

1923

Renault

Workers

Fight

Sackings

A GRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF RECENT STRUGGLES
AT THE RENAULT WORKS IN PARIS & LE MANS

WRITTEN BY RANK-AND-FILE FRENCH METAL WORKERS

AN 'AGITATOR'

PAMPHLET N° 3

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1924

INTRODUCTION

BRITAIN, 1960: sackings at Vauxhall's, at Lucas's, at BMC, at Standard's, in the Rootes Group and elsewhere. Eighteen thousand men on short time at Ford's (Dagenham), speed-up elsewhere. The time and motion men invading shop after shop, blacklists, witch-hunts and increased snooping in many factories. British workers are experiencing the realities of 'the affluent society' in no uncertain manner.

The sackings and short time are accompanied by a propaganda barrage in which employers, Government spokesmen, production 'experts', the kept press and sundry Labour M.P.'s jointly 'explain' to the working class the need to 'cut production costs' (that's your wages, friend!), 'so as not to be priced out of the world market'. Some workers unfortunately still fall for this nonsense. They confuse their employers' problems with their own.

In France, the motor millionaires have also been resorting to a general tightening-up which has involved sackings on an increasing scale. The nationalised Renault works, one of the biggest factories in Europe, has been in the forefront in this process. It has set a pattern and example to every employer throughout the country.

The problems of French employers are very similar to those of British employers. They have profits to maintain. They must extract every ounce from their 'own' workers and pay them as little as possible. To do this, in France as in Britain, they have to attack workshop organization and conditions. Each employing class does this to the accompaniment of routine talk about 'foreign competition'. In France, as in Britain, it is the working class who is on the receiving end of all this and who pays the costs. Or who fights back, determined to defend its rights.

'Agitator' has been fortunate in obtaining a number of articles about the recent sackings in France written by rank-and-file militants in the Renault motor works in Paris and Le Mans. Parts of these articles were published in the rank-and-file French metal workers paper 'Tribune Ouvriere'. We reproduce them here (together with some explanatory notes), as a special pamphlet, for British motor workers and others who may be interested.

These articles describe in vivid, down-to-earth terms, the explosion of working class anger that greeted the news that men employed for years at Renault's were to be tossed onto the scrap heap. They give the inside story of how resistance developed in the workshops.

(cont'd end of next page)

SACKINGS AT RENAULT [PARIS]

by DANIEL MOTHE, an active militant at Renault's and editor of the rank-and-file paper 'Tribune Ouvrière'.

Background to the sackings.

One thousand men sacked in the spring of 1960. Three thousand men sacked in the autumn of the same year. Such is the net result of fifteen years of struggle to increase productivity in the biggest car factory in France: the nationalised Renault works.

Throughout these years, the Management repeatedly told the workers that all benefits coming from technical progress would be passed on to the men. The 'benefits' have taken the form of sackings for some, fear of the sack for others and, for the vast majority, a reduction in wages, as hours

have been cut without a corresponding increase in rates.

Are these sackings due to an unexpected 'crisis' in the motor car industry? Are they due to a 'rationalization' of the labour process, planned by the employers themselves? There may be a market 'problem'. But we don't think this is the real cause of the sackings. If Renault's are sacking workers today, it is because the same number of cars can be turned out with fewer men. Over the years, the factory has grown, spread and been transformed. Whole shops have been

INTRODUCTION (cont'd)

Years of fragmentary struggles, side-tracked by the union bureaucracies into constitutional channels, have had a certain demoralising effect on the French working class. The recent upsurges in the Renault works in Paris and Le Mans show however that the working class in France, as elsewhere, is capable of breaking through the stranglehold of 'its own' bureaucratic organizations. It is beginning to assert itself as an independent force. As yet this force is not fully aware of its strength. Nor is it clear about the need itself to determine the objectives and methods of its struggles, if these are to be successful.

'Agitator' sees as one of its main aims to bring to as many workers as possible the experience of other workers in struggle. Everything in present society conspires to hide this experience from workers. Within our very limited means we will strive to break down these barriers.

TOM HILLIER, A.E.U.

KEN WELLER, A.E.U.

moved, first to Flins, then to Cleon.

The transfer of these shops, some of which comprised up to 1000 men did not cut back production in the main factory. Just a year ago Renault's were still taking on labour. The number of cars turned out each day by the main factory didn't fall. The experts meanwhile were perfecting the machinery and installing bigger and faster assembly lines. The time and motion wallahs ensured speed-ups in practically every shop. The Management slowly reorganized production. During this period a steadily rising number of motors was produced.

Then the 'reorganization' stopped. A given target had been momentarily achieved. The management decided to stop increasing output. The results of the 'reorganization' made themselves felt. Men 'had to be sacked'!

Whom to sack.

The spring sackings were an easy job. The management had taken precautions in good time. Only 'provisional' contracts had been issued to the men recruited the previous year. When they decided to sack, they just refused to renew these contracts. One doesn't have to be too fussy with this sort of labour.

Things were more difficult during the later sackings. Renault's employ many workers who have been with 'the firm' for over 10 years. The selection was left to the supervisory staff. Each worker had been duly catalogued, according to willingness and worth. But 'worth', as judged by a foreman or shop supervisor is essentially a question of 'being disciplined'. Manual skill plays a role of diminishing importance in a modern factory. Workers are increasingly interchangeable. Professional worth is judged by speed

and individual productivity.

The management first chose those whose jobs were not 'essential'. In some shops up to 70 per cent of the lads were sacked. They then chose those who could no longer keep up with the tempo of work and those who were often ill. Then they picked on the 'grouzers' and those who didn't like being kicked around. Many old scores were settled. Some workers who had been with Renault's for over 15 years were sacked. Also workers with large families. Also a number aged 45 or over... The sackings were carefully planned. Despite mass discontent it was ensured that the actual combativity of those left would be very unequal and fragmented.

The way in which the news was to be broken was also carefully worked out. The Renault Board first leaked it to the Press. A few days later the supervisory Staff and the joint Committee were notified simultaneously that 'some' redundancy was to be expected. Then each worker was notified by letter that there would be some sackings. The names of those to be sacked were still kept secret.

The trade union 'counter-offensive'

On October 19 the CGT, the CFTC and FO (see Explanatory Notes) issue a joint leaflet, calling on us to down tools for two hours. Many of the skilled workers seem reluctant. They should know better, because the bulk of those to be sacked will almost certainly come from their ranks. About ten thousand men pour out of the factory at the ordained time and join up at the Zola-Kermen crossroad. A few telegrams of encouragement are read to us over the

mike. Then we march up to the local Town Hall, where a meeting is held under the glassy stare of the cops at the nearby police station. Morale is not too good. Many seem to realize the futility of this kind of afternoon walk.

On October 25 a new leaflet again calls on us to down tools for two hours: we are instructed to assemble at another nearby crossroads. But this time the idea is being discussed among the lads of holding a mass demonstration in front of the boss's office. There are more workers this time, perhaps 15,000 in all. The blokes are arguing about the chances of this kind of demonstration being successful. Some start shouting: 'To the offices'. At that moment the CGT loudspeaker van appears, followed by the trade union officials, with posters. They exhort the workers to follow... away from the offices and towards... a nearby church! Those who wanted to go to the offices are getting steamed up. There's quite a rumpus. But after some shouting everyone eventually goes to the official meeting. Then another polite procession through the streets of Boulogne-Billancourt...

Downing tools for two hours probably corresponds with the amount of fight the majority of workers are at that time prepared for. Many wish to express an opposition to sackings, but are not prepared to wage a struggle about it. A fighting minority, perhaps two or three thousand men, are prepared to go further. They seriously consider the problem and how to tackle it.

On Wednesday, October 26, the Minister of Labour gives the unions an 'unsatisfactory' answer. He endorses the sackings. He is quite firm Under no circumstances can hours be cut without a corresponding cut in

wages. It is a question of principle. Renault is a key factory. Any concession here would lead to endless 'trouble' throughout the industry.

The unions meet to discuss 'action'. The CFTC and FO want to call a strike for the following day. The CGT agrees. Next day a call is issued... for a 90 minutes stoppage. Only 3000 workers follow the call. They go to yet another meeting. There, they are told once more exactly what they had been told during the two previous meetings. Some of the men are now prepared to take things further. Shouts of: 'enough gas!' and 'to the offices!' begin to punctuate the empty, wordy speechifying. But a group of CGT and Communist Party members are there, utterly devoted to their official 'leaders'. They clap at all the right moments. They are there to see that no 'incidents' occur. The official CGT directives must be respected. They make it quite clear that 'respect' will be 'enforced', if necessary by violent means.

On Wednesday, November 2nd, we learn the names of those of our mates who are to be sacked. Some are offered other jobs. A turner is notified of an opening as a ticket puncher on the Metro. The pay? 'Modest to start with. But you've got brains. You'll make a career of it!'. Other men are offered jobs at 150 to 200 kilometres from Paris.

That night the various unions meet separately. The meetings are poorly attended. The CGT runs into trouble from its own rank-and-file militants.

Next morning the unions get together. They call us out, for the fourth time. Some of the lads want the strike to start at 2 pm.,

so that morning and afternoon shifts can come out together. The CGT vigorously opposes this suggestion. They finally decide that we should down tools that afternoon at 4 pm... for 90 minutes, and hold a meeting in the street. An amendment that a mass meeting be held in the factory, in front of the boss's office, is rejected by the CGT. In this matter, the other unions support the CGT's stand.

The incidents of November 3rd.

The Renault factory is a sort of small town with passages separating the various buildings, hangars and sheds. Just as in the Middle Ages the 'town' can be divided into districts, separated from one another by enormous metal doors. The management had shut all doors leading to the office block and also some of the others.

At 4 pm. the meeting starts in the street, outside the factory. It suddenly starts raining hard. The workers first take refuge in the bicycle sheds. Then someone suggests we enter the nearest workshops and get the men still working there to down tools. A certain amount of pushing and shoving takes place. We 'do' the shops one after another, 'to keep dry' ... and to get the men out. A large number of workers are now standing about in various parts of the factory, at times separated from each other by the giant iron gates, but in no sense locked in.

These groups naturally attempt to join up. The doors are pretty strong. Iron bars prove useless. Someone then has the bright idea to fetch a fork-lift truck and to use it as a bulldozer. Some of the lads set out. Despite the protests of the drivers they come back with several Fenwicks. The doors are then attacked, side on. One

or two good rams and the locks give.

It stops raining. The men drift out. The meeting gets going again but the men are becoming restless. The cry soon goes up 'to the offices'. The CGT toughs do all they can to 'contain' the men who are getting more and more worked up. They plead with us: 'Don't do the irreparable!'. 'If there are incidents the management will lock you all out'. Angry comments are heard 'Enough speechifying!', 'enough processions!'. To avoid being outflanked the 'organizers' quickly decide to send a deputation to the management. The workers decide not to disperse. They stay on the spot. After a while the officials come back. The management, they say, 'cannot receive the deputation just now'. The men are incensed. A mass movement takes place towards the square in front of the manager's office.

In the forefront is a group of 300-400 men, mainly the boys who'd been sacked. All of them are very angry. A little further back a mass of spectators. One might call them 'active' spectators. They all claim to be there 'in support of the sacked men'. In the main factory yard there are about 3000 more workers, the 'passive' spectators.

Stones soon begin to fly. Windows are smashed. Some of the men get into the offices. The CGT officials and representatives then line up, in front of the building, elbow to elbow, forming a solid human barrier. 'It's us' they shout 'your CGT representatives. Don't go in!'. 'F... off or we'll do you' the lads answer. A group of workers advances in a threatening manner towards the officials: 'You wouldn't strike us, your represen-

tatives' the officials plead, not too sure of themselves. 'That's what you think' the men reply. The 'representatives' are quickly brushed aside. About 200 more workers enter the building. The CGT delegates make themselves scarce for the rest of the day. The FO and CFTC delegates who hadn't done anything for the workers either, are quite content just to look on, while the Stalinists get a good pasting.

The climax.

The lads who entered the building quickly spread out. They find no one in any of the managerial offices. These gentlemen have either hastily departed or have never been there. The men realize they have been tricked. Some of them vent their anger on the window panes, pull out the telephones, empty furniture and files out of the windows. On the top floor they come across some of the supervisory staff, who adopt a haughty attitude: 'We forbid you to proceed any further...!' 'What?' the men say 'you forbid us?' 'Better scram when we come...' They are seized by the scruff of the neck, chased down the corridors and ejected from the building.

The men who invaded the offices were nearly all young workers, many of them among those recently sacked. Several dozen were due for call-up within a few weeks. There were also Algerian workers and a number of skilled men. Also, of course, most of the known militants.

During this time, in the yard in front of the office, a group of workers are keeping up a steady bombardment of the windows. Behind them stand the bulk of the others, approving of what is going on, 'protecting' the men in the building, even egging the lads on,

but not actively intervening themselves. Most of these have not been sacked. They are rather worried about being spotted. A photographer who suddenly popped up from God knows where is quickly neutralized, his film confiscated. The supervisory staff and the CGT officials also look on, fuming and furious, but quite impotent.

The demonstration goes on for about 40 minutes and then comes to an end, of its own accord. The men drift away. When only about a hundred are left a police car arrives. The cops clear the yard in front of the offices. There are no arrests.

Aftermath.

Next day the 'unity' of the three unions blows up. Denunciations start. The CGT leads off. During the night the windows had been mended and the management had had posters hung up, denouncing the incidents of the previous day, threatening to lock out the workers and informing them that legal redress would be sought. That same morning the CGT produces a leaflet ... also condemning the events of the previous day. The window-breakers are denounced as provocateurs and 'trotskyists'. The leaders of the CFTC and of FO are accused of having incited the workers to violence! The leaflet not only indicts these organizations, it specifies by name certain active trade unionists, accusing them of being directly responsible for the incidents. The following week the management sacked two of the men denounced in the CGT leaflet. The struggle against sackings at Billancourt ended on this note.

Most of the workers are disgusted by these police methods. But even without this, the struggles of November 3 were seriously compromised before they had even started. After three partial strikes and a number of marches the workers were getting restless. They clearly saw they could not fight sackings by these methods. To force the management to retreat, they should have fought with more determination and also from the beginning. But none of the trade union organizations wanted a real struggle.

The majority of workers, it is true, were probably not prepared for a full scale strike. But if, from the onset, the CGT had given its full sup-

port to the militant minority - instead of putting every possible spoke in its wheels - things might well have turned out very differently. The militant minority might perhaps have won over the major part of the factory, thus transforming the level of consciousness and combativity of the other workers. These workers themselves might then have believed both in the effectiveness of their struggle and in the likelihood of its success. Who knows what would have happened then?

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RENAULT (LE MANS) STRIKE AND LOCK-OUT

by PIERRE LAFORGUE, a militant at the Le Mans works.

On Wednesday, October 19, the CGT and CFTC called the Renault workers at Le Mans out on strike. Ninety percent of the workers marched to the Town Hall. Angry workers shook loose the Town Hall's iron gates and fences. Around 2.30 pm. a delegation of union officials was received by the Prefect. They returned eventually with an offer of a meeting, to be held the next day, between the Prefect, the unions, the work inspectors and the factory Manager. The men were not impressed. Some shouted: 'Not tomorrow, now!, tomorrow's too late!' 'We'll wait right here!'. The T.U. delegates could not make themselves heard, not because the workers were hostile to them, but because the men were loudly muttering their disappointment.

The delegates asked the workers to disperse and to resume work at 4 pm. At the last moment groups of workers formed and someone shouted 'To the Manager's office!'. Most of the morning shift went home but about 1500 men went back to the factory intending to demonstrate. The T.U. delegates were already there, waiting for them on the steps. They announced that the Manager was not there and pleaded with the men to resume work. Next day, the local Gaullist paper congratulated the

T.U. officials on the 'good behaviour' of their members.

Six days later, repeat performance: ninety-five percent of the workers marched, the union officials at their head. These were received by the Prefect. But this time there were about 1000 armed cops, gendarmes and security guards 'protecting' the Town Hall. The gates and fences had also been repaired.

The workers considered this show of helmets, shields, riot sticks and guns a provocation. Everyone became restless and agitated. When the union officials came out announcing that Renault Headquarters in Paris had agreed by telegram to postpone the sackings, the workers smelt a rat. Many expressed their discontent, shouting: 'We'll stay here. Action now!'. But the officials advised a return to work, 'so as not to lose the bonus'.

Everyone felt cheated and disappointed. They had done everything the union officials had asked them, but they saw quite clearly both their own failure and the management's manoeuvres. They had meant to make the management

retreat. Some perhaps even thought they could stop all sackings. Now they were beginning to realise that such actions were not enough. One heard remarks such as: 'If we want anything worthwhile we'll have to stay out for a week!', 'Let's stay here, in front of the Town Hall; to hell with the bonus!'. The majority eventually dispersed, not without having thrown the odd nut or bolt at the cops guarding the Town Hall.

The slogan 'To the boss's office' is again put forward by the more advanced workers. They set out for the factory. About 200 lads enter the office block and proceed to the manager's office. They ask him to phone Paris, in front of them. The manager refuses to act under threats. About 1500 workers are waiting outside, ready to support those who have taken over the offices. Some sharp exchanges take place between workers and manager: 'Why were you still taking people on last year? - Why did you launch out into all this without a serious study of the international market?'.
 The manager tries to 'explain'. The lads are not impressed. He soon proposes: 'I am prepared to discuss matters with your officials and to phone Paris in front of them. But the others must go'. The T.U. officials support this suggestion. Little by little the workers are edged out of the offices. The meeting drags on. The workers outside gradually drift away. At 8.30 pm., it is all over. The management then decide on a lock-out.

Next day, the workers find the factory gates closed. The union officials are there, rehashing yesterday's arguments. They ask the men to attend a further meeting at 2 pm. Nothing like meetings for letting off steam. 6000-7000 workers attend.

Obediently, they listen for two hours to speeches from the officials.

On the Thursday the gates re-open. It is certain that this decision was secured by the Prefect, who feared the participation of the Renault workers in a local demonstration in favour of Peace in Algeria, organized by the Teachers' Union.

The workers return to work feeling that the sackings have only been postponed and that the management will soon renew its attempt. Some of the men now understand the need carefully to define objectives before action is taken. This must be done quite soberly and the men confronted with their real responsibilities. The means of struggle to be used will depend on these objectives. A two-hour strike may be good enough to protest against sackings. It is certainly not long enough to stop them.

The pill must not be sweetened. Workers must be warned of the logical consequences of their demands. The struggle must be geared to the objective. Only in this way will workers become conscious of the fact that the struggle must be their own struggle. Only in this way will they lose the habit of 'leaving it all to the union leaders'. Only in this way will they win lasting victories.

Sooner or later the events at Le Mans will take a new turn. There is clearly a risk of further violence. In that case, will it meet the unified resistance of the three unions? Or will it see the usual reactions of the union bureaucracies who, after defeats, each try, by the most disgusting methods, to attribute the failure to their rivals.

EXPLANATORY NOTES :

The majority of industrial workers in France do not belong to any trade union. There are many reasons for this, not the least important of which is the way in which the official trade union organizations have repeatedly failed to fight for the real interests of the working class. Union membership has declined drastically since the peak years of 1945 and 1946.

At present there are three main trade union federations in France and a number of smaller ones. The main ones are:

The CGT, by far the largest. It is completely controlled by the Communist Party. In 1945 it had over 5 million members. Its membership now is just over 1 million. It is affiliated to the World Trade Union Federation.

The FO, (does not stand for what you think) means Force Ouvriere. It is the Right-wing union organization and supports Guy Mollet's 'socialist' Party. Like the TUC it is affiliated to the International Confederation of 'free' Trade Unions.

The CFTC, a Catholic trade union organization. It recruits on a religious basis. Its social doctrines lead to its collaboration with the employers. The other union federations also practice collaboration, without even any doctrinal dogma to justify it.

There is very little rank-and-file organization in French factories. There is nothing really corresponding to the Shop Stewards movement. Workers delegates to various negotiating bodies are elected once a year but only the officially recognized trade union bodies have the right to nominate candidates. The elections are jointly 'organized' by the trade unions and the management. There are no nominations from the shop floor and workers have no right of recall on their delegates, should they fail to act in conformity with the wishes of the men.

There is no strike pay during disputes, even when the workers are called out by 'their' various trade union leaders.

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The Renault works were nationalized in 1945 (because Renault had collaborated with the Germans). The various works together employ over 40,000 men. The majority work at the Paris factory, in the suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt.

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ABOUT OURSELVES

'Agitator' is a new revolutionary socialist monthly, circulating among young industrial and office workers, members of CND, and in New Left Clubs and Labour Youth Sections in London and in a number of provincial cities.

It is opposed to all bureaucracies, fetishes, orthodoxies and mystification. It is non-Stalinist and non-Trotskyist. It stands for the self-conscious, independent action of the rank and file. It believes that the emancipation of the working class must be the task of the working class itself.

Working people are submitted to a systematic indoctrination in capitalist ideas by the ruling class and by its agents in the Labour and Trade union movement. Workers are kept in the dark about the great past struggles of the working class.

Workers are also kept divided from one another by artificial local divisions, occupational divisions and geographical divisions. These are reinforced by wage differentials, narrow appeals to craft consciousness and nationalist propaganda.

All this benefits the ruling class. It prevents workers everywhere from seeing themselves as one class, with fundamentally similar interests everywhere.

Working people are even kept in the dark about what other workers are thinking and doing today. All the channels of information are in the hands of the ruling class or of various bureaucratic organizations with special axes to grind.

The group of comrades around the 'Agitator' are striving within their limited means to break down these barriers. If you think this is a worthwhile task, why not help us in it? Read the paper. Discuss it with your friends. Write for it. We are very interested in hearing what you think, not in telling you what we think. We hope to hear from you, soon.

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1935

HOW TO FIGHT SACKINGS

(EDITORIAL, TRIBUNE OUVRIERE, NOV. 1960)

When the management announced that 3000 men would be sacked, many workers wondered how this could be stopped. Many of us realised that this decision must have been taken some time previously. 'What had the unions been doing' we asked 'to fight against the sackings?'

The real answer to sackings is the shortening of the working week without loss of pay. But we all know from bitter experience that this will never be handed to us on a plate. It will not come our way without a struggle.

The management was working hand in glove with the Ministry of Labour. They had a plan. They knew what they wanted. And they got it.

Most of the workers were not prepared for a real, all-out struggle. They thought 'it won't be me'. The tool-makers were saying 'we won't be sacked - but we must give a hand to those who will be. There must be at least a gesture of solidarity'. But everyone really understood that the Renault men couldn't, by themselves, win the 40 hour week without loss of pay. And without this victory, how could one insist that no one be sacked? The trade union officials alone seemed to display their usual boundless confidence.

There were three possibilities: first, token stoppages. But they only serve to pacify the guilty consciences of those who won't be sacked. Secondly: to prepare for struggle in a serious manner. Even if total victory was not within grasp we could at least have had a real testing of forces. We could have attempted to extend the movement. This would seriously have frightened the Government. They would have proceeded a lot more carefully in the coming months. The essential requirement for a struggle of this kind are 'action committees', directly based on the shops and grouping all workers, irrespective of qualifications. This would have provided the mass of the workers with a possibility of expressing their views on the ways and means of organizing resistance. After all, they have to suffer and make sacrifices in a strike.

But the trade union organizations did not want to be outflanked. They did not want a serious struggle. There were so many things that could have been organized: street demonstrations, demonstrations in the factory, mass deputation to the management, contacting other factories, appeals for support and - if the situation developed favourably - ultimate occupation of the factory.

For such action to be successful the workers must themselves feel that there is at least a chance of winning. But the Renault workers had no confidence whatsoever in the way the union officials had prepared the 'struggle'. All their talk and fake demonstrations had only exhausted and

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HOW TO FIGHT SACKINGS (cont'd.)

demoralised the men: The management were well aware of this. They allowed us to proceed with our symbolic strikes.

The third possibility was to make a demonstrative gesture. Because they were not prepared for a genuine struggle, the union officials were confronted with the unplanned explosion of anger of the sacked men. If this explosion had occurred at the outset it might have had an effect on all the workers in the factory, mobilising them for harder struggles ahead. Occurring as it did at the end, it was bound to remain isolated and ineffective.

If the struggles are not organized by the workers themselves there is little likelihood of real success. This implies democratically elected action committees and systematic preparation for a struggle for the 40 hour week. It is not an easy road. But short of this course of action, there is no likelihood of effectively fighting sackings - either today or tomorrow.

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