the 1960's Britain can no longer afford to have its defence programme in the decrepit hands of arrogant Old Etonians. We will clear out the old boys network from the armed forces. We will destroy the barriers that do not give way to talent. We will ensure that men who really want to kill - and know how to do it efficiently - will get right to the top, where they can do the most damage.

Efficiency and modernization will be our keynote. How absurd to think that mankind may be destroyed piecemeal and without a plan, a plan in which everyone of our citizens can play his full and equal part.

The voter who has the country's security at heart need not be afraid. When Labour comes to power we will not rock the boat. We will turn the ship of state into a gunboat. And we will steer it swiftly and effectively..... into great, democratic, military cesspools.

LET'S ALL GO (DOWN THE DRAIN) WITH LABOUR !

Or as our sectarian friends would say:

'SOCIALISM IS WONDERFUL ! DON'T LET LABOUR RUIN IT !'

# AS THE BUSMEN SAID

A few weeks ago we produced 2,500 copies of the pamphlet 'BUSMEN, WHAT NEXT?'. We have been to a few garages, have sold out and are now reprinting. The reception of this pamphlet has been quite unique. We reprint sundry comments below.

I thought you'd like to hear what comments there have been about the pamphlet. With the exception of about 6 all have been sold in Hendon Garage. In other words, the total sold in the garage is 92; still it may be possible to sell even more. In fact the branch sec. is going to call in my shop during the week to let me know if he want more for next Friday.

Everywhere you looked in the canteen during the last three Fridays you see people reading the pamphlet. When I saw the sec. last Friday he told me there were six on order! Everybody seems impressed with the contents without exception.

I have been asked by several if this will be a monthly feature and when will the next copy be out. The feeling towards the pamphlet has quite honestly astounded me.

I saw a driver walk up to a crew sitting in the canteen on Friday and say 'Have you bought a copy of this Busman's magazine? It's the best sixpennies worth you can buy. Go and get a copy.' The crew said they hadn't seen it, and so the driver lent his copy to the conductor (woman) who was reading the pamphlet with great interest when I left the canteen.

When I took the first 24 copies I thought some would be returned to you. I underestimated the feeling of

the busmen and women towards such a pamphlet, and doubted if it would be ever sold by the Branch Secretary. I'm now of the opinion that if a meeting was held in relation to the pamphlet there would be a good attendance.

Some of the men I have spoken to have expressed the desire for unity and the need for a union dealing with transport problems. The TGWU as it is at present isn't doing the job.

It is funny when I sit in the canteen and just listen to the talk between the crews. Those that don't know me (and there are many) say: 'Who's this bloke in Hendon - Fred Whelton?', and 'Have you read this one? This is great! And only for a tanner!'.  
\* \* \* \*

Another driver was sitting in the canteen, talking to me just a few moments ago. First he asked the usual question: 'When will the next issue be out?'. My reply: 'Never, unless you and some of the other chaps on the job would like to play an active part and produce it. I can promise help if you're prepared to write for it'. To this he reacted quite differently to what I expected - he is all for it! He then went on to tell me that some of the other lads on the job, in his



opinion, would be keen to work for it. There are about three coloured lads (Indians) who hold their B.A.s working here at Hendon he tells me and there are some who are keen to see a pamphlet started and written by busmen on the job.

He also tells me that they are interested in the other publications advertised on the back of the Busmen pamphlet. I've asked that he contacts these others he speaks of and I'll meet them together and discuss the question with them.

Fred W., Watford.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have just been to the New Cross bus depot and within half an hour had sold the dozen copies sent.

Besides the changing points at London Bridge and Bricklayers, I have learnt that there is a depot at Peckham. As I have yet to go to these three places I enclose money for another 30.

I find the best tactic is to wait for glances at the cover and then shout 'Written by your mates'.

Brian W., Rotherhithe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Enclosed 6/- for the Busmen's pamphlet. I sold them at our Eastern Counties Depot the weekend that some of the Eastern National men were out, and they were well received.

Neil D., Ipswich.

\* \* \* \* \*

Veronica and I sold 20 copies in less than 20 minutes at lunch time today - in both the Borough and County canteens and the checking in room at the Council House.

Bretta C., Derby.

Sold 200 like hot cakes at big strike meeting in Glasgow this afternoon. Could have got rid of many more; they are very popular and the busmen liked them.

George W., Hamilton, Lanark.

\* \* \* \* \*

Though I don't agree with some of the contents of 'Busmen - Solidarity Pamphlet No.16.' I think it is the best piece of working class literature produced for a long time. I have already sold 29 copies, and don't think I will have any difficulty in getting rid of another 100 copies.

Branch Secretary, TGWU.

(129 copies were sold at this particular London garage.)

\* \* \* \* \*

Two of us sold about 50 copies last Friday at Battersea Garage. One of us, a busman, was shouting: 'How to fight the bosses'. Two young coloured busmen came up to us, bought pamphlets and said: 'It's the union bosses too we've got to fight'. We agreed!

Some busmen bought copies as they were going into the canteen, then came out for more for their mates. The older men seemed tired and just didn't want to know. The younger men were quite ready to talk.

A group told us they were thoroughly browned off because of piddling disciplinary measures. The management's assertion of its own authority seemed to be all that mattered.

There was a general atmosphere of dissatisfaction, mainly about conditions. The union wouldn't or couldn't do a thing. The men felt trapped.

\* \* \* \* \*

I went to the main bus garage in Coventry on a Saturday afternoon. Fifteen minutes passed before I saw a busman. He bought a copy and told me to go to the canteen at the terminus, in the centre of the city.

Entrance to the canteen was up a flight of steps headed: 'No unauthorised person to enter these premises', etc. Not many people went in or out, but all except one (an elderly busman) bought a copy. A young busman then told me I ought to go into the canteen itself. I now felt fully authorised.

There were about 30 busmen sitting at the tables, also a few women. I quickly sold 20 copies. None of the women bought one. The men, sitting in groups, all wanted to discuss the content of the pamphlets at length. The younger men seemed genuinely interested. Many went through the pages and read out bits which were received with obvious approval.

I explained to a busman of about 55 that the authors of the pamphlet, all London busmen, described their experiences, their problems and the methods they'd used to overcome them. He waved me away with the statement: 'No thanks, mate. We've enough problems of our own on Coventry buses'.

At another table was a mixed bus crew - a man and woman of about 45. They listened intently to my description of the pamphlet. Their interest increased as they asked questions. The woman then said: 'Is it political?'. I said 'yes'. They shut up like clams. They didn't just turn their heads. They swivelled themselves sideways. They must have had a bellyful of traditional politics. Their 'No, thanks' was so definite that I knew an explanation of what we meant by 'political' would take a long, long time.

Andy A., Coventry.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the second week of April a big 'unofficial' bus strike hit Glasgow, where the busmen are employed by the Labour-controlled Glasgow Corporation. The strike was on the question of new schedules and intensification of work. It lasted several days, during which Glasgow was virtually without public transport.

Over 350 copies of 'Busmen, What Next?' were sold within 3 days by Committee of 100, Anarchist, ILP, and Solidarity supporters in Glasgow.

A new Solidarity Pamphlet describing the Glasgow bus dispute is being produced. It describes some of the new methods of struggle used by the Glasgow men (the mass boarding of 'black' buses; the mass branch meeting, etc.). The pamphlet is being written in cooperation with a number of Glasgow busmen, who were most active in the strike.

'Busmen, What Next?' brought some of the ideas of rank-and-file London busmen to their mates in Glasgow. The new pamphlet will bring real news of the Glasgow men to the London garages.

## HUNGARY 50

by ANDY ANDERSON.

This book is at last available.

4 shillings, post free.

If you haven't a copy, ORDER ONE NOW

If you've had a copy, PAY FOR IT NOW

If you've paid for your copy,

ORDER MORE NOW,

from Bob Potter, 197 Kings Cross Road, London W.C.1.

# DIRECT ACTION AND THE UNEMPLOYED 1920-21

Although the unemployed struggles of pre-war years are often referred to, relatively little is really known about them. An interesting feature is the parallel between some of the methods used by the unemployed in those days and the methods of the modern anti-war movement, in particular the Committee of 100.

The 'Hunger Marches' in some way resembled and certainly inspired the Aldermaston March and various anti-Polaris marches. The unemployed frequently used the techniques of the 'sit-down', the 'lie-down' and the 'sit-in'. On one occasion they occupied a number of Labour Exchanges in London. Late in 1921 a factory in Islington which was working excessive overtime was invaded by the unemployed, who refused to leave until they got an agreement that overtime working would cease.\*

Even the mistakes made, some of which will be described in this article, have something to teach us. They will be only too familiar to anyone who has participated in organizing the Committee of 100 demonstrations. While it would be wrong to draw too close a parallel it is enough to say that in the early twenties at least, the whole emphasis of the struggle of the unemployed was 'Direct Action'. They fought their own battles!

In this article I will deal with just one skirmish in this long struggle. This was not by any means 'non-violent'

## *the essex road library*

At the local elections in October 1919 the Labour Party had swept the board in Islington. They won 44 out of a total of 60 seats. The Council elected was, verbally at least, an extremely 'left' one. For example it passed resolutions (already then a popular method of showing how 'left' you are!) in support of the policemen who had been victimized for taking part in the unsuccessful police strike of 1919. There was even talk in the Council Chamber of refusing to pay the Police Rate until the men were reinstated.

Another resolution passed by the Islington Council\*\* was one rescinding a previous Council Order for the flying of the Union Jack on the

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\* The technique of the obstructive factory 'sit-in' has not yet been tried by the anti-war movement. There are possibly suitable factories and installations involved in the manufacture and maintenance of nuclear weapons and their components and delivery systems.

\*\* On July 20, 1920.

King's Birthday and similar occasions. There was even discussion on whether the Red Flag should be flown instead, over the Town Hall.\*

All went well until late 1920 when there was a rapid increase in the number of unemployed. By October the number had reached between 7,000 and 10,000, and the number continued to rise.\*\*

A body calling itself the Unemployed Relief Committee was set up. Following some pressure within the Labour Party, this body, which was dominated by the Islington Unemployed Workers Committee, was granted the use of the then non-functioning South East Branch Library in Essex Road,\*\*\* as from November 1, 1920. The Library rapidly became the centre of self-help amongst the unemployed. For example unemployed cobblers would repair shoes. Out of work barbers gave haircuts and so on.

The Library also became the headquarters for the growing unemployed agitation in Islington. Marches of men went out every day to collect money. These marches were far from being begging expeditions. An example of the aggressive attitude of the unemployed was a demonstration in support of a demand for a drastic increase in the rates for winter relief. This march, to the Islington Board of Guardians, took place in mid-November 1920.\*\*\*\* The delegation which went in to see the Board became so threatening that several Guardians 'got the wind up' and left hurriedly.\*\*\*\*\*

The spokesman of the delegation, Dennis Jennet, Chairman of the Islington Unemployed Workers Committee, made no bones about their attitude. He told the Board that if they did not grant relief at least equal to that of Poplar\*\*\*\*\* the unemployed would raid the shops next day and help themselves.

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\* The Edmonton Borough Council had already done just that.

\*\* By February 4, 1921, the numbers signing on at Kings Cross and Holloway Labour Exchanges were 10,187 and 8,554 respectively. And not all the unemployed were registered!

\*\*\* It is still the Library.

\*\*\*\* The Board of Guardians was the Local Government body administering the Poor Laws.

\*\*\*\*\* Islington Gazette, November 21, 1920.

\*\*\*\*\* Poplar's rate was the highest in London. They paid 5/- in cash and 4/- in kind for each adult, plus 6d. for each child. Also the rent, up to a certain amount.

The Board of Guardians took the hint. They conceded the men's demands, even granting an extra 6d. a week for children under 15. The extra cost to the rates from this increase was in the region of £1,500 a week.\* But the Borough Council did not have much to worry about. In February 1921, after paying out the increases, it was still able to reduce the rates!

## labour 'victory'

The Labour majority on the Council had certainly got the wind up. Councillor E.H. King (the Mayor) had visited the Library just before the demonstration and given the Unemployed Relief Committee a week's notice to quit. The unemployed refused to budge. They told King point blank that if they were evicted they would take over the Town Hall! King retired and the unemployed set about barricading themselves inside the Library.

The 'siege' of the library lasted nearly five weeks, until 7.30 am on December 29, when a force of 50 policemen acting on the instructions of the Labour Mayor swooped suddenly and after a minor struggle managed to eject the half dozen night guards on duty. E.H. King's first action after this great Labour 'victory' was to issue a press statement along familiar lines. It said:

'The Essex Road Library was held by unemployables who were not genuinely unemployed, and it was they who were responsible for the disturbance.

'The real unemployed have been meeting at the Town Hall for some time. When we took the Library we obtained possession of the books. I found in them such entries as "paid to men on the march £58 odd"... "paid to men on the march: £60 odd"... "pay of committee: £1.10.0"... "paid to men on the march: £82.4.3½" and an entry next day of £70.

'Another entry was "10/6 for taxi" and yet another "cigarettes for demonstrators: £1.7.11". The sums paid out "on the march" between December 20 and 24 totalled nearly £230.'\*\*

Then, as now, these bureaucrats could understand nothing of the problems of those they 'represented'.

Another unnamed member of the Mayor's busy 'Unemployment Committee' was quoted in The Times of January 4, 1921, as saying:

'The trouble was the outcome of the Mayor's decision to have a properly organized committee to relieve the 7,000 unemployed of Islington. The unofficial committee was composed of extremists who were using the unemployed for propaganda purposes.'

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\* The Times, November 23, 1920.

\*\* From the Islington and Holloway Press, January 8, 1921.

## plans for january 3, 1921

The response of the unemployed to their eviction was rapid. The London District Council of Unemployed Workers called a demonstration for January 3. It was planned to proceed as follows: assembly at St. Pancras Arches, then a march up Pentonville Road to Islington Green where the march would join another contingent which had formed up at Highbury Corner and marched down Canonbury Road and along Essex Road to Islington Green. The united demonstration would then proceed along Upper Street until it reached the Town Hall.

All this marching and counter-marching was specifically planned to keep the police on the hop. The idea was to keep them in doubt until the last moment as to whether the main objective was the Town Hall or the Essex Road Library. Unfortunately these preparations were to no avail since the authorities had received prior information of the plans of the organizers.\* Alongside the open demonstration, a smaller contingent, consisting of about 80 men from East London, were formed into an 'assault party'. Their task was put clearly by Jennet in a note to John O'Sullivan, Chairman of the Poplar Unemployed Workers Committee. It read:

'To Poplar: I want your men up to Highgate (Archway Tavern). You will see your men are all handy but not too near one another, because I want you to board a car that is empty and drop off at the street opposite the Town Hall. If you can, get your men at the Archway Tavern at quarter past three, dead to the minute if possible.

'There will be two men from Islington to act as guides and to give you advice about the car to get and where to get off. As soon as you get off the car you must make a dash for the Town Hall. I am working this so that within three minutes four carloads of men will be landed within 25 or 50 yards of the Town Hall. I am trying to keep the police busy somewhere else, but tell your men they must not speak or recognize one another while they are on the car, because when the car passes a police point, if he sees them all talking in the car he will tumble.

'Well, good luck to you. Signed: Jennet of Islington.'

On the back of the note there was written: 'When you get in, pack some men in each of the offices, but let no one come out, and don't forget the time to get the car, 3.15.'\*\*

Arrangements were made for couriers on bicycles and on foot to keep the 'assault party' in touch with the main march. The idea was to speed up or slow down the main march to make sure that its arrival would be correctly synchronized with that of the 'assault party'.

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\* The Times, January 4, 1921.

\*\* Islington Gazette, January 6, 1921.

## the plan comes unstuck

But things soon began to go wrong. The police had been forewarned and errors were made in carrying out the carefully thought out plans. When the main march started it was found to be well ahead of schedule. To make time it was decided to go by a longer route than that planned. At the same time the 'assault party' arrived at the Town Hall 30 minutes ahead of the time planned and had to face the undivided attention of a large force of police. There was a fierce struggle and several arrests. Despite this a number of demonstrators still managed to get into the Town Hall but not for long. Amongst those arrested were the Secretary and Chairman of the Poplar Unemployed Workers Committee.

All this happened long before the arrival of the main march which was at Dalston when it heard of the failure of the assault. In spite of the defeat of the 'assault party' the leaders of the march decided to go ahead with their part of the demonstration. They proceeded as planned to Islington Green and thence along Upper Street. The idea was then to go via back streets, by-passing the Town Hall, and then to return along Upper Street so that the march would be on the same side of the road as the Town Hall.

Unfortunately the march was misled by its guides. Following their directions Wal Hannington, who even at this early stage, was a well-known leader of the unemployed, led the column of several thousands into a cul-de-sac (Almeida Street). To get itself out of this situation the demonstration had to go along Napier Terrace and down Waterloo Terrace which debouched directly opposite the Town Hall.\*

The snag about this was that it brought the marchers into direct confrontation with the police cordon surrounding the Town Hall, without any way of bypassing them. The police refused to let the demonstration through. But they did agree to a small delegation. Taking this opportunity to get through the police line, Hannington jumped onto a car and began to speak to the crowd. The mounted police then charged. Hannington was thrown to the ground and injured but was rescued by the men accompanying him.

A struggle lasting over an hour then took place within the restricted confines of Almeida Street, Waterloo Terrace, and Florence Street. Many people were injured including 13 police. One mounted policeman was unhorsed. There were a number of arrests. Many of those arrested were alleged by the police to have had offensive weapons on them when arrested, but this was denied by both those arrested and by the organizers of the march. Amongst the weapons which the police claimed to have found were sticks, daggers, iron bars, razors and petrol bombs. It was even alleged

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\* This was not the present Town Hall. In 1921 the Town Hall was about 75 yards nearer Islington Green. It was later closed down and then became a cinema (which was itself closed down fairly recently).



that some of the crowd possessed firearms, although none were produced. The police did manage to find 'five small cartridges'.\*

There was no evidence that any of these weapons had actually been used. Even the magistrate did not seem to take the accusation too seriously. He simply bound over all who had been arrested. Dennis Jennet, who was one of those arrested, was held in custody and refused bail for several days. Later he was also simply bound over.

## *the south islington labour party*

In spite of the 'failure' of this demonstration, it did not end the struggle of the unemployed. Late in 1921, after a series of angry demonstrations at the Board of Guardians, the Board agreed to further increase the outdoor relief rate to 12/6 for married men and 12/6 for their wives. For children up to 15, they granted 5/-. And they paid all rent up to 15/-. They also allowed 3/6 for a hundredweight of coal. This figure was a very high one by the standards of the time. The Minister of Health refused to sanction it!

The ruling Labour Group was split on whether to accept the Minister's decision. Sixteen Labour Guardians voted to accept the decision and only six voted to continue paying the higher rates. E.H.King was one of those who voted to submit.

The record of King and some of the other Labour councillors led to a revolt... inside the South Islington Labour Party! King was removed from the list of Labour candidates for the St.Peters Ward (the safest Labour area). But he succeeded in getting this decision referred back by the Borough Party which was dominated by his cronies. King moreover backed up this move by going to the South Islington Party Rooms (at 295 Upper Street) and by removing - and attempting to sell - most of the furniture, including three dozen chairs. These he had apparently paid for, as a quid pro quo for his nomination in the previous election.\*\* At this the General Management Committee of the Party caved in. It gave King the nomination. This was in line with another tradition (which also still flourishes) of always placing finance above principle. There were several resignations from Party Officers with weak stomachs.

It came as no surprise to anyone that at the next Council elections in November 1922, the Labour Party was crushingly defeated. They only held 5 seats out of the 44 they had won in 1919. Ironically one of those returned was E.H.King. It was not until November 1934 that Labour next took control of the Council in Islington. It has remained in control ever since.

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\* No record of any half bricks!

\*\* There is a grand old tradition in the Islington Labour Party of nominating candidates in return for quite large financial subsidies. The tradition happily lives on. I understand it is not unknown in quite a number of other constituencies.

## a genuine movement

It would be a mistake to fall for the carefully cultivated myth of the leading role of the Communist Party in these early struggles. It is certainly true that Wal Hannington and some of the other leaders of the unemployed were members of the newly formed Communist Party. It is also true that at a later stage the National Unemployed Workers Movement became virtually a front organization. At the time of these early struggles however the unemployed movement was a genuine movement of unemployed workers in which many different tendencies played an honorable part. For example both the Secretary and the Chairman of the Poplar Unemployed Workers Committee (John O'Sullivan and Reuben Gilmore) were associated with Sylvia Pankhurst's 'Workers Dreadnought' which was anti-parliamentarian and which, even at this early stage, was critical - and for the correct reasons - of the way things were going in Russia.\*

There is a real need today to get at the genuine history of the working class movement. This will need to be unearthed from under the layers of distortions, half-truths and omissions under which it lies buried. Most of what passes as working class history today is written by people with a particular axe to grind. They are out to show that this or that success or failure is due to this or that particular leadership ... or lack of it.

For us the real history of the working class is not primarily the history of its organizations or of the struggles of various elite parties, claiming to speak in its name. Nor is history writing an exercise in proving how prophetic were the insights of Marx or of any other of the 'great teachers'. We are more interested in the vast, unwritten history of particular periods and struggles. What did the ordinary people feel, think and do? How did their thousands of individual actions mould the history of their time and prepare the ground for the more dramatic and better known events? What message, finally, did their actions leave for others, in the future, to recognise and make their own?

KEN WELLER.

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\* In mid-1921 this paper published Alexandra Kollontai's 'Workers Opposition' (which was republished in 1961 by 'Solidarity', and is still available - 2/5 post free).