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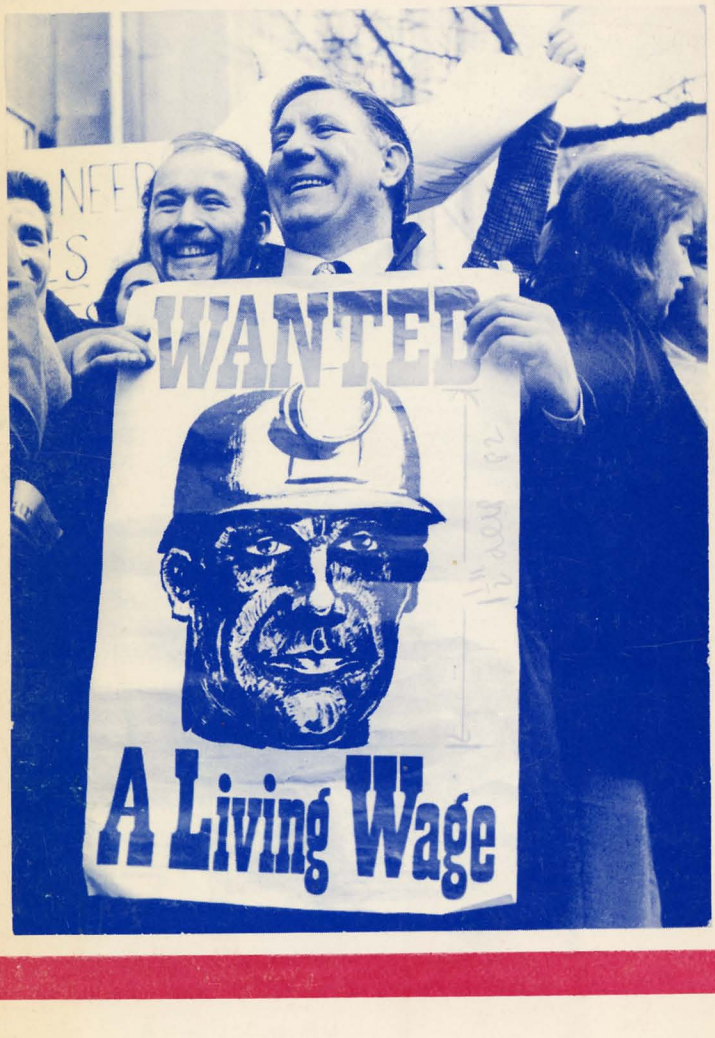

Class Struggle in Britain

RADICAL AMERICA

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Cover: Miners lobbying the Executive Meeting at the National Union of Miners Headquarters January 24, 1974. Photo by Peter Harrap (Report)

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Introduction

This issue of RADICAL AMERICA is concerned with the crisis of capitalist society in Britain. This crisis is nearly total, pervading almost all areas of social life. The roots of this crisis are found in the wreckage of Britain's economy. Over the last decade no government, either Labour or Conservative, has been able to isolate Britain from the growing crisis of world capitalism. Neither a state-regulated incomes policy, nor currency devaluation, export booms, import surcharges, entry into the Common Market, or a savage attack on trade unions has been able to halt the slide of British capital. An index of the loss of capitalist self-confidence is found in the collapse of British stock prices, where values have fallen more than 50% in the last year. Most observers, moreover, see no end to this collapse : inflation is expected to pass 20% in the coming year, and a doubling of unemployment seems likely.

The near-collapse of Britain's economy is at the heart of a much broader crisis in Britain. Capital, even when assisted by the trade union bureaucracy and the state, has been unable to prevent the effects of the economic collapse from spreading far beyond the shop floor and periodic contract negotiations. Over the last decade a powerful rank-and-file movement has grown up within the trade unions, and the "Left" (i.e. the C.P.) has captured the leadership of a number of important industrial unions. This rank-and-file movement has been the motor force behind the most intense strike wave since World War II, breaking out of the tactical confines of traditional trade union bargaining in a desperate attempt to have wages keep pace with inflation. The crisis of British capitalism has also meant a sharp decline in the level and quality of state-supported social services, such as health care, housing, welfare, and education. The near collapse of many social services has meant a sharp decline in the standard of living of Britain's working class, and militant movements have emerged among both working-class consumers of social services and sections of government workers as a result. The housing shortage, for example, has led to a broad struggle around rents, especially in public housing, and has seen the emergence of a militant tenant movement and widespread illegal occupations of public housing ("squatting").

Britain is also faced with a seemingly endless civil war in Northern Ireland, and a rapidly growing racial conflict between white and non-white immigrant workers. Both conflicts are among the remnants of British imperialism, bringing home to Britain the chauvinism and racial violence which was formerly confined to more distant reaches of the Empire. The rapid polarization of British society, finally, has been accompanied by the emergence of non-Parliamentary movements on the Left and Right. Since the late 1960's the beginnings of a revolutionary Left, most importantly the International Socialists, has gained a foothold in British industry and in independent community organizations. On the other hand, a threatening ultra-Right has grown up in response to both the upsurge of working-class militancy and the growth of the number of non-white immigrant workers. As Britain's economic crisis continues, both Left and

Right can be expected to grow in strength, hastening the collapse of the British state.

As we go to press Britain is preparing for elections. This election, unlike the one last February which saw the end of four years of Conservative rule and the creation of a minority Labour Government, revolves around the question "Who will pay for Britain's crisis?" Last winter the Conservative Government forced a showdown with Britain's working class, hoping to create a broad conservative consensus to "put an end to government by trade unions." As Ian Birchall shows in our lead article, the general intent of the Tory Government was to modernize British capitalism by bringing it into the Common Market, speeding up the concentration of capital by allowing unprofitable firms to collapse into bankruptcy, and to promote new investment by an economic policy designed to allow profits to rise while holding wages in check. As Birchall shows, the key to Tory wage control was a savage attack on the trade union movement. At the same time that they were fighting wage increases, however, the Government was also trying to force the trade unions themselves to curb the shop-floor militants who led the "unofficial" strikes, crippling the modernization plan. The miners fought the most dramatic episode of this conflict. Dave Douglass, a British miner and an editor of a revolutionary miners' newspaper, describes how the mineworkers defeated the Tories' plan to control wages with their strike in 1972, and then brought down the Government itself with their strike last winter.

Yet the Labour Government that has been in power since February has been no more successful than the Tories in managing Britain's faltering economy. The heart of Labour's economic policy is the "social contract," which the Government engineered with the Trades Union Congress, the equivalent of the United States' A.F.L.-C.I.O. Through this arrangement the leadership of the trade unions agreed not to press for wage increases greater than increases in the cost of living, and not to demand across-the-board wage increases more than once a year. The trade unions agreed to this in exchange for the Government's promise to pursue a vigorous policy of nationalizing Britain's heavy industry, to raise the quality of social services, and to abolish the

Tories' hated "Industrial Relations Act" and statutory incomes policy. In spite of the trade union leadership's collaboration with the Labour Government, however, rank-and-file pressure has continued to grow, and the union leadership has been only partially successful in channeling class struggle within the boundaries of Labour's plan for economic stabilization. Britain's economic situation, moreover, has continued to deteriorate. Heavily dependent on imported oil, food, and industrial raw materials, Britain's cost of living shows no signs of stopping its climb. On the other hand, frightened by Labour's promises to the trade unions, especially concerning nationalization of industry, capital flees the country or goes on strike, refusing to make new investments as long as Labour is in office.

The crisis of British capitalism dominates the election strategy of the major parties. Each party has campaigned on its plan for economic stabilization, attempting to present itself as a party of the "national interest". Labour only has to remind the trade unions of the hardships of Tory rule to secure the votes of the industrial working class, and important parts of the revolutionary Left are urging support for Labour in the elections. The Labour Party is also trying to gain support from those outside the trade union movement, warning that only it, through the "social contract," can keep a lid on inflation by keeping wage increases within the boundaries of its economic plan. The trade union leadership quietly threatens a renewal of official wage militancy if the Tories are returned to power. The Tories have also attempted to present themselves as having a "national perspective," less intent on crushing the working class than on saving the entire nation from the follies of "trade union government." One of the most important reasons for this centrist perspective of the two major parties was the phenomenal rebirth of the Liberal Party in the last election. Presenting itself as a modernizing, technocratic, "middle class" alternative to the narrow self-interestedness of the two major parties, the Liberal Party was able to win 14 seats in the last election, and holds the balance of power in Parliament. The Liberals hope to increase their share of Parliamentary seats, preventing either major party

from gaining a majority in Parliament, and raising the possibility of a coalition government.

Though it is possible that this election will once again prove inconclusive, resulting in either a minority or a coalition government, polls show a sharp swing to Labour as the election approaches. Whether or not Labour is able to form a government, however, political instability will continue. Though the root of this instability lies in the long-term collapse of British capitalism, this is reflected in divisions within the major parties. Though the leadership of the Conservative Party has stated its general support for Keynesian pump-priming measures — its opposition to reviving a statutory incomes policy, for example — an important section of the Party's right wing has broken party discipline to advocate a stabilization program centering on a strict monetarist policy that would result in much higher rates of unemployment in an attempt to stem inflation. A further division within the Parliamentary Conservatives emerges from the conflict in Northern Ireland. Enoch Powell, once an important figure on the Right for his opposition to immigration and Britain's entry into the Common Market, is now seeking a Parliamentary seat in Northern Ireland. It is possible that a bloc of Ulster Conservatives under his leadership could emerge to hold the balance of power in a deadlocked Parliament.

The Right is also growing outside of Parliament. The focus of this non-Parliamentary Right is two-fold. Ruling class circles concentrate on combatting the growth of trade union power. The U.S. press has highlighted the growth of movements like the "Unison Organization," created by retired military officers to serve as a strikebreaking force in case of a general or "political" strike. During the summer the creation of such a paramilitary strikebreaking force of technicians was even advocated by a member of the Conservative "shadow cabinet." Many in the British labor movement remember that such a government-sponsored strikebreaking force was used in the disastrous defeat of the General Strike of 1926. More sinister than these largely paper organizations, however, is the growth of the fascist National Front, which has attracted some working-class

support. The Front focuses its attacks on immigrant workers, claiming that they are stealing Britons' jobs and housing. After several years of street demonstrations and thuggish intimidation of immigrants, the National Front is now strong enough to stand 80 candidates for Parliament.

The growth of this non-Parliamentary Right, of course, is only a symptom of Britain's crisis. Reflecting this crisis mentality, elite British publications such as the London TIMES have been discussing the possibilities of a military coup in Britain, or sustained military administration of industrial areas crippled by strikes. Such a vision is modelled on the "solution" now employed in Northern Ireland. Like Vietnam, moreover, the technology used to combat a popular war for national independence has been brought home to be used against the dissidents of the mother country. The Ulster experience has begun to politicize the Army and police, and one Conservative Party grouping has called for riot equipment developed in Ulster to be made more generally available to the British police. British comrades already report that police violence against demonstrations has severely increased, and recently a student was killed in a demonstration against the National Front.

While there are signs that the Conservative Party has lost some of its unity and hegemony over the various forces opposed to the working class, the power of the working class itself is divided. One important sign is the growth of regional nationalism, especially in Scotland. Bolstered by the prospect of economic independence and prosperity now made possible by the discovery of vast oil fields off the coast of Scotland, the Scottish National Party is likely to increase its strength in Scotland at the expense of the Labour Party. Even more significant divisions are found within the trade union movement. Within the Trades Union Congress an important minority is opposed to the "social contract," insisting that trade union moderation in demanding wage increases should wait until after the Labour Party has fulfilled its part of the bargain. Among the trade union leadership, this left wing is dominated by the Communist Party. At the August meeting of the Trades Union Congress this Left reluctantly agreed to support the "social contract"

so as not to undermine "labour unity" as the elections approached; but the same meeting saw the left wing increase its share of leadership positions.

Important divisions also exist within the working class itself: within the unions themselves, between unionized and non-unionized workers, and between white and non-white workers. The ability of the working class to withstand the next offensive of capital, whether the attack come by way of Labour's "social contract" or by way of the more direct attacks of the other parties, will largely turn on the depth and permanence of these divisions. It is with the state of the British working class, and the nature of the divisions within it, that this issue of RADICAL AMERICA is concerned. In our major article, setting out the struggles of industrial workers under four years of Tory rule, Ian Birchall highlights the importance of the shop stewards' movement, the most militant section of the working class during the 1960's. The existence of this shop stewards' movement — a local, on-site, elected trade union leadership which has formed inter-industry links among stewards' groups — is one of the most important reasons why British trade unions have been more militant around wage issues than U.S. unions. Whether the stewards will continue to provide this leadership is a question raised by Big Flame's account of the shop stewards' movement at Halewood, an enormous Ford plant near Liverpool. Big Flame, a libertarian communist group, suggests that important parts of the shop stewards' movement face incorporation into managing capitalism, increasingly restricted to "enforcing the contract" like their U.S. counterparts. Two other articles describe the growth of industrial militancy in two new sectors, non-white workers and women workers. Mala Dhondy, in an article reprinted from RACE TODAY, describes the strike of East African Asian workers at Imperial Typewriter, a runaway subsidiary of Litton Industries from Connecticut. The account of this strike, and its aftermath, make clear that white British trade unionists and their leaders are not immune to the racist propaganda of the ultra-Right. Both Dhondy's article and that of Beatrix Campbell and Sheila Rowbotham, however, also make clear that women and non-white workers have begun to develop

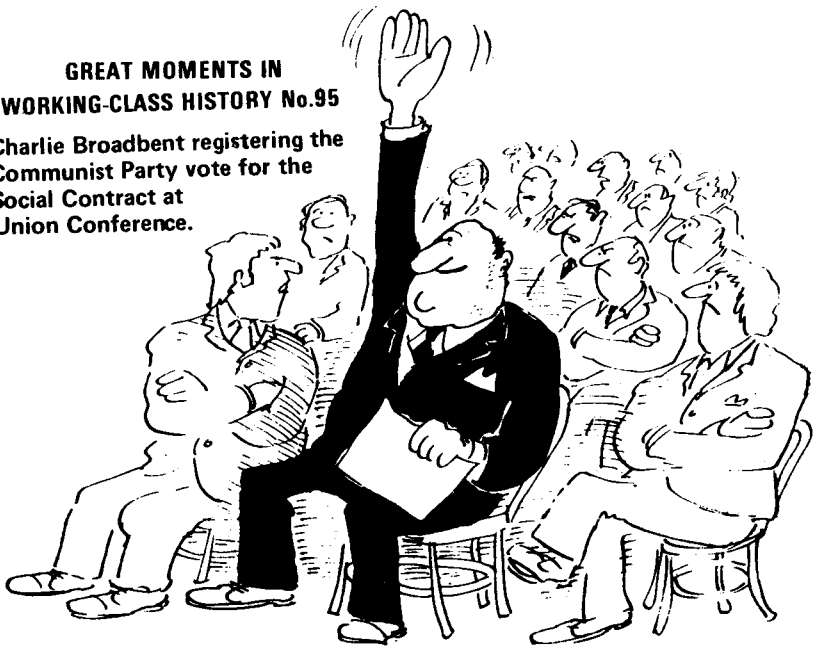
an industrial militancy of enormous potential. Insofar as these groups dominate traditionally low-paying jobs, especially in non-unionized sectors and government-supported social services, their militancy is at least susceptible to Labour's promise of a "social contract."

In publishing this issue of RADICAL AMERICA, we have tried to provide a reasonably comprehensive overview of the crisis of British capitalism. We think that an understanding of this crisis is important for the U.S. Left for several reasons. First, the American media have systematically understated the depths of Europe's crisis. As the American economy continues its slide into depression, we need to maintain or develop an understanding of the worldwide nature of this crash. Second, because the crisis is nearer and the struggle more intense in Britain than it is in the United States, the strategy and tactics developing within the British working class foreshadow many of the tasks which will soon face the working class in this country.

Frank Brodhead for the RA Editors

GREAT MOMENTS IN WORKING-CLASS HISTORY No.95

Charlie Broadbent registering the Communist Party vote for the Social Contract at Union Conference.



Class Struggle in Britain:

Workers Against the Tory Government, 1970 - 1974

Ian Birchall

The Heath government in Britain (June 1970-March 1974) saw a sharp intensification of class struggle in Britain. In 1972 alone twenty-three million days were 'gained' (1) in strike action. This was over ten million more than the previous year, which in turn had had the highest figure since the General Strike of 1926. Political strikes, hitherto almost unknown in Britain, became commonplace, and workers developed a variety of new tactics of struggle -- 'work-ins', factory occupations, flying pickets. In response the British state, which traditionally cultivates an image of kindliness (British policemen are not normally armed) began to bare its teeth.

The events in Britain lacked the colour and drama of France 1968 or Italy 1969; they were nonetheless of great significance in opening a new period of struggle which may well prove to be the most favourable for socialists since the years immediately following the First World War.

1) The Tory Government.

The Tory election victory in 1970 came as a surprise to most people. It was not the result of any upsurge of enthusiasm for Edward Heath or for Tory politics. The percentage of the electorate who voted – 72% — was lower than at any post-war election; the opinion polls almost unanimously forecast a Labour victory. It was, essentially, Labour abstainers who brought the Tories to power; workers who would call themselves Labour if asked, but who did not feel sufficient commitment to their Party to leave the television and walk to the polling station.

The blame for this abstention rests fairly and squarely on Harold Wilson and the Labour administration, and not on any alleged 'apathy' of the British working class. In just under six years in office Labour had managed to abandon just about every policy it had been elected on, and to betray just about every principle it had seemed to stand for. (2)

To some people Labour had seemed to be the Party of liberal and progressive policies. They were rewarded by Wilson's slavish support for the US in Vietnam, and successive tightening of immigration controls. Others had seen Labour as a Party of social reform; they saw a government which cut away some of the minimal welfare legislation that already existed. Labour, in the name of economy, reintroduced the very payments for medical care which it had abolished at the beginning of its period in office, and withdrew the provision of free milk for children in secondary schools.

Most important of all, Labour in power seriously damaged its links with the trade union movement. Labour's attempts to impose 'incomes policy' led to growing resistance from workers – including some, like dustmen and teachers, with few traditions of struggle — who had suffered the most under Labour launched strike action. Labour's proposals to introduce legislation limiting the right to strike were withdrawn in the face of massive trade union opposition, including a strike of ninety thousand workers on May Day 1969.

All this, plus Heath's promises to restrain inflation, made it possible for the Tories to be elected. Moreover, British

workers' previous experience of Tory rule had been relatively benign. From 1951 to 1964 the Tories had been able to conceal their basic nature as open agents of the ruling class. The prolonged post-war boom, produced by massive armaments expenditure, allowed full employment to be combined with rising wages, and the Tories campaigned on the slogan 'You've never had it so good.' But in 1970 things were to be very different.

By the 1970s the stabilising effects of the international arms economy were beginning to wear off (3); moreover, British capitalism faced particularly acute problems. Despite all its efforts, the growth rates of its main rivals had been two to four times more rapid. And the impact of inflation was becoming more and more marked.

British capitalism in 1970 faced three inter-related problems: stagnation, inflation and declining profit margins. At the same time there was a rise in working class militancy. Whereas in a period of economic expansion this would not have presented so much of a threat, in a period of stagnation, wage rises would serve only to worsen inflation.

It was, therefore, not innate viciousness (even though most Tories are, in fact, innately vicious men), but objective circumstances which led the new Tory regime to break with the traditions of post-war Toryism and launch an attack on working class living standards and organisation.

The attack took several forms. Firstly, taxation changes redistributed wealth in favour of the already wealthy. It was estimated that the first Tory budget, in 1971, added about £355 million to the wealth or purchasing power of that third of a million taxpayers who already had incomes of over £5000 a year.

Secondly, various welfare services were cut, and a violent onslaught on working class standards was launched by the grotesquely named 'Fair Rents Act', which was in fact designed to compel massive increases in the rents paid for municipally owned housing, housing inhabited virtually entirely by working class people.

Thirdly, the Tories actively encouraged the increase in unemployment to the highest post-war levels (leaving aside a few short periods of exceptionally bad weather). At the Tory Party Conference in 1971 Chancellor of the Exchequer

Anthony Barber openly encouraged the unemployed to undercut the wages of those with jobs: 'Everyone who is out of work should go to those who still have jobs and say: "You are the majority. You have the power to stop these strikes which are clearly unjustified, and you have the power to stop unreasonable pay claims — for our sake use it."'

Fourthly, the Tories sought to limit the power of organised working class action by introducing the Industrial Relations Bill. Although this was commonly, and correctly, described as 'anti-union' legislation, its primary aim was not to attack the official union organisation as such, but rather to weaken what was the strongest point of British trade unionism, the shop-floor and local organisations.

Fifthly, the Tory Government aimed to keep down wages. Even though Heath was pledged to dismantle the various mechanisms of economic control that the Wilson Government had introduced, he was not prepared to let wages continue to rise in an inflationary situation. In the first instance the strategy was one of confrontation with the unions in the nationalised industries, in order to reduce the level of wage increases.

Two further factors complicated the strategy of the Tory Government — the European Common Market and Ireland.

One of the main aims of the Heath Government was to succeed where previous Tory and Labour Governments had failed, in negotiating British entry into the European Common Market. Such entry was seen as particularly advantageous to the multi-national corporations, the British firms which aspired to operate internationally, and the technologically advanced industries. But it was also argued that it would have 'dynamic' effects on the whole of British industry. As the Confederation of British Industries put it (4): 'The opportunities offered by, and the stimulus of, free access to a fast and growing market should provide the necessary conditions for achievement by the UK of a significantly faster rate of growth than has been realised in the last 15 years.'

Entry into the Common Market was inextricably bound up with the Tory attack on workers. For the main economic effects of entry were all designed to be detrimental to

workers. Firstly, taxation changes and the Common Market Agricultural Policy would encourage rising prices, and would hit working class consumers especially hard. Secondly, the trend toward rationalisation, which it was hoped the Market would encourage, meant industrial mergers and closures, necessarily leading to increased unemployment. And thirdly, increased involvement in Europe would encourage the movement of industry to the South of England, worsening the problems of regions remote from Europe, such as Scotland, the North East, and Northern Ireland.

The troubles in the North of Ireland were the other side of the coin to the Common Market. A British capitalism increasingly oriented toward Europe, and at the same time faced with stagnation, was not able to solve the economic problems which afflicted the British ruled enclave in Ireland. When a Civil Rights movement grew up in 1968 to fight against the poverty, unemployment and political discrimination that afflicted the Catholic population, there was rapidly conflict between Catholics and Protestants, including Protestant workers whose marginal privileges encouraged them to believe they had some interests in common with the British. The response of the British Labour Government in the summer of 1969 was to send in more troops — ostensibly to keep the two sides apart, in fact to protect British interests.

If there had been a socialist leadership in the Civil Rights movement, it could have led the struggle forward by showing the common interests of Catholic and Protestant workers; to do this it would have had to fight not only British imperialism, but also the reactionary regime in the South of Ireland. In the absence of such a socialist force, the leadership of the struggle fell into the hands of the IRA, whose politics were unable to go beyond nationalism.

The Tory Government responded with increased repression — the introduction of internment (imprisonment without trial), random violence against the Catholic population (typified by the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry in 1972) and the increasing use of spies and agents provocateurs.

The IRA, for want of a political strategy, turned increasingly to terrorism (as distinct from the quite legitimate defensive violence used against the forces of occupation).

From 1972 on there were spasmodic episodes of bombing in England, against both military and civilian targets.

The Tory Government handed over the Irish question as unresolved as it had inherited it. But throughout the struggles that took place against the Heath Government, Ireland represented, on the one hand, a continuing element of political instability, and on the other, an excuse for the increase of State repression in the name of 'law and order'.

2) The British Labour Movement.

To appreciate the nature of the British class struggle in the 1970s, it is important to understand the traditions of struggle that had developed in the fifties and sixties, and to see the organizational and political strengths and weaknesses that derived from them.

The first feature of struggles in the fifties and early sixties is that they were highly localised. This resulted in the phenomenon often described as 'wage-drift' that existed in many industries, notably engineering. This was based on a two-tier system of negotiation; national negotiations established a minimum rate, while local negotiations covered piece-work rates, bonuses etc. As far as workers' living standards were concerned, it was the latter that were the more important. For example, in June 1968, the national standard weekly wage for an engineering fitter was just under £13, but the average actual earnings (not including overtime payments) were nearly £23. In many areas they were considerably higher. As a result, for well-organised workers, national negotiations seemed fairly unimportant, and as a result so did the national union organisation — hence the low votes in most national union elections. Of course, for badly-organised workers, or for those, mainly in the public sector, who did not have a two-tier bargaining system, the picture was not so rosy.

As a result, a great many strikes were unofficial. In the ten years from 1953 to 1962 there were only thirty 'constitutional' stoppages in the engineering industry, and in the five years from 1954 to 1958 there were none at all. As one observer put it: 'If a strike goes on for only a couple of days the question of whether headquarters supports it or

not is not of overriding importance. In many cases, a central element in the tactics of the militants was to win the strike before trade union headquarters heard about it!' (5)

Even more important was the fact that most strikes were successful. Indeed, the statistics for this period are somewhat misleading because they omit the strikes which were won so quickly that they were never recorded, and the strikes which never took place at all because the management gave in without a fight. As The Economist, the most class conscious journal of the British ruling class, put it: 'Full employment since the war has not led to more strikes because the unions, now more highly organised than ever, have been getting their own way without recourse to them.' (6)

Another factor closely associated with the ability of capitalism to grant wage rises relatively easily was the fact that only a small percentage of strikes were over pay — in the 1950s less than ten per cent. Far more strikes were over issues of 'control' — not, of course, some abstract demand for workers' right to participate in management, but a constant attempt to encroach on the power of management through struggles over questions of working conditions, rules and discipline.

The effect of all this was, of course, the depoliticisation of workers. There was much discussion of so-called 'apathy', defined by the historian E P Thompson as the search for 'private solutions to public evils'. Inasmuch as workers were able to improve their income and living standards by militancy within one factory, their need to look beyond these narrow horizons disappeared. The Labour Party suffered a continuing loss of active working class militants; the local organisations either faded away, or were taken over by middle-class radicals. The widespread corruption in the Labour Party is merely a side-effect of this. In a Party with no active rank and file, the functionaries and municipal councillors have a free hand, with no-one to ask awkward questions.

Already under the Labour Government the pattern began to change. Incomes policy and proposals for anti-strike laws necessarily began to raise the importance of political factors for militants. In his book Working for Ford (7), Huw

Beynon quotes two Ford shop stewards, both commenting on the experience of the Labour Government. One, a Communist Party member, says:

'We must get more involved in politics. With this Prices and Incomes Board we've got to take the Government on. We've created this monster that's in control now. We've got to organise to ensure that it stays in power but that it changes its policies to socialist policies.'

The other puts the emphasis rather differently:

'This Labour government has been an eye-opener for me. And the lads on the floor. We've talked about it quite a bit. Most of the lads think you can forget about the Labour Party, y'know. Forget about it because it's never going to do anything for the working class. The general feeling on the floor is that we're on our own. Y'know, we've got to fight our own battles. Do everything ourselves, from now on.'

The two quotations sum up the two sides of working class consciousness in the period. On the one hand, the sense of self-reliance engendered by years of localised struggle; on the other, the recognition of the need for a more generalised response. The problem was to combine the two.

Under the Labour Government there began the process of change in the pattern of industrial struggle. Strikes became longer, and more often they were official and concerned with wages. One commentator has argued that the very fact of incomes policy had an effect on class consciousness:

'Finally, incomes policy has had an unexpected ideological consequence. In the past, there existed a surprising degree of agreement as to what represented "fair pay". Trade unionists and employers alike tended to accept with little question that traditional relativities between different industries and occupations, and modest annual increments, were natural and reasonable. But incomes policy — rejecting traditional arrangements as a sufficient justification for given pay levels or relationships — made these matters the subject of wide-ranging debate. It would be surprising if this were not one reason for the growing questioning of long-established inequities, for the widespread voicing of such demands as equal pay for women or parity between car workers in different companies and areas.' (8)

The first political strike of any significance in Britain for many years was a highly unpropitious one from a socialist viewpoint. It came in 1968, when dockers and other workers struck in support of Enoch Powell, who was demanding tougher immigration control. Yet history works in strange ways; and though at the time socialists reacted with unanimous horror at the event, in retrospect it is possible to see this as a first confused recognition by workers that their industrial strength could be used for wider ends, albeit reactionary ones. Under the Tories political strikes were to become widespread, although in most cases they were token ones.

The generalisation of industrial struggle brought the trade union leaderships right into the centre of the battle. The trade union bureaucrats are necessarily caught in an intermediate position. They are at the head of workers' organisations, usually by election, though often they are voted in by only a small percentage of the membership and only once in a lifetime. They have to deliver something to their members to justify their existence. At the same time, by their income, life-style and involvement in economic and political negotiation, they become divorced from those they are supposed to represent and committed to the maintenance of the existing social order. This has nothing to do with personal corruptibility (though, as a matter of fact, many trade union bureaucrats are corrupt); it derives from the structure of the situation they find themselves in: 'For normal trade unionism centres around negotiation over the terms and conditions of workers' employment: negotiation that presupposes as unproblematic the existence of capitalist employment relations. Even a union representative who questioned the very institution of wage-labour, the subordination of employee to employer, would have to operate in his routine activities as if capitalism were permanent.' (9)

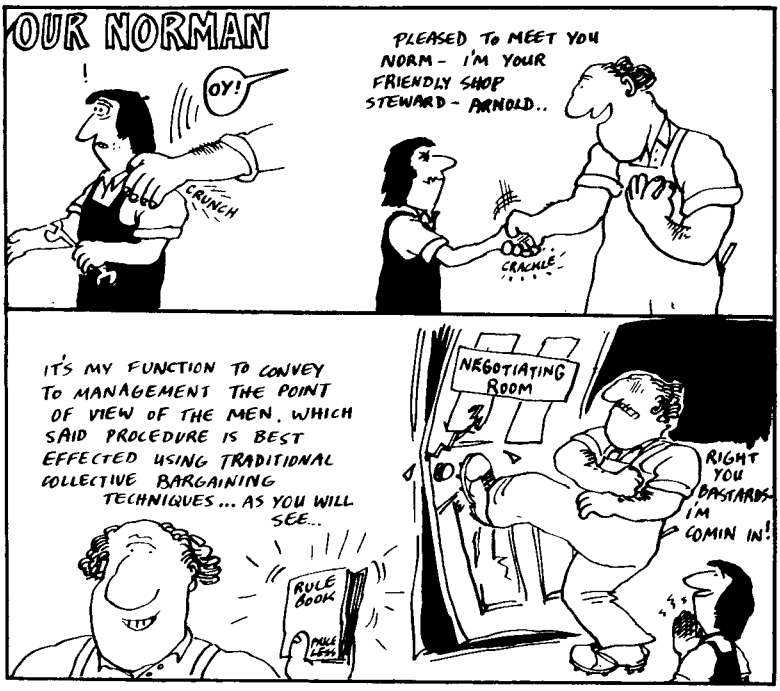
For the first twenty years or so after the Second World War the trade union leaderships stressed their political neutrality and responsibility. Thus, when the Tories came to power in 1951, the General Council of the Trades Union Congress stated: 'It is our long-standing practice to seek to work amicably with whatever government is in power and through consultation with ministers and with the other side

of industry to find practical solutions to the social and economic problems facing this country. There need be no doubt, therefore, of the attitude of the TUC towards the new government.'

To some extent the picture changed during the sixties. In the fifties the two most powerful unions, the Engineers (AEU, subsequently AUEW) and the Transport and General Workers (TGWU) both had leaders on the extreme right wing of the Labour Party. By the seventies they were led respectively by Hugh Scanlon and Jack Jones, both on the left of the Labour Party, indeed with politics largely indistinguishable from those of the Communist Party.

This meant a considerable strengthening of rhetoric, and to some extent a greater willingness for militant action. But only to some extent — the left bureaucrats acted within the same ultimate framework as the right. For them militancy might be a useful bargaining counter in negotiations; what it was not and could not be was a part of a process whereby workers emancipated themselves through their own self-activity. Their role was often to coopt militancy and to divert it into safe channels. In late 1973 Ray Buckton, leader of the railway engine-drivers' union, was asked by a television interviewer why he was calling for official action in direct conflict with the Tory Government. His reply was revealing in its direct cynicism: 'Because otherwise we would lose control of our members.'

The trade union bureaucracy coexisted, often rather uneasily, with the organisation workers themselves had built up at shop floor level. The militants of course supported left-wing leaders, but in a pragmatic manner, and without being willing to abandon their own defences. The recorded comments of a Ford shop steward in Liverpool on the fact of Jack Jones' becoming leader of the TGWU are probably typical: 'I'm not going starry-eyed about anyone. I'm prepared to be disillusioned. I'm not going to be carrying a flag for anybody for the rest of my life. I'm not a "Jones man" like some, but Jones is an improvement. He is concerned about the stewards and the lads on the floor. He's making some movement in the direction of listening to what the lads say they want, which is a hell of a lot different from what we've been used to. I think he's the best we could hope



for at the moment.' (10)

The shop stewards movement is central to an understanding of the traditions of struggle of the British working class. The movement first grew up in the period before and during the First World War (11) and was an important factor in the founding of the British Communist Party, but it collapsed after the defeat of the General Strike. The movement grew again and spread in the years after the Second World War. The steward, elected by those he worked with, sharing their wages and conditions, and subject to recall, is in a quite different relation to those he works with than the union bureaucrat. (This is not to say there are no shop stewards who are improperly elected, or who are corrupt, pro-management or reactionary. There are, just as there may be union bureaucrats with hearts of true revolutionary socialist gold. But what matters is their situation.)

The strengths and weaknesses of the shop stewards' movement are summed up in this picture of the shop stew-

ard at Chrysler's car plant in coventry (one of the best-organised industries in one of the best-paid and best-organised areas): 'For many workers "the steward was the union". On the shop-floor there were regular arguments about wages and conditions, and the steward operated under the close scrutiny of his members. This was what made the relationship a democratic one. However, at a time when employers were willing to make a series of minor concessions rather than halt production, the success of a militant steward often hinged on his individual negotiating skills. This inevitably contained the danger of the good steward substituting his ability for the collective action of the section. Finally he was a shop steward, and as it was here that most improvements could be negotiated, there was little impetus for him to look beyond, to the rest of the factory or the trade union movement outside.' (12)

The shop stewards' system was the most formidable weapon in the armoury of British workers, and any Government that wanted to hold down wages had to take it on. At the same time it was a weapon designed for a very different period than the one that was now opening up. This was the drama that was to be played out in the forty-four months of Tory rule.

3) Strikers against the Tories.

The first few months in power were not propitious for the Tory government. The tide of strikes that had been rising during Labour's last years continued unabated. Within a month of the Tories coming to power, a dock strike had begun, covering all ports in the United Kingdom. It lasted two and a half weeks and over half a million working days were 'gained'. Despite the somewhat equivocal attitude of the union leaders, a substantial increase was won.

Then in the autumn a strike of manual workers employed by Local Authorities in England and Wales rose to over a million days. This was a further extension of the action by the 'lower paid' public sector workers which had already erupted under the Labour government. Eventually, after about six weeks' action, increases not far short of the

original claim were won, amounting in percentage terms to around fifteen per cent.

Even more significant was the miners' strike that same autumn. In the fifties and sixties militancy in the coalfields had been declining; the position of the miners had been weakened by the growing use of oil and a deliberate policy of pit closures. There had been little decisive leadership from the union bureaucrats, right or left.

But there was a deep resentment smouldering among the labour force in the coalfields, and this exploded over the 1970 pay claim. When offered a ten per cent increase, a ballot of miners showed a majority in favour of strike action — but the majority was not big enough to meet the requirements of the union rules. When the offer was raised to twelve per cent, the Executive narrowly voted to accept, but strikes broke out spontaneously in Yorkshire, Scotland and South Wales, and began to spread to other areas. If the Communist Party and other left leaders in the union had given real encouragement and leadership at this point, the advantage could have been pressed home; as it was, a further ballot was held, and the twelve per cent accepted. Nonetheless, this was not a defeat pure and simple; twelve per cent was considerably higher than the sort of increase the Tories wanted to give. Moreover, the strike saw the use of the flying picket, a tactic that was to become central to the 1972 miners' strike.

The Tories got their first taste of blood with the action of the electricity supply workers in December 1970. The electricity workers did not go on total strike (which could have reduced the country to standstill in a matter of hours), but initiated a work to rule. This tactic, whereby workers stick formalistically to the rules as laid down by management, led to a sharp fall in production, and hence to the necessity for power cuts.

The press, television and other mass media immediately launched a savage attack on the power workers. Exaggerated stories of the dangers to life and limb as a result of electricity cuts were given enormous prominence; public antagonism to the power workers was deliberately incited. One television programme put five power workers in front of an audience of two hundred people. A farmer stated that

if he had a shotgun he would shoot all five, and was cheered.

This played into the hands of the union leaders, who were only too happy to call the action off and accept a Court of Enquiry. Frank Chapple, leader of the Electricians' Union (an ex-Communist now using his Stalinist experience in the service of right-wing politics) declared 'the public have had enough'.

But the union machinery had not been used to counter the attack from the media; nothing was done to try and break out of the power workers' isolation. As two Manchester militants put it in an interview with Socialist Worker (13):

'The union leaders made no effort to put our case. There is a lot of resentment in the stations. We bore the brunt of the attacks and we feel let down.

'The officials did not contact their members in other nationalised industries to give us support. Action from men in gas and water supply could have been decisive....

'Thousands of leaflets should have been produced. We'll have to do it ourselves next time.'

But the Tories were not wasting their time during their first six months — they were preparing what was to be the lynchpin of their attack on rank and file organisation — the Industrial Relations Bill which was to become law in 1971.

The Industrial Relations Bill had certain analogies with legislation already proposed by the Labour Party — analogies which Labour politicians hastened to forget. But it nonetheless represented the most far-reaching attack on trade-union rights in Britain since unions had grown into their modern form.

The Bill sought to impose limits on both the organisation and the action of trade unions. Organisationally, trade unions were to be given the opportunity of being registered; such registration was to be dependent on official approval of the union's internal rules. Unions that were not registered were denied various legal rights. Moreover, individual union members were to have legal 'protection' against the rules and discipline of their own unions. In addition, the Bill proposed a rather nebulous concept of 'unfair industrial practices', which, while not removing the right to strike, sought to limit the occasions on which strike action could be taken — for example, trying to prevent solidarity

actions.

The Bill was not, of course, aimed at smashing trade unions as such. The trade union leaders were too important as potential allies of the government to be got rid of. The Tories had no desire to see thousands of trade unionists imprisoned under the Act; this would lead to a massive industrial confrontation — the last thing they wanted. What they could hope for was that the Act would intimidate workers, especially the less organised and militant sectors, who had been troublesome of late. This would in effect strengthen the hand of the trade union leadership, who, despite their verbal protestations of opposition to the Act, would actually be able to use legal shackles as an excuse for toning down the level of action.

(THE ACT BEGINS TO BITE.)

Nonetheless the union leaderships were forced to take action against the Bill. There was strong rank and file pressure, in particular from the Communist Party - dominated Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions. In all there were four one-day strikes against the Bill be-

tween December 1970 and March 1971; in a country with no tradition of political strikes these were an important step forward. At the same time, one-day strikes are by definition merely symbolic actions; unless they are seen to be leading to something more forceful, they rapidly frustrate and demoralise those involved. (In France and Italy the trade union leaderships have used one-day strikes as a safety valve for militancy for many years.) The TUC called a demonstration against the Bill which attracted greater working class support than any demonstration since the war — but it was called on a Sunday so as not to interfere with 'normal working'. In short, the trade union leaders made it clear from the beginning that they were not prepared to use their full industrial strength — which was the only way the Tory laws could have been smashed.

In the short term, the Industrial Relations Act was a victory for the Tories; in the longer term, it was to prove a millstone around their necks. Firstly, because it allowed individual employers (who might not be thinking in terms of the interests of the class as a whole) to launch provocative legal action. And secondly, because the whole ideological strategy of the Act backfired. As one observer put it:

'The Conservatives, in their attempt to use the judiciary to reform industrial relations, selected the one branch of the capitalist state that is, by tradition, the most "neutral", the most "impersonal" and the most "inflexible" in its phenomenal appearance. By using the courts to enforce punitive anti-unionism, Heath presumably imagined he could utilize the majesty of the law to awe the working class, which in England has been traditionally "law-abiding". In fact the ideological effect was exactly the reverse. Responsibility for coercion in the area of the wage contract was displaced from the government onto the judiciary. This did not depoliticize the attack on the unions; it repoliticized the function of the courts for the mass of the proletariat.' (14)

But the Industrial Relations Bill was only a second-line weapon for the Tories. The key issue was wages, and what was needed was an exemplary victory. The aim was to find a section of workers with whom a head-on confrontation could be staged, and a thrashing administered such that any other section would think twice about making 'excessive'

pay demands.

The postmen fitted the bill neatly. They were low-paid public sector employees, with no traditions of militancy and a politically ambiguous leadership. They were involved primarily in the letter services, which made a considerable loss, rather than the automatic telephone service which was showing increasing profits. A confrontation was carefully set up; emergency procedures were introduced in the Post Office, and the Post Office chairman, Lord Hall, who had indicated some sympathy with higher wages for postmen, was unceremoniously sacked.

The Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) submitted a claim for fifteen per cent (the same as the local authority manual workers had received) in the autumn of 1970. They were contemptuously offered eight per cent, and in January 1971 they began complete and indefinite strike. The strike was to last forty-four days, and was by far the biggest strike since the war in Britain.

The postmen had one asset, and one alone — their own determination and enthusiasm. 'Everyone, including the union leaders, was astonished at the enthusiasm of the workers' response to the strike call. There was no question of strike pay. The union had started a small strike fund only three years previously. At the beginning of the strike, the fund totalled 334,000. The most this money could finance was a "hardship fund" for those strikers (such as single men) who had no income while on strike. Even so, the fund could only last for a maximum of three weeks. Yet the response among postmen was almost unanimous. The Press, notably the Daily Express and Daily Mail, immediately ordered all its reporters to "Hunt the Blackleg", but were hard put to it to find a chink in the strike. Of 100,000 postmen, less than 700 reported for work.' (15)

But even this fantastic fighting spirit was not able to overcome the tragic isolation in which the postmen found themselves. Firstly, the telephone services were maintained virtually intact, which meant that British capitalism did not face a crippling blow to its communications. Secondly, other unions were not able to organise effective blacking to prevent workers such as lorry-drivers and railwaymen being used to carry packets and messages that

would normally have gone by post. Thirdly, and most crucially of all, despite much rhetorical bluster, the TUC failed to provide the UPW with the kind of financial support that would have enabled it to prolong the strike.

And so, after forty-four days, the strike collapsed; the money won was only infinitesimally higher than what had been offered some weeks earlier. The decision of the Executive to call off the strike led to widespread demoralisation and anger among the members; many branches voted against acceptance of the offer, and in Liverpool a mass meeting of more than 2500 UPW members voted two to one against return to work.

Almost simultaneous with the postal workers strike was the strike at Ford plants throughout Britain. Here the demand was for substantial wage increases to enable Ford workers to achieve parity with other car firms in Britain. The strike lasted over two months, and was the biggest stoppage affecting a single employer in British history. The strike was only brought to an end by the intervention of Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon ('left' leaders of the two biggest unions in Britain), who held secret talks with Henry Ford, and then called a secret ballot on a new marginally improved offer. The offer was accepted, but the settlement again caused bitterness and demoralisation among many rank and file members who resented the whole procedure of secret talks and secret ballots. Huw Beynon records the comments of a Liverpool steward: 'If Jack Jones had come up here. Talked to the lads. Told them that it was all up, that the union couldn't afford any more strike pay. Y'know, put it to the lads. They might have said: "All right Jack, that's fair enough, let's call it a day." Or they might have gone on without strike pay. Y'know. But it wouldn't have turned them against Jones. What really made us mad was his agreeing, and then getting the Company to arrange a ballot for the lads to vote when there'd been no report-back meetings. Y'know everything about this strike and the way we've done things since 1969. Negotiations — leaflets — report-back meetings at the Stadium. Y'know organised. Everybody together, going in the same way. That ballot smashed all that. That's what we won't forgive Jones for.' (16)

So, by Spring 1971, the trade union leaders had, effectively, accepted the Industrial Relations Bill; a section of car-workers, traditionally the spearhead of British workers, and a section of low-paid public sector workers had been smashed. The Tories appeared to be getting on top.

But there were three prongs to the attack on workers. Legislation and wage restraint were two of them; the other was unemployment. During the course of 1971 unemployment rose to over one million. The closures and sackings that were leading to increased unemployment needed new tactics to fight them.

An important step forward was the struggle that took place at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS). UCS had been created under the Labour Government in 1968, when a number of shipyards had been rationalised into one, with the old owners getting generous compensation and seats on the new board. But in June 1971 the Tories announced the closure of the yards. 6000 jobs were directly at stake, and another 20,000, of workers indirectly dependent on the yards, were in danger.

The UCS shop stewards committee (politically dominated by the Communist Party) responded with a 'work-in' beginning on July 30. This meant that production of ships was to be maintained, and that when workers were sacked they would continue to work in the yards and be paid from a national fighting fund administered by the stewards. The rationale of the tactic was explained by a political supporter of the stewards:

'The problem facing the leaders of the UCS workers was to devise a new technique of struggle which would achieve their objective, to prevent redundancies and closures, in what was bound to be a tough struggle. A strike could play into the hands of the employers when they were set on closures anyway. A sit-in would have been difficult to maintain for long enough. It would have also given the employers a good excuse to attack the workers by arguing that the sit-in made it impossible to fulfill any contract and aggravated the bankrupt situation. This could have helped the Tories to alienate public opinion from support of the UCS workers.' (17)

There is no doubt that the UCS work-in was an important

and imaginative advance. It won the enthusiastic support of other workers, especially in unemployment-stricken Scotland. Moreover, it raised the whole question of ownership and control of production. It marked the beginning of a revival of the working-class confidence badly shaken by the defeats of the Spring.

At the same time the work-in tactic had serious limitations. Firstly, the aim of the 'work-in' was conceived of as being primarily to influence 'public opinion', in order to manoeuvre for concessions. By continuing to complete ships, the UCS stewards handed over to the authorities the main physical assets in the workers' hands. And within the yards discipline was maintained very much in the old way. The Morning Star (18) reported proudly: '...even time-keeping has clocked new records of precision. It is summed up by the fact that the traditional lunchtime pint is downed minutes before the horn goes and the time-clock bell rings every second.' As a result demoralisation set in. By June 1972 only fourteen per cent of redundant workers were still 'working-in'. The UCS stewards placed all their hopes on trying to persuade an American businessman to take over the Clyde yards.

But whatever the limits of UCS itself, it had an enormous impact in raising the issue of occupation among British workers. Factory occupations, used brilliantly by French workers in 1968, were virtually unknown in Britain until 1971; since then there have been many instances of their use.

For example, in September 1971, workers at the Plessey factory in Alexandria, Scotland, decided to launch an all-out occupation against a threatened closure. An eye-witness described the scene, almost unprecedented in British working class history:

'Last Friday the flag over the Plessey factory was hauled down and dumped on the manager's desk. With it came the words: "We have taken over." The company had intended to close the factory. Instead the workers occupied it. The day began with Plessey's paying off the last 200 employees. Then the workers held a mass meeting, marched through the works, locked the main gates and made their shock announcement. Since then they have slept in the factory and

maintained a 24-hour guard on the gates. Managers have been admitted only after agreeing to have their cars searched and giving certain satisfactory assurances to the workers. Any boss refusing this has been locked out. Posters and placards have been put up and a squad of workers has erected barbed wire barricades as a defence against any sudden police swoop on the plant. Food and blankets have been supplied by wives and a few local tradesmen.' (19)

Many similar occupations followed. Although the success in actually fighting unemployment was limited, their effect on class confidence was considerable. For occupations confront the whole hegemony of the ruling class. As electricians' steward Archie Breden, one of the leaders of the Fisher Bendix occupation near Liverpool in 1972, told Socialist Worker (20):

Welsh steelworkers protesting impending steel bill clash with police outside Parliament, February 26, 1973

'Management are redundant. We could run the factory. Of course, we would have problems, but we would get assistance from other experienced trade unionists.

'People became immediately responsible. They no longer feel subservient.'

But significant as the occupations were, they affected

only a small section of the working class. The real turning-point came when once again the Government took on a head-on fight with a major section of workers over wages. This time it was to be the miners.

The miners were demanding increases of between £5 and £9 — the biggest claim ever submitted by the union. Although the National Coal Board's response was contemptuous, it is clear that in the beginning neither the Government nor the union leaders believed there would actually be a strike. In particular, the President of the National Union of Mineworkers, Joe Gormley, went out of his way to be conciliatory.

But the Tories miscalculated. They believed the miners could be isolated and beaten in the same way that the postmen had been. But there were important differences. Firstly, the miners lived in tight concentrations in pit villages, and had a long tradition of bitter struggle behind them; as a result, they were relatively impervious to the attacks of the mass media. Notable in particular was the solidarity shown by families. In strike situations the British press delight in raking up wives who oppose their husbands' strike action. They had no luck in finding anti-strike miners' wives.

Secondly, the miners were able to succeed where the postmen had failed, in winning massive support from other workers. Since before 1926 the miners had been a key sector of the British labour movement, and other workers knew this. They also knew that the miners' job was a filthy and dangerous one, and thought they deserved more pay. And above all, they recognised that the postmen had been defeated through isolation, and that it was in their own interests not to let it happen again.

From the beginning of the strike solidarity was apparent. Collections were held in union branches and workplaces up and down the country. Students offered money to the miners, and occupied colleges to provide accommodation for pickets, thus showing how completely their social role had changed since 1926, when students provided the main reserve of scabs during the General Strike.

But the key factor was picketing. The TUC had instructed that no other workers should cross miners' picket lines. But this was meaningless unless the picket lines were ac-

tually, physically there. The miners had to prevent existing coal supplies from being moved and used by picketing ports, power stations and coal depots. A fantastic organisation grew up, with pickets of miners travelling the length and breadth of the country, and receiving warm welcomes from trade unionists wherever they went.

But warmth was not enough; the Tories were responding by ordering lay-offs of workers and stepping up police attacks on pickets. If the strike had lingered on too long, the mood could have gone sour. The crunch came at the Saltley coke depot in Birmingham, one of the centres of militancy in the engineering industry. If Saltley could be closed, the Government would have to think about retreating. Saltley was closed, in one of the high-points of solidarity action of the British working class. A participant described how it happened:

'For the miners it was simple. The closing of the depot became a matter of principle, and as one miners' leader said, "We may have to bring sufficient pickets here to make it physically impossible for a lorry to drive through the gates."

'The call went out on the Saturday for men to come from Barnsley. The striking evidence of how miners responded to the call for pickets is shown by the fact that on the Sunday 600 miners were at the Saltley gates. The Gas Board closed them but announced they would be open the next day.

'On the Monday and Tuesday frustration and tension mounted as lorries went through the pickets. In one case a lorry burst through the crowd. The chant began — "Close the gates! Close the gates!"

'Building workers, car delivery drivers and delegations from factories supported the picket, but as the picketing force increased it seemed as though the police could call on unlimited reinforcements. Hundreds of extra police were brought in and the total built up until they practically outnumbered pickets.

'Plain clothes police in the crowd directed snatch squads to arrest militants among the pickets. At this stage it seemed as if the police would hold the line and through arrests and a massive display of strength keep the gates open.

'The decisive events which swung the struggle to victory began on Tuesday evening, 8 February, when the East District Committee of the engineering union in Birmingham called a meeting of senior stewards for the following day. At the meeting over 200 senior stewards issued a call for a solidarity stoppage and a march on Saltley on Thursday morning.

'The response was amazing. 40,000 workers struck from scores of Birmingham factories and 10,000 marched to Saltley.

'The 1000 police gave up. They were no match for such a massive display of working-class solidarity with workers from Rover, Lucas, Tractors and Transmissions, Wilmot Breedon and many, many others assembled outside the gates. To massive cheers, the Chief Constable ordered the gates shut at 10:42 "in the interests of public safety."' (21)

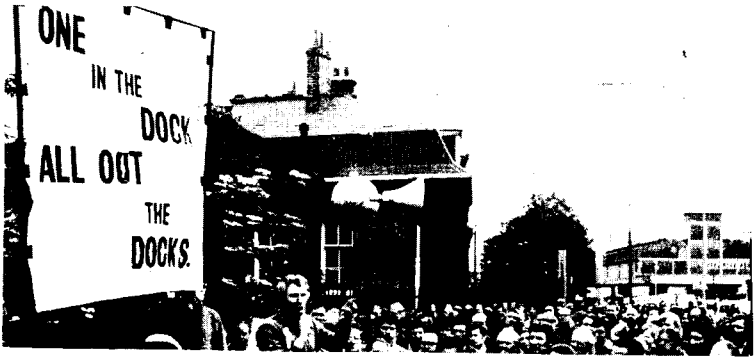
Five days later the Government set up a special enquiry — the Wilberforce Enquiry. This reported in three days flat, and in essence conceded a substantial increase, on the basis that the miners were a 'special case' — i.e. that their increase should not be seen as an example for other workers. The Wilberforce offer fell short of the full claim, and it contained some disadvantageous clauses (notably one extending the agreement to February 1973, which meant that the next struggle would come in Spring, not Winter, when the miners would have less bargaining power). But essentially the miners had won a victory, and it was perceived as such by both the Government and other workers.

Although the Government managed to hold the line that the miners were a special case in dealing with some weaker sections (e.g. teachers), the confidence generated led to a victory for the railwaymen, despite the fact that a 'cooling-off period' and then a secret ballot were imposed by the Industrial Relations Court.

And it was to be the Industrial Relations Court which was at the centre of the next confrontation. This time the workers involved were dockers, and the issue was jobs. The introduction of containerisation had cost the dockers a third of their total numbers over the previous five years. The dockers were not fighting against technological advance as such; but they saw that under a system based on profit,

containerisation was being used to replace dockers with other workers who did not have the wages and conditions won by the dockers over years of struggle.

As a result dockers were picketing a container depot at Chobham Farm in East London. After a considerable amount of legal toing and froing, on July 21, 1972 the Industrial Relations Court sent five dockers to jail for refusing to appear before it to state their case.



Demonstration supporting jailed Pentonville dockers

The press and media had done their best to blunt workers' solidarity by making this appear as a conflict between two groups of 'selfish' workers. Nonetheless, when the crunch came and workers were for the first time actually jailed under the hated Act, the response was far bigger than either the Government or the union leaders could have predicted. Immediately the machinery of rank and file solidarity went into action. An observer relates:

'As soon as the news came through to the London stewards that the five would be jailed they resolved to go back to the dock and call the men out. When they got there, the men were already leaving.

'About 300 dockers were outside Midland Cold Storage by 1 pm, ready to stand guard over the men who were to be jailed. When the first two policemen came for the men, they were nearly lynched. The stewards calmed the men down and a few minutes later three of the five were arrested.

'Immediately the dockers held a meeting in the car park of the nearby Hackney greyhound stadium and the key call went out: "Picket the prison." The picket was established firmly by 6:30 pm and the dockers had their "nerve centre".

'As Bob Light, one of the many rank and file dockers intimately involved in the struggle, explains: "Picketing Pentonville (prison) gave the whole thing a base, it was our unofficial mission control. From there we could send our pickets anywhere." And that is how the stoppage was spread beyond the docks with pickets, with initiative, and with imagination.

'"Our men went down Fleet Street (where national newspapers are printed) on Friday night," Bob says. "We chose Fleet Street because that was the only industry we could stop over the weekend. In the back of our minds was the immense psychological importance of the national papers. If we got them shut down then we would have the best press we'd ever had."

'On the Friday night the dockers' pickets were turned down by the printers. Then on Saturday night the electricians moved along with some NATSOPA (print union) chapels and all the Sunday papers were shut down with the exception of the Sunday Times.

'But it was still touch and go. On Sunday there was a real likelihood the papers would re-appear. Then SOGAT (another print union), who organised the van drivers, moved and Fleet Street was sewn up.

'The dockers moved out, sending stewards and pickets here, there and everywhere. Fleet Street had become the start of the snowball.' (22)

The strike did indeed snowball. Within a day or two the TUC General Council itself was threatening to call a General Strike (for the first time since 1926). The reason was summed up with the cynical pragmatism that only a 'left' trade union bureaucrat could muster by Jack Jones of the TGWU: 'If we don't do something then the leadership will be in the hands of unofficial elements.'

The Tories did not want a General Strike. But they had the problem that the jailed dockers, taking a principled stand of refusing to recognise the Industrial Relations Court, would say nothing in their defence. So, from the

recesses of Britain's archaic and ponderous legal system, they dredged up a strange figure called the 'Official Solicitor', whose job it was to plead for those who could not plead for themselves. Few other than lawyers so much as knew he existed. Within five days the dockers were free. Mass action had again won a victory.

An interesting sidelight on the events is provided by an interview in Socialist Worker (23) with Tony Churchman, steward of the non-docker container workers at Chobham Farm, who had originally initiated the moves against the dockers in the Industrial Relations Court. Now, more impressed by solidarity in action than by a ton of propaganda about 'unity', he stated: 'What we did by going to the NIRC was diabolical. We were doing what the Tories and the employers have always tried to do.... I am proud to be associated with the dockers.'

The final deal on guaranteed jobs and redundancy payments for dockers was considerably less than could have been gained, largely due to Jack Jones' eager cooperation with the employers. But it was still better than would have been won without militant action; and the class as a whole had notched up another big victory against the Heath Government. In the late summer building workers took up the initiative with a successful strike in which the flying picket tactic was again used. The time had come for the Heath Government to fundamentally review its strategy.

When Heath came to power, he had denounced the idea of incomes policy as practised under Labour. 'I believe,' he said, 'in a free enterprise economy in which people take their own decisions and run their own lives.' (24) But, after the defeats inflicted over the miners' claim and the jailed dockers, Heath was forced to start trying to cobble together just such an incomes policy.

From July to November 1972 there were a series of so-called 'tripartite talks', involving Government, TUC and the Confederation of British Industries. The trade union leadership participated in these talks, designed to take the Government's chestnuts out of the fire, instead of pursuing the advantage they had gained from the victories earlier in the year. Although they were verbally committed to getting rid of the Tories and replacing them with a Labour Gov-

ernment, in terms of the watertight categories of their ideology, this had to be done by 'political action' (a synonym for voting) and not by industrial action. Indeed, they were almost pathetically determined to prove their responsibility and dog-like loyalty. As Jack Jones of the TGWU put it after the talks had finally broken down: 'We are prepared to talk and negotiate in the best interests of the British people because we are as British as anyone who claims to be, from any other quarter.' (25)

In the course of the talks Heath made various offers, including an offer of a £2 a week flat rate increase all round. The response of The Economist was to headline 'Good for Profits'. (26) Even the TUC could not swallow this and retain its credibility. So the talks broke down, and Heath moved into his next gambit — a statutory prices and incomes policy. This began, in November 1972, with a three-month total freeze. Even then the trade union leaders did not give up; as late as January, the Morning Star reported another set of talks, noting that 'Mr Scanlon will be attending, as he feels it is necessary to have the militant viewpoint put.' (27)

The freeze was a wage freeze pure and simple, with price control introduced only as a piece of window-dressing, aimed presumably at the feeble-minded. It was obvious to anyone who ever entered a shop that prices, and especially food prices, were continuing to rise; the Department of Trade and Industry, armed with just 25 staff and the maximum sanction of a £400 fine, had not much chance of doing anything about it.

Phase Two, which followed after three months of freeze, was little better. It set an upper limit of £1 plus 4% for increase on weekly wages. Only the very lowest paid (on whose behalf the Tories were shedding floods of crocodile tears) could hope even to keep pace with rising prices. And yet, thanks to the equivocation of the trade union leaders, there was no solid front against the policy which could have forced its withdrawal. Heath had turned the tables, and the struggle was once again to be waged by fragmented sections.

Phases One and Two were met by a wave of sharp struggles, but they were almost entirely unsuccessful. Basically this was because the sections who went into struggle did not

by themselves have the muscle to force victory. The possibility of all-out strike action by Ford carworkers and by miners was averted. This was partly due to the skill of the union bureaucrats in pursuing conciliatory policies; and partly because many workers were deceived by the rumours circulated that tough wage restraint was only temporary, and that Phase Three, due in the autumn, would be much more generous.

And so the sectors that went into struggle were largely lower-paid workers from the public sector with few traditions of industrial militancy. Some, like civil servants and hospital workers, had never been in action before.

But here too the role of the union leaders was to try to channel the action into selective and partial strikes, rather than go for an all-out confrontation. The hospital workers were told to engage in selective strikes only, though half of them had voted for an unlimited strike. The gas workers' strike was ended after a deal involving pension contributions and a secret ballot. The National Union of Teachers, led by Communist Party member Max Morris, took time out from its campaign for a higher London allowance (extra pay for those facing high prices in London, justified by the virtual collapse of the school system in parts of London) to attack left-wing militants alleged to have behaved 'disruptively' at a mass rally.

A vital aspect of the abdication by the union leaders was the failure to call any effective united action between the sectors in struggle. Such attempts were left to local initiatives. For example, in the Camden and Islington area of North London, a meeting was held at the call of the British Museum branch of the civil servants' union, involving all unions in struggle — gasworkers, hospital workers, teachers and others. An action committee was set up which called further meetings, published propaganda, and organised support for pickets and demonstrations. Similar committees were set up in a number of other areas.

By April the struggles were largely over. Heath had held the line and Phase Two had been preserved intact. It was a clear defeat, and workers saw a decline in their living standards. But there was no demoralisation. Rather workers seemed prepared to wait and see what Phase Three

would offer. And more and more trade unionists were becoming aware of two things — that only militancy pays, and that there was little to be hoped for from the trade union leaders of left and right alike. Heath had won a breathing space, but a sharper clash was clearly in the cards.

The success of any Tory policy still depended on winning the support of the trade union leaders, and direct repression was only a secondary aspect of their strategy. Nonetheless, repression came to figure increasingly in Tory policy during 1973, if only as a means of increasing ideological pressure on the union bureaucrats, and of winning middle class support on the basis of an appeal to 'law and order'.

A major target of the Tories was picketing, which had proved a central weapon in workers' struggles over the previous couple of years. A special police unit was set up to coordinate action in dealing with potentially 'violent' picketing, and specially trained units of police were set up which could be sent to trouble spots. A judgment in the House of Lords ruled that it was illegal to peacefully obstruct a lorry in the course of picketing.

The offensive against picketing was backed up by what was one of the most important political trials in Britain for many years. In October 1973 began the trial of 24 building workers accused of offences during the previous year's strike. The use of flying pickets had been central in this strike as a means of contacting and bringing out on strike workers on many scattered and often poorly organised sites.

The trial was not based on the Industrial Relations Act; that would have risked a repeat of the actions that followed the jailing of the five dockers the previous year. Instead nineteenth century Conspiracy Laws were raked up, and the trial, lasting some months, was held in the remote and highly conservative town of Shrewsbury, before a judge who scarcely troubled to conceal his reactionary views. In the end punitive sentences were imposed, one of the convicted receiving three years in prison and another two.

The union leaderships in general had little to say about the Shrewsbury trials. The allegations of 'violence' were an embarrassment to them, which they preferred to evade, rather than going on the offensive against those really re-

sponsible for violence, the building employers, whose profit-seeking and neglect of safety leads to such a high accident rate in the industry. The main builders' union, UCATT, actually instructed its branches not to contribute money to the financial support of the accused pickets.

The real target of all this was the miners. Phases One and Two had largely succeeded in their aim. The annual rate of increase of earnings had been cut back from 15% to 12.4%; average take-home pay was only just keeping up with the price index; and the share of profits in the national product had risen at the expense of wages and salaries. At the same time many workers were becoming impatient. The Tories had only limited room for manoeuvre. The overall economic situation would not let them open the gates for bigger wage increases; at the same time they could not risk a general confrontation. As The Economist noted: 'The government believes that the worst disaster this winter would be a near general strike that was successful because the strikers commanded a wide measure of public sympathy.' (28)

The miners were obviously the key to the whole situation. They had already shown they were capable of defeating the government; and in the autumn of 1973 their position was greatly strengthened by the Middle East War and the consequential rises in oil prices.

Phase Three was carefully worded to give the appearance of generosity. It was more flexible than its predecessors, with allowances for productivity and for 'threshold agreements' enabling additional payments after a seven per cent increase in the cost of living. In addition, it contained a provision permitting extra payments in the case of workers who had to work 'unsocial hours' (shift workers etc.). This was specially designed to let the government off the hook by allowing them to pay the miners more if it came to the crunch. Indeed, it was reported that this clause of Phase Three had been partly drafted by a Coal Board official, so that it could act as a loophole for the miners without setting general precedents.

Meanwhile the miners were pushing ahead with their claim, to establish minimum weekly wages ranging from £35 to £45 according to types of work. Negotiations broke

down in the face of the legal pay restrictions, and the NUM leadership were faced with the question of how to fight for the claim. Gormley and other right-wing leaders were, of course, as anxious to avoid head-on confrontation as Heath, and the Communist Party and other left leaders had no clear alternative.

Gormley's strategy was to propose a complete ban on overtime, including weekend maintenance and safety work. This could be presented to the militants as an effective sanction which would rapidly bite without involving miners in the sacrifices of an all-out strike. At the same time it was an indication to the Tories that the NUM leaders were responsible men who wanted to keep on talking and avoid a confrontation.

Heath, however, was now in a position where his whole credibility depended on beating the miners. Rumours of an election were already rife. So he had to stake all on doing what he had failed to do in 1972 — isolate the miners from the rest of the working class.

In December the Tories declared a state of emergency, for the fifth time since they had come to power. They then followed this by putting the whole of industry onto a three-day week. In straight accounting terms this was nonsense; it was designed to lose Britain 800 times more national income than paying the miners would cost. But it was a clear political move with two aims. Firstly, to indicate that the Government was prepared to sit it out till the Spring rather than pay the miners. And secondly, by in effect imposing a loss of up to 40% of earnings on workers, to encourage them to blame the miners and not the Tories for their misfortunes. This was followed by a series of vicious cuts in public expenditure; defence was cut back somewhat, but so were social services such as health and education which in some areas were already not far from the point of collapse.

Still there was no clear response from the trade union leaders. The three-day week had turned the struggle into one between the Tories and the whole working class; but the union leaders were quite unwilling to recognise this and start to lead all-out action against the Government. Because of various local agreements on weekly minimums and conditions, the effect of the three-day week was highly uneven.

Yet the union machines did virtually nothing to communicate the experience from one sector or area to another, let alone to present a united front against cuts in standards.

The NUM leadership still carried on talking, trying to patch up a compromise. But now a confrontation could not be avoided. An observer records the train of events :

'At the beginning of January the government encouraged the miners to believe that coal stocks at the power stations were running low, but by the middle of the month nobody could hide from the true facts. According to power station shop stewards most stations had enough coal to last at least two to three months and were likely to be able to keep going, despite the overtime ban, until the middle of summer at least. At many stations the bunkers were so full that fresh supplies were having to be turned away.

'Anger among the rank and file was mounting. In Leicestershire, the most right-wing area, Frank Smith, area secretary for 28 years and a member of the national executive, proposed the overtime ban to be called off. Men walked out of the pits in the area and demanded his resignation. The first mass meeting on the coal-field since the General Strike was called at which Smith was forced to apologise.

'Meanwhile calls were being made at a pit and area level for the action to be stepped up. Eventually, at the national executive committee meeting on 24 January it was decided to ballot the membership with a recommendation for strike action. The ballot was held a week later and the result was a massive 81 per cent in favour — as against 58 per cent in 1972. What made the result even more remarkable was that the membership had been so badly prepared for a strike. Up until two weeks before the decision to ballot the rank and file had been encouraged by both left and right wing members of the executive to believe that the overtime ban was winning.

'The massive majority showed two things : firstly it indicated the determination of the rank and file to fight and win, and secondly it showed the importance of decisive leadership. After this experience no trade union official should ever be able to blame his unwillingness to fight on the reluctance of his members. The ballot showed that the rank

and file will respond to clear leadership, no matter how late it may be in coming.' (29)

So it was a confrontation, whether the bureaucrats liked it or not. But their congenital preoccupation with separating 'politics' from 'trade unionism' was shown when Mick McGahey, Vice-President of the NUM and a member of the Communist Party, made a rousing speech in which he threatened that if troops were used to break the strike, the union would call on them to disobey orders. This unleashed a classic red-scare, and 111 Labour MPs signed a statement attacking McGahey. McGahey's response was not to use the opportunity to raise the whole question of state power, but to make another speech in which he stated: 'I am for the ending of the government as quickly as possible. But we'll do it in our own traditional way, through the ballot box.'

But one thing was missing from the scenario as planned by Heath; the miners were not being isolated from the rest of the population. At the beginning of February an opinion poll showed that over the last month the percentage of the population who were willing for the miners to be paid had risen from thirty-eight per cent to fifty-two per cent.

So Heath had to play his final card. A General Election was announced for February 28. Gormley now tried frantically to get the strike called off, but under massive rank and file pressure the Executive agreed that it would go on.

The 1974 election was more clearly a class confrontation than any previous election since the Second World War. Not, it should be stressed, because the Labour Party had in any sense a working-class programme. Wilson and his friends were just as clearly committed to running the capitalist system at the expense of the working class as was Heath. In policies the only difference was Labour's commitment to a few timid reforms (as sugar on the pill) and its belief that better 'industrial relations' could be achieved by cooperation with the unions (that is, the union leaders should be made accomplices in the screwing of their members).

But conscious members of the working class traditionally identified with the Labour Party, and the Labour Party was organically linked to, and largely financed by, the trade un-

ions. A victory for the Tories in an election forced by a strike would be seen as an endorsement for the Tories' anti-union policies. Workers would feel demoralised and isolated, and the Tories would have an endorsement for the stepping up of repressive measures against the unions. A Labour victory, on the other hand, would be seen as an encouragement for trade union militancy and a rejection of Heath's union bashing. Labour politicians did their best to obscure the fundamental issues with the usual rhetoric about the 'national interest'. But in the circumstances they could not wholly succeed.

The Tories, indeed, thought they could profit from an atmosphere of confrontation. The union leaders had been so apologetic about themselves that union-bashing seemed to be worth votes. One right-wing Tory candidate went so far as to call the Labour Party 'red Nazis'. The Economist, almost as hysterically, warned 'Worst of all, a successful miners' strike, including successful illegal picketing, would insensibly spread rule by force throughout the British community.... A surrender now would make unlawful force seem the normal way of conducting the business of earning Britain's living. There is not just a whiff of Weimar in Britain. There is a smell of Argentina.' (30) The Tory election manifesto highlighted the threat to withdraw social security payments from the families of workers on strike.

There is some evidence that the witchhunting backfired, and that the Tories actually lost ground by their red-baiting tactics. More significant was the fact that there were deep splits in their own ranks. In the run-up to polling day the Tories suffered two mortal blows. Firstly, Enoch Powell, who enjoyed great support among the Tory rank and file, announced that he would be voting Labour because of Labour's opposition to the Common Market. Secondly, Campbell Adamson, director general of the Confederation of British Industry (the main employer's organisation), declared that the Industrial Relations Act had poisoned industrial relations and should be repealed. Both these moves could be interpreted in terms of the personal strategies of the individuals involved; but they were important as symptoms of the very deep malaise inside the Tory Party and

indeed the whole ruling class.

The election result was a victory for nobody. The Tories received a clear vote of no confidence. The Labour Party, though emerging with the most seats, were short of a clear majority. More surprisingly, they polled fewer votes than at any election since 1935 and a smaller percentage of the poll than at any since 1931. As for the much proclaimed Liberal upsurge, it represented essentially an expression of dissatisfaction with both main parties.

Many people voted Liberal 'to keep the Tories out'. The Liberal vote is a vote of radical discontent, which in the coming period of struggle could go either to the radical left or to the radical right.

So Labour formed a government. They paid the miners — though, with the cheerful acquiescence of bureaucrats of left and right alike, they paid some categories of workers well short of the full claim.

For the first time trade union action had brought down a government. It was, in a sense, a victory for the working class. But it was a long way short of a clear-cut victory; indeed, in retrospect it will probably be seen as no more than a breathing-space in the continuing struggle.

4) The Political Perspective.

Labour's accession to power led to a lull in the struggle. It would be foolish to predict the timing or rhythm of coming events, but it may well be that by the time this article is printed the so-called 'honeymoon' between Labour and the unions will be over and new confrontations will be on their way. In the first months of Labour rule the sectors in struggle are again low-paid public sector workers — nurses, local government officers — with no traditional attachment to the Labour Party. But the heavier battalions will not be silent for long, and the international economic situation does not give Labour much scope for buying them off.

During the period of opposition Labour made certain apparent moves to the left. This is a normal pattern for the Labour Party, which uses periods of opposition to win back to its ranks some of those who have been disillusioned or

demoralised by its performance in power. At the same time Labour can never risk the support of middle-ground voters by aligning itself too actively with industrial struggles. It is aided in this balancing role by the so-called 'left' of the Party, who offer repeated rhetorical opposition to the Party line coupled with de facto support, thus helping to keep alive the illusion that Labour can be 'pushed to the left'. The appointment of old-time left-wing 'rebel' Michael Foot as Minister of Employment is just one example of Wilson's ability to manipulate this situation.

There are two reasons why the hope of pushing Labour to the left is illusory. The first is the nature of the Party itself. As Ralph Miliband has pointed out: 'Of political par-

ties claiming socialism to be their aim, the Labour Party has always been one of the most dogmatic — not about socialism, but about the parliamentary system. Empirical and flexible about all else, its leaders have always made devotion to that system their fixed point of reference and the conditioning factor of their political behaviour.' (31) Labour has never been committed to mass mobilisation of workers or the overthrow of capitalism; it has always been committed to making capitalism work more smoothly (and thereby possibly a bit more humanely). In 1945, or even to a much lesser extent in 1964, it was able to do this by in-

troducing some small but real reforms (the development of a free health service in the post-war period being the most obvious example). In the present economic conjuncture the margin for reforms is far less than it was on either of the previous occasions. Labour will have to be openly and brutally pro-capitalist even sooner.

The second reason is the present organisational state of the Party. There has been a continuing decline in the level of active commitment to the Labour Party. In 1970, 172 local parties (out of a total of somewhere over six hundred) failed to send delegates to the Party's Annual Conference because they could not find an active member willing and able to go, or because they could not afford to send one. With a few localised exceptions, the local branches of the Party are either moribund or dominated by middle class members. The Party leadership, moreover, has fought hard to establish the precedent that Conference decisions of the Party are not binding on the Parliamentary Labour Party — let alone a Labour Government. In short, to wage a fight inside the Labour Party would be little more than wasted breath.

Yet at the same time the need for a political leadership becomes more and more evident. The artificial barriers between 'politics' and 'trade unionism' began to crumble during the Heath administration, not because of a rise in working class consciousness, but because of the Tory policy. With a statutory incomes policy, every strike is a political strike.

The organisation best placed to offer such a political leadership would, at first sight, appear to be the British Communist Party. Compared with its sister parties in France and Italy, the British CP has always been small, and in terms of parliamentary politics it has been unsuccessful in challenging the monopoly of the Labour Party over the working class vote. But, ever since the Second World War, when the popularity of Russia and its line of none too critical support for the war effort led to the most rapid growth in its history, the CP has had a significant influence in many trade unions, being represented by many of the best shop stewards as well as capturing positions in the various levels of the bureaucracy.

The British CP loyally followed the zigzags of Stalinism and destalinization, but managed to lead a number of struggles on the way. However, over the last ten or fifteen years it has been increasingly incapable of offering a militant leadership. This fact stems essentially from its strategy, of pushing Labour leftwards and at the same time trying to win positions in the trade union hierarchy. Trade union elections an end in themselves instead of a means to an end, the concern not to embarrass friends in the left union bureaucracy became a more important consideration than the need to mobilise and educate the rank and file.

The Communist Party's main weapon for industrial intervention was a body called the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions. This was effectively a self-appointed body, but it called conferences of delegates from trade union bodies. On 8 December 1970 it took the initiative in calling a one-day strike against the proposed Industrial Relations Bill. But when real action was called for, the Liaison Committee was nowhere to be seen; for example, when the five dockers were jailed in July 1972, there was no noticeable intervention by the Liaison Committee, even though only a month earlier it had called a conference of twelve hundred delegates which had demanded firm action against the Industrial Relations Act.

The more the Communist Party put the main emphasis on maintaining friendly relations with left bureaucrats, inviting them to speak on Liaison Committee platforms, write in the columns of the Morning Star, etc., the less able it was to maintain a disciplined industrial cadre. Members in important and sensitive positions were more and more able to follow their own whims rather than Party discipline. The Party's organisation, especially in the workplaces, began to fall into decline. A pathetic indication of this was given in the report to the CP Executive by John Gollan on the tasks for 1973. He called for a big drive for Morning Star sales, 'seeing that every member is a reader'. (32) When struggle had reached its highest level for years the Party's aim was no more than seeing that all its own members read the Party's daily paper. There is little hope that the CP will be able to provide an effective leadership in the class struggles in coming years.

As yet, however, the emergence of a revolutionary alternative to the left of the Communist Party is proving a slow process. Until the late sixties revolutionary organisations in Britain were infinitesimal in size, and usually buried deep in the Labour Party. The first opportunity for them to reach a wider audience came in the 1967-68 period. A wave of militancy swept through the universities and colleges; the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, organising in opposition to the Communist Party's call for 'peace' pure and simple, was able to get up to a hundred thousand people onto the streets of London; and the May 1968 general strike in France awoke the hopes and enthusiasm of many on the left. A sizeable revolutionary milieu grew up, though it had little impact in the working class.

It would be futile to catalogue the varying tendencies of the British revolutionary left. There are at least twelve Trotskyist groupings known to the present writer; and the Maoist groups (of which he is less of a connoisseur) are probably as numerous. The only Maoist group with any significant roots in the working class is the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), which took a number of CP militants in the engineering union disillusioned with the increasingly reformist policies of the CP leadership. Of the 'orthodox' Trotskyist groups the most significant are the International Marxist Group (IMG) and the Workers' Revolutionary Party (WRP — formerly the Socialist Labour League). The IMG, British section of the Fourth International, has made some impact in student circles, and has distinguished itself in anti-imperialist solidarity work (Ireland, Vietnam, Chile), but has not succeeded in making any real impression in the labour movement. The WRP has made the fantastic achievement, for a group of at best a couple of thousand, of producing a daily paper, The Workers Press. The price has been a high turnover of exhausted cadres and a sectarian style which seems to prohibit co-operation with any other tendency.

The largest of the revolutionary groupings is the International Socialists (IS). (The present writer must declare an interest as an active member of IS.) IS comes from the Trotskyist tradition, having distinguished itself by developing the view that Russia, Eastern Europe and China are

'state capitalist' societies. The political orientation of IS in the present period is that there is no prospect of changing or splitting the Labour Party, and that what is needed is the construction of an open revolutionary party. The danger at the present time is not that the revolutionary organisation will be diluted by raw and untrained elements, but precisely the opposite, that the revolutionary organisation will not be sufficiently open to the new layers of workers being radicalised in the present struggles. This implies a policy of open recruitment on a minimum revolutionary programme, and a concentration (not exclusive of other areas of work) on building a combat organisation rooted in the workplaces.

The achievement so far is relatively modest — something over three thousand members, about half of them manual workers, and a good proportion of the rest white-collar trade unionists; a weekly paper, Socialist Worker, with a circulation approaching forty thousand, higher than the circulation of the CP's daily Morning Star or the left Labour weekly Tribune; and some forty branches organised in factories and other workplaces.

But the building of an alternative political leadership can only take place in the course of struggle. At present none of the revolutionary groupings can intervene in the course of national struggles (though they may have a decisive weight in a small or localised conflict). What is needed urgently in the present situation is a movement which can incorporate the thousands of workers who are beginning to break with the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy, but are still far from being willing to accept a revolutionary programme. What is needed is a rank and file movement, working inside the existing trade union movement, but fighting against the bureaucracy. Such a rank and file movement could begin to develop the forms of organisation and contact required in struggle, which the existing, ossified structures of the British trade union movement do not provide.

Over the last two or three years a number of groups have emerged in various industries and unions which reflect an awareness of the need for a rank and file movement. In some cases, usually unions dominated by the right

wing, these groups have been politically inspired by the Communist Party (the Flashlight group in the electricians' union, or the building workers' Charter). In other cases — for example the Rank and File group in the National Union of Teachers — they have been animated by revolutionaries in the teeth of Communist Party opposition. These groupings all have specific programmes for the union or industry in question, but generally combine a commitment to militant policies with the demand for the democratisation of the union.

An important step towards the development of a real rank and file movement was a conference held in Birmingham on March 30, 1974, sponsored by a number of rank and file papers in various industries. This was attended by over 500 delegates from over 300 trade union bodies. There were delegates representing 40 shop stewards' and combine committees, two strike and occupation committees, 19 trades councils and seven district committees. The 239 union branches represented included 58 from engineering, 38 from transport and 32 from teachers. There was some debate at the conference as to to what extent such a movement should adopt a political, as distinct from a militant, trade union programme, but there was general agreement on the need for an aggressive set of demands on wages and conditions, defence of trade union rights and trade union democracy.

In a sense the conference was a tribute to Edward Heath. For such a conference to have been held four years earlier, independently of the sponsorship of the Communist Party (who dismissed it as being called 'by the Trotskyist International Socialists' (33)), would have been quite inconceivable.

But the Heath government was no more than a prelude to the struggles that can be expected in the next four years. The problem for workers during the four years of Tory rule was a frantic race to develop forms of organisation to keep up with the demands of the struggle. That race still goes on.

Ian Birchall is a member of the National Committee of the British International Socialists, author of the recently published Workers Against the Monolith; The Communist Parties since 1943 (Pluto Press, 1974), and co-author of France: The Struggle Goes On.

NOTES

(1) Gained, that is, by the workers; the official statistics prefer to call them 'lost'.

(2) For a detailed study of the ideology and politics of the Labour Government, see P Foot, The Politics of Harold Wilson, London, 1968.

(3) See M Kidron, Western Capitalism Since the War, London, 1970.

(4) Britain into Europe, London, 1970, p 2.

(5) T Cliff, 'The Bureaucracy Today', International Socialism 48, June-July 1971,

(6) April 6, 1957.

(7) London, 1973, p 225.

(8) R Hyman, 'Industrial Conflict and the Political Economy', The Socialist Register 1973, London 1974, p 107.

(9) Ibid., p 117.

(10) Benyon, op cit, p 265.

(11) For a full account, see J Hinton, The First Shop Stewards Movement, London, 1973.

(12) P Jones, 'Politics and the Shop Floor', International Socialism 64, November 1973.

(13) December 19, 1970.

(14) A Barnett, 'Class Struggle and the Heath Government', New Left Review 77, January-February 1973.

(15) P Foot, The Postal Workers and the Tory Offensive, London, 1971, p 13.

(16) Benyon, op cit, p 304.

(17) A Murray, UCS — The Fight for the Right to Work, London, 1971, p 11.

(18) Daily paper of the Communist Party, September 3, 1971.

(19) Socialist Worker, September 11, 1971.

(20) January 22, 1972.

(21) Granville Williams, in Socialist Worker, January 12, 1974.

(22) Laurie Flynn, in Socialist Worker, January 26, 1974 (my additions in brackets, IB).

(23) August 19, 1972.

(24) June 18, 1971.

(25) Quoted in Financial Times, November 9, 1972.

(26) September 30, 1972.

(27) January 11, 1973.

(28) October 6, 1973.

(29) Bill Message, 'Miners, a Special Strike', International Socialism 68, April 1974.

(30) February 9, 1974.

(31) Parliamentary Socialism, London, 1972, p 13.

(32) Comment, January 27, 1973.

(33) Morning Star, April 2, 1974.

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Women Workers and Class Struggle

Sheila Rowbotham
and Beatrix Campbell

Women now make up 40% of the work force in Britain and over half of all women go out to work. (1) This means that the older pattern of spasmodic work outside the home with a long period spent in child-bearing is being replaced by a more continuous relation to the wages system. The effects of this change on women's consciousness are complex but extremely significant. They are complicated by the fact that the increase in the number of women workers is largely among married women with young children forced to do part-time unskilled work. Also the conditioning of little girls in the family to be submissive — to attend, serve, complement, and defer — continues when women go out to work. Feminine conditioning and job prospects reinforce each other.

Moreover, women are still mainly responsible for housework, so for women with families, work for wages is only one aspect of the total pattern of labor. Housework and

caring for children and men is hidden labor, but essential for the continuing of work in the wage labor system. This double shift means that for the woman who goes out to work her work really is never done. Women are not just physically exhausted but also have trouble concentrating. Thus although women's lives span the community and industry — domestic production in the family and commodity production for capital — the perception of most women remains fragmented. A woman shop steward describes this fragmentation: "A woman makes up her politics from bits and pieces. She only half listens to a programme on TV whilst she's doing the ironing or some other household job. She hasn't got the time to sit down and listen to something all the way through." (2)

The male orientation of industrial relations and trade union bargaining reinforces this fragmentation by ignoring the specific situation of women as a sex. Women workers are thus presented as unorganizable and "backward," a view which is unfortunately reinforced by many socialists. Within the women's movement in Britain in the last few years there has been a growing recognition of the need to understand how class exploitation and female oppression intertwine, and how some aspects of women's consciousness could, if recognized, have a positive and radical potential in questioning bureaucracy in the unions and the economistic concentration of much wage bargaining. (3)

This article reviews the various forms women's action at work has taken in the last few years in an effort to distinguish similarities to and differences from men's action. We will discuss both the struggles women have had to fight like men workers, and agitation against the specific inequalities of women, like strikes for equal pay.

Women at work are obviously subjected to the same pressures of the economic decline of British capitalism as men: unemployment, inflation, the determination of employers to resist wage demands, and the increasing tendency for the state to intervene directly to control pay. Unemployment, though, has probably affected women as a group less than men, because the immediate effect of redundancy (lay-offs) has been in industry rather than in the

service sector where women predominate. (4) On the other hand women in manufacturing which is hit by unemployment have been affected rather more than men in the same industries, and have been involved in several struggles against redundancy. Much female employment is always hidden, because of the use of women by capital as a reserve of cheap and casual labor.

Women are concentrated in the low paid jobs — in which immigrant women constitute a lower level even among women workers. Therefore the effects of inflation and wage freeze on women are especially harshly felt, particularly by women who have to be the sole supporter of a family. Job insecurity and a low level of union organization often go with poor pay. Only just over a quarter of women workers are in unions, as opposed to half of the male labor force. Even among women who are union members, their role is often a passive one of paying dues but having little influence on policy making with their specific grievances frequently overruled.

Groups of workers who are badly paid, many of them in the public sector where the government can directly impose wage restraints, have been propelled into an unaccustomed militancy in the last few years. Perhaps another factor besides rising prices has been the determined intervention of employers and the state in the traditional mechanisms of trade union understandings of a fair wage and of accepted inequities between various sections of the working class. Thus productivity deals, incomes policy, and the rhetoric of economic planners about the plight of the lowly paid have ironically thrown long standing implicit acceptances of differences open to examination. (5) This has strengthened the continuing tendency within capitalism to break down old craft skills and confuse the distinction between skilled and unskilled. Demands for parity and equal pay extend the range of what is comparable.

Influences upon consciousness are difficult to chart and prove without very deep and detailed studies of particular disputes which we lack at present. While the existence of women's liberation has had some directly traceable effects on particular disputes in which women have been involved recently, its impact has been more as an external symbol

of defiance. Simply hearing about the action of other women at work can be important too. The Fords sewing machinists who went on strike for the right of women to be accepted on the higher pay grades in summer 1968 and closed down Fords undoubtedly encouraged other women. (6) In 1972 a shop steward, June Marriner, involved in a dispute in Goodmans loudspeaker factory in Havant, Hampshire which had been previously unionized, said the women workers read about and discussed women's liberation and were encouraged by the action of other working class women who resisted redundancy by occupying a shoe factory in Fakenham, Norfolk. (7)

NEW RANK AND FILE MILITANCY

Whatever the precise causes, there have been several upsurges of rank and file militancy in industries where either there has not been action for a long time or militant action has not been taken before. Women have played a significant part in both these developments. Early in 1970, 14,570 workers in the Leeds clothing industry, many of them women, erupted after about thirty years of quiescence. They stopped work in protest against an agreement signed by their union officials which had productivity strings attached. The unofficial strike spread to South Yorkshire and the North East of England.

Like many strikes in which women are involved it had an element of released exultation and celebration. In Leeds, a hard and dour manufacturing city, the women poured out onto the grass verges, walking from factory to factory to get other workers out, howling down the union official who came up to get them back to work and setting up a rank and file committee which brought the fusty trades council to life. During the dispute the question of equal pay was raised. The final compromise, though, left the women deflated and disillusioned.

A continuing and problematic feature of much of the rank and file militancy in the last few years has been the difficulty of connecting and sustaining the offensive. This was certainly true of the Leeds clothing strike, though the wom-

en did pass on the use of the mass picket which was to be crucial in winning the miners' strike in 1972. (8) The pattern of short unofficial strikes in the early sixties began to change in the beginning of the seventies when the number of long official strikes went up. Large numbers of workers have been involved, many of whom have not taken action for a long time, if ever. Many of these workers are in the public sector, nationalized industries or government service. 6,000 post office workers went on strike between January and March 1971. Women played an active part demonstrating and chanting in London, though the press highlighted women who broke the strike. There was no strike pay in the post office strike. Young girls who moved to London for work paying weekly rent in bed sitters (one-room apartments) without savings were in a difficult position. The post office workers did not get the 15% they asked for; instead they were given 9%. The official strike of workers unaccustomed to militancy has proved as vulnerable as rank and file upsurges unless help comes from other trade unionists. (9)

There have been other strikes in the public sector which have included large numbers of women. In hospitals, ancillary workers in 1972-73, and more recently radiographers and nurses in the summer of 1974, have taken action. It has always been difficult for these workers to act because a strike affects people who are the patients, not profits. It is particularly hard for women in hospitals, especially nurses, where the emphasis is on the altruistic caring aspect of the job. Teachers, where women predominate in the lower paid sectors, are in a similar predicament. So are social workers, who, with other local government employees, went on strike this year.

It is interesting that in these disputes the rejection of professionalism and the growth of trade union militancy have been accompanied by a questioning of the manner in which capitalist society shapes and distorts the public and social services. Thus hospital workers have started a ban on private practice and are insisting that patients come within the National Health Service. Socialist teachers have been struggling for anti-authoritarian relations with pupils

in the schools as well as more pay. Teachers in the women's movement have been contesting the sexist values which are still dominant in the education system. Similarly social workers in the radical grouping Case Con have exposed the aspect of class control and the particular containment of women both within the work force and as clients. (10)

These official strikes in the public sector have involved large numbers of workers; but there have also been pockets of militancy among low paid workers — including women — in the private sector. The numbers involved have probably been less but they have nonetheless occurred with a persistent and significant frequency. Their importance has not been so much in the extent of their immediate gains, but in the effects on people's consciousness of trade union struggle in areas which are often geographically remote and in factories and work places where trade unionism is far from automatic.

One example of such action is the long drawn out strike in a thermometer factory in a small town called Cleator Moor in Cumberland. The strike was quite simply for the right of workers to join a union and keep their jobs. The employer, Brannon, had been given a grant by the government to take his business to Cleator Moor, where there was little alternative employment. He was not only paying low wages but was negligent over safety, and cases of mercury poisoning occurred. The strike divided the small town very deeply, causing conflict not only between friends but within families. Despite this the strikers, mainly women, showed great determination and tenacity. In such circumstances the struggle for unionization becomes a question not just of economic gain, but also of political commitment.

The occupation at Fakenham in Norfolk was an indication of the speed with which new trade union tactics, like the work-in to avoid redundancy, can be taken up by workers who have no background of trade union militancy and are initially politically conservative in their views. The Fakenham occupation transformed the outlook of the women. They started to break down craft privilege, teaching everyone closely guarded skills. They started to make leather goods in a creative way instead of just repeating the same shoes.

Like the Cleator Moor strikers they met all kinds of people, ranging from socialists from Norwich to Dutch members of women's liberation. But these new trade union tactics are still limited by the continuation of capitalism. The Fakenham women successfully established a cooperative but found they had difficulty in selling in the open market.

There have been various other occupations in which women have participated. For instance men and women at Briants' color printing occupied their factory in South London. The women had to fight an attempt of one of the older male stewards to send them home at night. They insisted on an equal part. "We're not behind the men, we're with them." In September 1973, after a five-week strike for union recognition, men and women at a Seiko watch repair center in Kilburn London barricaded themselves into the manager's office for 24 hours. They took in sleeping bags and food. TV and hot and cold water were already there — courtesy of the management, who were unable to do much to harass the occupiers without potential damage to thousands of pounds worth of watches. Their demands were all met, the union recognized, back pay given for the weeks on strike. However, and this is another example of the limitations on new militant tactics, three months later they got dismissal notices two days before Christmas. Another, and this time rather more successful occupation which included women, occurred at Tillotsons Liverpool, a point and packaging factory.

EMPLOYERS RESPOND

Employers in unorganized and semi-organized jobs respond to the most basic demands, like the manufacturers in the period of early industrialization, by trying to crush workers with severity rather than co-opt them by accommodation. A particularly blatant case of this was the women's liberation campaign to unionize night cleaners working in offices between 10 at night and 6 in the morning. (11) The women work in small groups. They are already exhausted by housework, caring for small children and husbands when they go to the buildings. Many of them are im-

migrants, and few have had any previous experience with unions. The employers responded to their joining the union by moving the women from building to building, by racist insults, victimization, refusing to negotiate with the union officials and not recognizing the union. Despite this onslaught some gains were made by cleaners in London and other towns where the campaign was taken up. But even when a particular contractor was forced to give way, if the contract was given to another company the agreement with the union ceased to be valid! The harsh brutality of life in capitalism's bargain basement is a frequent experience of women workers.

In November 1973 seventy women in a Biro-Bic factory in Reading sent in a petition complaining because they were working from 7:15 A.M. to 4:15 P.M. with a 30-minute lunch break, taking home £15 a week with a fine of £1.75 on top of a loss in wages if they missed a day. After two half-day walkouts they joined the engineering union, AUEW, and elected stewards, only to have to then fight for union recognition. It is important to remember that for many women workers simply joining a union can be an exhausting, consuming struggle. While modern capitalists devise complicated mechanisms to control well-organized workers, old-style straightforward repression also still operates for the unorganized.

The economic situation and the government measures to control workers make this even harder. With the failure of industrial legislation the Tory government tried to limit the rights of workers to picket, and police were not over concerned if workers picketing were hurt by management. Very recently unionized women workers thus found themselves in quite violent pickets. At General Electric (GEC) Salford Electrical Instruments in Eccles and Heywood, Lancashire, ninety women and men who were only recently unionized went on strike because their wages were being held back under phase 2. Management drove through the Eccles picket line and used a German shepherd to intimidate pickets, biting one. A woman who was in women's liberation and an International Socialist member were arrested supporting the picket.

At both Eccles and Heywood the women transformed the whole activity of picketing by literally inhabiting the picket line. South Wales miners donated a little yellow fiberglass hut which the Eccles women sat in outside the factory gates. They installed cooking facilities to make tea, and chairs and tables. One day the management, so incensed by its presence, hoisted the hut and lifted it over the factory fence, leaving behind it the perplexed women who'd been sitting under it. The strikers at Eccles drifted back to work, but those at Heywood stayed completely solid and got backing from workers on the shop floor. They made themselves a picketing base by occupying an empty house owned by the firm just opposite the factory, putting in carpets and cooking apparatus and even decorating the mantlepiece with flowers.

There are several examples of women opposing other government measures. Jean Jepson, a convenor (person who convenes union meetings) at Armstrong Patents, was sacked for refusing to accept the three-day week in Beverley Yorkshire in January of this year. (12) Also in January, 1200 workers, mainly women, in Camborne Cornwall threatened to strike when management arranged the three-day week to include working on New Year's Day.

There have also been strikes against redundancy and attempts by management to break up work patterns to gain more control over workers. In March 1974 2000 production workers at Birmingham's Lucas factory walked out in protest against redundancy. 90% of these workers were women. In publishing in May this year Claire Walsh was made redundant at Allen Lane, Penguin Books. She was reinstated after 41 workers, including women on the switchboard, occupied Penguin's and 250 printers refused to print hardback Allen Lane books. 200 women at GEC Raglan St. in Coventry went on strike to defend their jobs because management intended to move the work over to another factory in Swansea. This was seen as an attempt to break the union militancy of the Coventry factory.

SUPPORT FROM MALE WORKERS

In these struggles of women to unionize, to get more pay, and to fight against particular aspects of the current crisis, in both the private and public sectors, support from other workers has proved vital. This has taken several forms. Women workers have been helped by men in picketing. When the night cleaners at the Admiralty building in Fulham went on strike in the summer of 1972 the refusal of delivery men to take in milk, food, and perhaps most vital beer, was an important means of pressure. Similarly, at Barbour's rainwear factory in South Shields in the same year, 60 women earning £10.60 for a 40-hour week went on strike for union recognition and a £2 rise. Men in the Transport and General Workers Union and 50 sheet metal workers from the neighboring factory helped them to picket after police brought in reinforcements. There have also been occasions when not only has the potential division between men and women workers been overcome, but also the old suspicion between manual and non-manual workers. In April of this year six typists in East Kilbride Scotland working in a subsidiary of Bunch oil won increases of £4-£5 after engineering workers on the shop floor blacked deliveries. Nurses in June were supported by other trade unionists with one-day strikes or demonstrations in Nottingham, Carmathen,

Manchester, Doncaster, Darlington, Leamington, Norwich, Edinburgh and Sunderland. The workers involved included dockers, miners, dustbinmen and market workers. A particularly impressive example of support occurred in 1969 in the British Sound Recording dispute, where 1000 workers, mainly women, went on strike for four months for union recognition. The local council of East Kilbride in Scotland supported them. There were also short stoppages in solidarity throughout the central belt of Scotland which involved a total of two hundred thousand people and were successful.

Despite these instances of support there have also been cases of opposition and apathy from male workers. (13) In July 1973 at GEC Spon Street, Coventry, women workers earning a basic rate of £13 a week found that the introduction of new materials would bring their piece rates down even more. They decided to go on strike despite the opposition of the convenor in their union, the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers. Albert Beardmore told drivers to please themselves about crossing the picket lines and set them a militant example by crossing it himself saying "I'm not going to have my men laid off by a bunch of silly girls." One picket was knocked over trying to persuade someone not to enter. Beardmore then tried to take away his deputy Elsie Noles' AUEW union card because she supported the women. By September the factory had been completely closed down. Beardmore was overruled by a mass meeting but remained intransigently chauvinist. He organized a kangaroo court of other stewards which voted to expel Elsie Noles. This was hastily changed by the AUEW district committee which reinstated her.

BLACK AND ASIAN WOMEN

Even more wrinkled and complex struggles have faced black and Asian women in several disputes which have had a racial as well as an industrial component. In some of the big public service strikes black women have presented a new and dynamic presence, not surprising since thousands of black women are employed in this sector, particularly

as hospital workers.

However there have been a number of disputes in recent years with distinct racial overtones in which sometimes the strikers have found themselves pitted not only against the employer but against the union too. Most recently, about half the 600 or so Asian workers who walked out of the Imperial Typewriters factory in Leicester were women. The strike was sparked by a bonus dispute, in which the management had cheated the assembly line workers out of their bonus. During the strike the strikers, particularly the women, spilled much accumulated resentment against their treatment at the hands of white racist foremen. The local union leadership was positively hostile to the dispute and uttered many a bitter word against it, supporting the 500 or so workers who had remained inside the gates. However the strikers appealed to the national leadership of the Transport and General Workers Union, and after many weeks a settlement was reached involving a return-to-work without victimization. Significantly, the women decided to organize a women's group within the union in the factory through which they can air specifically their own grievances.

Despite the continuation of racist attitudes, despite the survival of men like Beardmore in the trade union movement, and despite cases of official trade union half-heartedness about the organization of women workers, a very important shift has occurred since the Fords women's strike in 1968. Men like Beardmore are now being increasingly forced onto the defensive. This change in the climate of assumption towards women workers has not only forced through legislation about equal pay, it has meant that several unions have taken important initiatives in these areas of special female inequality.

At the end of the sixties, a commitment which had existed formally in the Labour movement since 1888 on equal pay was expressed in legislation when the Labour government's employment minister, Barbara Castle, drew up a long-awaited bill to introduce equal pay by 1975. The bill appeared in the wake of sporadic outbreaks of quite dynamic industrial action, notably the Fords women's strike and the

British Sound Recording dispute in Scotland, and escalating pressure from industrial spheres in which there was strong union organization involving women. The legislation, however, long awaited as it had been, arrived thin and flimsy, fraught with loopholes and without the crucial back-up of anti-discrimination legislation. Barbara Castle's Tory counterpart, Robert Carr, the shadow minister in opposition, had suggested including a discrimination clause in Castle's bill, but was defeated on the ground that a special anti-discrimination bill was not required. When the Tories took power in 1970, they were first resolutely unconvinced by the years of arguments and wave of pressure for a bill, and spent the next four years filibustering and prevaricating, only to come up with proposals so limited and limp as to be useless.

It must be said that the arrival of the act was soured too by the memory of Barbara Castle's patronizing and defusing intervention in the Fords women's strike, symbolized by her "talking it over" with the ladies over a cup of tea. Out of the coincidence of industrial action and the need to mobilize quickly for the implementation of the equal pay act grew the National Joint Action Campaign for Women's Equal Rights (NJACWER), which attempted to span both the incipient women's liberation movement, the incipient organizations of the left and the trade union movement. But despite some initial effects and public pressure this frail body was extinguished, more by internecine tug-o-war than anything else.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND WORKING WOMEN

Since the demise of NJACWER there has been no nationally co-ordinated women's movement around work and industrial struggle, and in practice the women's movement has neither had the confidence nor the contact with industrial workers to directly penetrate the labor movement.

Having said that, the very existence of the women's movement has generated a degree of consciousness which has percolated through many spheres and institutions, no less the trade unions than anywhere else, and the past two

or three years particularly have seen a little more potent commitment to equal pay than hitherto. One of the four points of the engineering workers' struggle in 1972 was equal pay, a demand which all too quickly evaporated in many areas because in general the struggle had failed to really take off — thus the women's demand was the first to go. Nevertheless the union had made some form of commitment to equal pay.

A tougher line has been taken by the Engineers' technical and administrative section (TASS), which has both encouraged and backed industrial action by women consistently. It was one of the first unions to smash through the counter-inflation barricade to win very substantial pay rises for women clerical workers in the Nuswift fire extinguisher factory in a small, hard-bitten Yorkshire industrial town called Elland. Here the women went on strike over the Easter holiday, staying out for over two months, after having been union members for only a couple of months. They were immediately supported by the male production workers, who walked out and stayed out. When the strike ended successfully, the men marched into the factory behind their union banner, through a corridor of cheering, clapping women. (14) Now this union is appointing a women's organizer.

Similarly, another administrative workers' union, APEX, unlike TASS not known for its militancy, has committed itself to taking industrial action in support of progress toward equal pay, and has insisted that all pay settlements include improvements in women's relative earnings. However, this has been strictly within the financial limits set by the Tory government's counter-inflation curbs, which permitted initially a one-third and later a one-half reduction in the pay differentials between men and women. Hundreds of factories were affected by this union's decision and scores were hit by industrial action. As mentioned earlier, the most bitter struggle was at a subsidiary of Arnold Weinstock's massive GEC empire, which had clearly pitted itself against any equal pay breakthrough. For the union GEC was the hardest employer to crack.

Another white-collar union, Clive Jenkins' scientific,

technical and supervisory staffs' ASTMS, has taken specific action to mobilize women. Within the Pilkington's glass complex the union got the management to agree to regular meetings of women's representatives from each Pilkington site in Britain. The same union is having regular meetings of women in the North West of England, and in the South women members are getting together. Clearly, in terms of union initiatives, the most consistent progress around equal pay has arisen where the union involved already had some real commitment and sensitivity both to women's situation and to women's demands. According to an official in the Sheffield-based small tools engineering industry, much of the movement generated around women's demands there at the end of the sixties and early seventies was precisely because the union had set up a women's advisory committee regionally to alert the union to women's demands.

Despite the tenuousness of the links between trade unions and women's liberation, it is certainly true that union consciousness has been informed by the feminist movement, and in some unions progress has been the result of pressure by feminist women. Of course, more generally important has been the percolation of ideas and experience from the women's movement into the trade unions. Although women's liberation has not been able to organize particularly effectively among working women, it has always been ready to give support, and is now beginning to initiate and participate in a new broad movement based on women wage-earners' demands.

Out of the official trade union movement this year came the "Working Women's Charter," a compendium of points covering pay, opportunity, training, maternity leave and child care. It emerged initially from the London Trades Council, which comprised representatives from scores of trades councils throughout the capital. (Trades councils are peopled by representatives from any or all the unions in a locality which are affiliated with the National Trades Union Congress.) At an initial meeting in London the charter and possibilities of organizing around it immediately became the focus for sectarian wrangles. However in other parts

of the country it has become the pivot of equal rights campaigns based on work and indeed involving men, and of significant attempts to breach the gap between the feminist movement and women workers. Certainly although the charter came out of an official trade union context it is likely to be taken up most enthusiastically by the rank and file movement and by the women's movement, and indeed this is already the case.

At the same time the struggle for anti-discrimination legislation has been supported by women's liberation, the labor movement and other agencies, not the least of them the National Council for Civil Liberties. The NCCL this year has made a considerable intervention in the struggle of women, both by organizing working women's conferences, which for once really do draw together shop stewards, union members, and women's liberation activists, and by launching a model bill which is both more comprehensive than any of the half dozen which stumbled vainly through the House of Commons and the Lords, and more effective. (15)

SPECIAL POSITION OF WOMEN WORKERS

Women's position at work cannot be understood in class terms alone. The ideas and feelings women have about themselves, the attitudes of men, the material circumstances of women's producing life are part of the particular predicament of women as a sex. Although there are differences between the circumstances of women of different classes there are also important similarities. The sex divisions have a real basis in the actual situation of women, and form a crucial element in women's consciousness of themselves as workers. Women share all the difficulties of men at work. They have to struggle against employers and sometimes against apathetic officials in their own unions who see union work as a job like any other and regard militancy as an irritating interruption to their routine. But there are the added problens of being female : internalized passivity so you feel incapable inside your deepest self, the external reality of inequality at work, the double shift

of housework, and the arrogant inability of some male officials and workers to recognize the specific oppression of women workers and learn from them. Sylvia Greenwood, a shop steward, describes this: "It's a hard job for a woman trade unionist. You're not just battling against management, you're battling against the sex problem, and it's one of the most difficult there is." (16) In the case of West Indian and Asian women there is the added problem of racism as the dispute at Imperial Typewriters showed.

Some of these difficulties take an explicit form. Men organize meetings when women have to put children to bed and then complain that the women are backward when they don't turn up. Others are less explicit and harder to confront, such as the overwhelmingly masculine atmosphere of many trade union meetings, so women feel pinned down and cornered by the force of male assumptions. There is also language. Audrey Wise, a trade unionist in the shop workers union USDAW expresses this: "...there's...the deep rooted male terminology....At one meeting I was at the chairman used the term 'old women of both sexes' and when I objected...I knew I'd be told I had a trivial mind... and sure enough up got the other speaker and said, 'I'm very surprised at Comrade Wise bringing us down to this trivial level.' But you see it isn't trivial and you have to take a very deep breath to stand up for women as a sex, as people." (17) Too often, too, far from really confronting specifically women's problems, discussion is steered into the same spheres as any other trade union gathering, without either the seriousness or effectiveness of the mixed congress.

Each instance of male contempt is invariably seen as trivial. The effect of innumerable instances smothers and stifles women's dignity as a sex. It saps the courage from us. The challenge which has been made to this internationally by the growth of the new feminism is a source of great strength to women, but the direct application of this consciousness and organization in the work situation of working class women is still tentative. New forms of organizing can't be constructed artificially. They grow out of changing combinations of circumstances. But the recognition and

sifting of their initial appearances can nonetheless have a crucial influence on their chance of survival. Within women's liberation in Britain there has been a good deal of discussion of the questions of separatism and autonomy. There has also been an attempt by a working woman in Lancashire to start a separate women's union, and this was discussed though rejected by some of the women in the Fakenham occupation.

SEPARATISM AND AUTONOMY

The initial appeal of clearing off and getting on with it on your own is powerful. The problem is the real world goes on without you. As far as women's separate unions go there are strong practical disadvantages. The separate union cannot overcome the real vulnerability of many women workers, either because they work in small units of production or in labor intensive sectors where they can be replaced, or because of lack of strong unionization and the responsibilities of women's double shift. Also separate women's unions share the dilemmas of small breakaway unions, of not having large enough funds to pay strike money, and therefore being doomed to militant rhetoric and the practice of a friendly society. There are even problems with women's separate organizations within trade unions. The Women's Trade Union Congress meeting is always in danger of becoming a kind of ghetto where women's talk is contained and safely ignored by men. This is an old argument in the trade union movement and the reason for the hostility of many women trade unionists to separate organization.

On the other hand the women's TUC does provide a place where women who would otherwise be squashed out can express and develop proposals. The experience of the women's movement has been that there is a world of difference between being segregated to keep you quiet and dividing to organize autonomously off your own bat. Autonomous organization means you are in control of your own organization, it does not mean that you are cut off from connections with men at every point. When women meet together they

create a confidence and trust which is vital in overcoming centuries of conditioning into suspicion and rivalry. Moreover it is only by meeting together as women that we can bring out and delineate the contours and extent of our specific oppression as a sex. Without this exposure oppression festers and consumes us.

Autonomous women's groups at the workplace, within an industry or in a trade union branch could be an important means of preventing male-dominated trade unions from dismissing women. There have, it is true, been spasmodic and temporary groups which have formed in the past, but not on a conscious basis of fighting sexism at work and in the unions, and not with any connection to one another. The women's movement forms a means of at least indicating such a consciousness and such connections.

There are a few tentative signs that this is happening among women who are in or affected by women's liberation. This parallels the growth in trade union militancy of white collar workers, many of whom are women, in teaching, the civil service and local government, including social workers, and the publishing industry. Local government employees, non-manual as well as manual, accountants, planners, architects, clerical workers in town halls and social service workers have been on strike for several months in London for an all-London allowance for extra cost of living and working in the capital. There has also developed a group of women social workers who are members of the National Association of Local Government Officers union to discuss and work out the connections between their position as women working in the family and conditioned into femininity in relation to their work which produces within the welfare state many features of the female caring role in the family. There have been similar developments among school teachers.

It would be misleading to exaggerate the extent to which these connections are being made. Nonetheless there are definite stirrings among women at work and a determination to resist on several fronts. An important strand in the way in which feminism is informing an understanding of class exploitation is the theoretical debate about the repro-

duction of labor power by the woman in the home. The discussions of the women social workers in the radical Case Con grouping are making this more concrete. The emphasis within the women's movement on culture and language in defining women's consciousness has been taken up by Audrey Wise and given a specific application in relation to trade unions. She has also criticized the dismissal of aspects of women workers' demands by male-dominated trade unions. Women are often seen as backward because they insist on the improvement of conditions whereas unions are geared to translating grievances into money. Audrey Wise argues that women's attitude towards work reflects a determination to stay human in dehumanizing circumstances, a refusal to give themselves over totally to the wage bargain with capital, which comes from women's peculiar situation in capitalism, at once in the wage labor system and yet also responsible for another form of work which is not valued in cash. (18)

Finally the implications of feminism are not of relevance only to women. They force a re-examination of the distorted manner in which men can be men in capitalism. Men are changed by women changing — even if the process is a long and painful one. The autonomous organization of women within the trade unions and at work would inevitably affect the consciousness of male workers. It could be of great significance in breaking down the splits between work and home, between economic and personal life, and could extend the concept of workers' control to cover the whole range of human activity.

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NOTES

1. The information about particular strikes is taken from "Striking Progress 1972-1973," Red Rag no. 5, which was originally compiled from the Morning Star and Socialist Worker. Information about strikes between July 1973 and August 1974 comes from an unpublished chronology collected by Dave Phillips from back numbers of Socialist Worker. We are grateful to him for allowing us to make use of this. Other information comes from the files of the Morning Star. For information and suggestions we are indebted to Mick Costello and Jean Gardiner.

2. Sylvia Greenwood, interviewed by Sheila McGregor, Socialist Worker, 10, August 1974.

3. See for example articles published in Radical America, vol. 7 nos. 4 and 5. The collection of papers from the Women's Liberation and Socialism Conference, London, 22/23 September 1973.

4. See Bob Rowthorn, "Unemployment in Britain," in Marxism Today, February 1972.

5. Richard Hymen, "Industrial Conflict and the Political Economy," pp. 105-106 in Ralph Milliband and John Saville (ed.), The Socialist Register 1973, Merlin Press, London, 1974.

6. For an account of this strike see Huw Beynon, Working for Ford, Penguin, 1973; and John Matthews, The Ford Strike, Panther, 1972. For the effect on the women's movement see Sheila Rowbotham, "The Beginnings of Women's Liberation in Britain," in Michelene Wandor (ed.), The Body Politic: Women's Liberation in Britain 1969-72; Stage I, 1973.

7. "Fakenham Occupation," Socialist Woman, Summer 1972; and Shrew, October 1972, vol. 4 no. 5.

8. Jim Roche, "The Leeds Clothing Strike," Trade Union Register, 1970; and the account by Gertie Roche in Sheila Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, Man's World, Penguin, 1973.

9. For details of this strike see Richard Hymen, "Industrial Conflict and the Political Economy," pp. 148-149.

10. Case Con, Women's Issue, Spring 1974. Includes ar-

ticles on the reproduction of labor power, women in white collar unions, the sexist ideology of case work, women in prisons, adolescent girls, battered women. See also Elizabeth Wilson, "Women and the Welfare State," Red Rag pamphlet 2.

11. Sections of the "Nightcleaners," Shrew were reprinted in Radical America, vol. 7 nos. 4 and 5 and in Michelene Wandor (ed.), The Body Politic. A more recent account is Sally Alexander, "The Nightcleaners, an Assessment of the Campaign," Red Rag no. 6.

12. "Sacked for Fighting 3-Day Week," Women's Voice, no. 9.

13. An example of union apathy is described in "Scrooge and Stooge: Company and Union v. The Workers of Cheeseborough Ponds," Notting Hill Women's Liberation Workshop. See also Alexander, "The Nightcleaners," on the attitude of the trade union officials.

14. Beatrix Campbell "Equal Pay: the Results of an Action," Link, Winter 1973, no. 4, gives a fuller account of this strike.

15. "Danger: Women at Work," Report of the Conference organized by the NCCL, 1974.

16. Socialist Worker, 10, August 1974.

17. Audrey Wise, "Women and the Struggle for Workers' Control," Spokesman pamphlet no. 33.

18. Audrey Wise, "Trying to Stay Human," Red Rag no. 3, p. 5 (out of print).

NOTE TO READERS: Our new mailing address is RADICAL AMERICA, P.O. Box 82, Cambridge, Mass. 02140.

Due to space limitations, Tony Cliff's "The Trade Union Bureaucracy Today," which was planned for this issue of RADICAL AMERICA, could not be printed. Cliff's essay originally appeared in International Socialism #48 as part of a special issue on British Trade Unionism. See advertisement elsewhere in this issue for address and price.

Cartoons throughout this issue are by courtesy of Phil Evans, staff cartoonist for Socialist Worker.

Immigrant Workers on Strike

Mala Dhondy

'The workers have not followed the proper disputes procedure. They have no legitimate grievances and it's difficult to know what they want. I think there are racial tensions, but they are not between the whites and the coloureds. The tensions are between those Asians from the sub-continent and those from Africa.

'This is not an isolated incident, these things will continue for many years to come. But in a civilized society, the majority view will prevail. Some people must learn how things are done....' — George Bromley, 30 years a Transport and General Workers' union negotiator, JP and stalwart of the Leister labour party.

Leicester, so we are told, is one of the richest cities in Europe. Isolated from the industrial turmoils associated with declining heavy industries, its economic base is built

on solid foundations in footwear, textiles and light engineering. Despite its labour council, it is a deeply conservative town, valuing the old-fashioned virtues of hard work and thrift, self-interest and parochialism. It has little tradition of industrial struggle, it's the kind of city where the 'social contract' might have been invented. It's a National Front stronghold — 9,000 votes polled in the last election — and at the height of the Ugandan Asian exodus in 1972, the City Council took out a full-page advert in the Ugandan press to stress the city's 'Red Area' status and warn off the East African refugees from settling in the city with its 'overburdened schools and inadequate housing.'

Towards the end of the sixties and throughout the seventies, the original Asian immigrant workers have been joined by refugees from East Africa. Some of the more astute arrivals brought with them enough capital from business enterprises to set themselves up with a house and a stake in distributive trades. Most of them, who had occupied the middle range of the colonial economic set-up in Africa, located between the white imperialists and the black workers and peasants, had been clerks and storemen, small shopkeepers and petty servers of the state. They arrived from a certain position of minor status in Africa with little more than they stood up in and the name and address of a friend or relative. With no tradition of industrial organization, often with a minimal grasp of English, they appeared ideal material for capitalist discipline in the factories of Leicester.

Huddled together in the Highfield area are many of the city's new inhabitants, mainly Asian, but with a scattering of West Indian families among them. Move on past Spinney Hill Park, drop down onto East Part Road and you find yourself at the main gate of Imperial Typewriters' factory. This is the old building, and together with the new plant, a quarter of a mile away at Copdale Road, 1,600 people work here normally producing manual and electric typewriters for the European market. Of the 1,600 people, approximately 1,100 are Asians.

On Wednesday 1 May, the traditional workers' day, four firms in the city were hit by walk-outs. 300 workers walked out of British United Shoe Machinery, another 300 struck

at the Bentley Group, and a further 200 walked out of the GEC factory at Whetstone. On the same day, 30 Asian workers left Section 61 of the Imperial Typewriter factory. All the other workers were soon back inside, but the handful from Imperial stayed out and soon managed to bring out a further 500 with them. Within a fortnight production was down to 50% of normal, and by the end of May, as the strike dragged into its fifth week, very few typewriters were coming off the lines at all.

The picket line has been manned constantly since the day of the walk-out. But it's not like a normal English workers' picket line with a couple of placards and half a dozen of the men turning back the lorries. This is a major industrial dispute involving Asian workers from East Africa, and it has a vivacity and style to it that makes it unique. The picket line is manned constantly by anywhere from 50 to 200 workers. Whenever a scab or management representative appears, a fearful yowling and hollering is set up, led invariably by the women who have been stalwarts on the line since the day the strike started. The noise is tremendous and very effective as it echoes across the street and between the high buildings. Sheltering in nearby cafes and the launderette when it rains, constantly moved on by the police when it's fine, the pickets stand there undaunted by the immovable position of the union — who refuse to make the strike official — and the hostility of the indigenous working class population. A new element has emerged among the strikers: young, long-haired, golden-earringed, bedenimed and brown-skinned, they are fearless and energetic. They have no qualms about attacking the National Front or cheeking the police (Leicester Police Force has an East African Asian on its strength who is used to control the picket line and interpret for the other men: he is a particular target for the youth), and their attitude towards the blacklegs is a powerful hostility. The state has been worried for some time about controlling a similar element among West Indian youth. Imperial Typewriters has shown the emergence of a similarly energetic force among Asian youth.

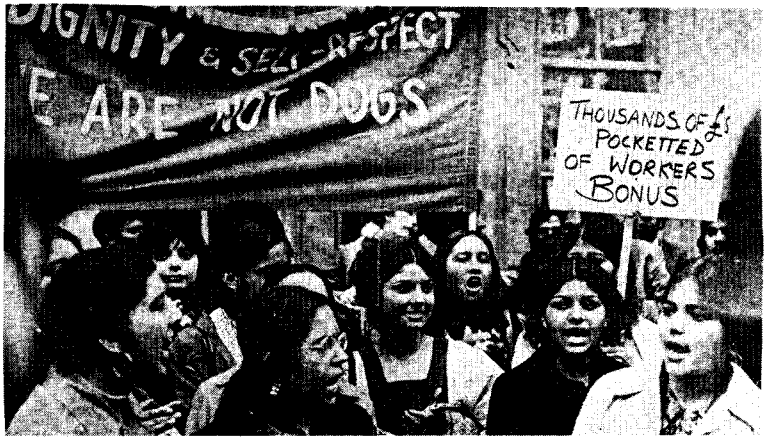
The 27 women and 12 men who walked out on 1 May all came from Section 61. Their task was to assemble parts

manufactured in Japan, Germany and Holland into complete typewriters: for this they were paid £18 per week for women on piecework and £25 for men. In addition to this basic, they were supposed to receive bonus rates: the daily target in that section had been set at 200 machines per day. For some months, there had been discontent throughout the factory at the fact that, despite the number of Asian workers employed, the shop stewards' committee was overwhelmingly white, with the exception of one Asian shop steward. Company policy had been to speed up the line and thus the rate of production. The workers in Section 61 felt that the quotas of production allocated to white workers and to themselves balanced, and that the struggles being waged by them were not merely unsupported but were actively opposed by their union. They demanded their own shop steward, to be elected by their section, who would negotiate not just on the question of production and bonuses, but also on all the important restrictions that made up their daily working lives compared to those of white workers — washing time, tea breaks, lunch breaks, toilet breaks and so on. In the course of their demands to Reg Weaver, the TGWU factory convenor, they found out that although they were being paid bonus on a target of 200 or more, they were in fact entitled to bonus on 168 (an agreement that dated back to 1972 and would have meant an extra £4 per week). It was this discovery, heaped on top of management's oppressive organization of production, that sparked off their walk-out.

By 3 May, the small nucleus of workers from Section 61, who had been led by women workers and who had revealed their unofficial leaders — 21-year-old Hasmukh Khetani and N. C. Patel — had leafleted and picketed the two sections of the factory so successfully that 500 other workers came out and joined them for a meeting in nearby Spinney Hill Park. The original 40 had demanded that their bonus, out of which they had been fiddled, should be back-dated to January 1973, and that new rates should now be negotiated on the basis of their present position.

But as the strikers were joined by more people from the factory, the realization of their collective power grew. They demanded an end to the use of racialism by management to divide workers. They called for democratic elections in the

trade union. They stood by their demand for back-dated bonus payments. The company's response was swift and positive. They issued notice to the original 40 that if they didn't return to work they would all be sacked.



Asian strikers demonstrate

photo credit: Harrap (Report)

Over that first weekend, the local MP, Tom Bradley, who is himself president of the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, intervened in the dispute and tried to negotiate the workers back, saying: 'I told the strike leaders they were getting nowhere by walking the streets and urged them to adopt the proper procedure by returning to work and resuming discussions under an independent chairman.' He was supported by Reg Weaver, the TGWU local convenor. The workers rejected it 100% and stood by their demands. They also called for support from all workers at the factory, black and white. 'Rebalancing the line will mean harder work for less money,' they said. 'Therefore our fight is for all workers, men and women, black and white, for all who work at Imperial.'

By 7 May the factory was down to 50% of its normal production, and more than 500 of the workers were out on strike. Free from the bureaucratic rules and regulations of the union organization, the workers have been inventing

and creating new ways and means of building a powerful strike organization to further their struggle. They have come up with 'the grievance meeting,' a mass meeting of the strikers in which they all voice their individual grievances. These sessions are taped, and the central strike committee then translate the tapes into a coherent series of demands. In this way, the leadership is continually in a close and vibrant relationship with the mass of the strikers. Among the streams of grievances to come forward from sections all over the factory are bonus disputes, clocking on fiddles, waiting time arguments and dozens of similar items collected by the strike committee and published in the bulletin.

Nine days after the walk-out, the company had sacked 75 of the original strikers, but the workers refused to accept their cards and instead sent them back. They also drew up a list of demands to be negotiated with the company. Imperial claimed they were willing to talk, but Reg Weaver blocked the process, saying he was ready to talk to any except the two men, Khetani and Patel, who had actually been thrown up as leaders. Mr. Bromley 'discovered' a TGWU rule that people could not be elected as shop stewards until they had been at the factory for two years: a novel contribution to shop-floor democracy. Jack Jones later repudiated this nonsense. In this state of deadlock, with the company offering a bit of money and claiming that harassment was used to keep the workers out of the factory, the level of demonstrations moved up. Mass picketing and a strike meeting were broken up by police.

The strikers at Imperial realized the enormity of the task they had undertaken. They began by sending out an appeal to several other factories belonging to the same branch of the TGWU. Four factories, with a large Asian membership, responded with donations to the strike fund and a pledge of a 24-hour stoppage at their work place if and when needed. Pressure on their managements will be pressure on their union. Race and a sense of community have so far been the strikers' only power base.

On Sunday 19 May, the strike committee called a mass meeting and demonstrated through Highfield. More than 2,000 turned up in an impressive display of militant soli-

darity. As the strike dragged into its third week, with half of the workers staying in the factory, and production slowed to a trickle, with little positive support from other sections of the movement, and with six of the workers facing fines of £315 for obstruction and assault on the police, the Race Relations Board intervened. Invited by Benny Bunsee, the Board stated its intention to carry out a preliminary investigation. The union officials welcomed it, the factory welcomed it. The workers were not so sure: they felt that it was slow and tardy. George Bromley had himself been a founder member of the East Midlands Conciliation Committee of the Board, but had resigned 18 months earlier due to pressure of work. Towards the end of the month, with most of the workers ineligible for social security, despite demonstrations outside the office, and with most of them having been 'officially sacked' by the company, the strikers rejected the intervention of the Race Relations Board. 'It's a toothless bulldog,' they said. Having dispensed with the mediators, the local MP and the RRB, David Stephen of the Runnymede Trust proposed another — Michael Foot, Minister of Employment. This has so far been ignored.

We attended one of the Grievance Meetings and listened to several men and women describing life at Imperial. This woman is a widow and the mother of three children. She joined Imperial three years ago at a base wage of £13.50:

> I assemble motors in the store department. When I first started work here I had to make 14 motors per hour. But then they raised the target to 16 and then to 18 and so on. Now it's 22. To work at that speed we can't even drink a cup of tea. We have no official tea break, but sometimes one of us goes out and gets tea for the others. But then if the foreman sees us he starts complaining about us in front of all the other workers, and even the supervisor, saying we always waste time and talk too much. Anyway, we didn't complain about that. We complained to them about the target — we all said 22 is too high. However hard we work we can never make more than that — and unless we make more we don't get any bonus.

But on top of that if we make less than 22 — say 20 or 21 — they cut some money from our basic pay.... We are mostly all Asian in our section but our shop steward is a white woman. She doesn't care and the union doesn't care. I pay 11p a week to be a member of the union, but I really think it's a waste of hard-earned money. Don't get me wrong. I'm not against unions — but our union is no different from management. And our shop steward, she hardly ever talks to us. One day she told me she was going to a meeting with some other stewards, but I know she went to the hairdressers. I'm sure the supervisor also knew, but he never said anything to her. She comes and goes as she likes. We can't see any difference between her and the supervisor. Yet she is with the union and he is with management. She didn't come out on strike with us — she didn't even want to hear about it. There's another one just like her in my friend's department.

I'll give you another example. I went to our shop steward one day and explained that the 22 target was too high. I also told her that the supervisor had asked us to oil our own machines that morning. Normally the machines are oiled before we come in. I told her that oiling was not our job and that management was always trying to make us do more work for the same pay. She told me not to make a fuss over such a small thing. That's the kind of shop steward she is. This is why we must have our own shop stewards. In this factory there are 1,100 of us and yet we have only one Asian shop steward. It doesn't make sense, does it? I'm not saying that all Asians will make good shop stewards — some of our people are also like the white people — they take their side — management's side against us. But this way we are not represented at all....

The other day I went to the toilet. Someone was already inside, so I had to wait. I must have been there not more than ten minutes when the foreman

started banging on the door. He had come to find me in the toilet to tell me to go back to work. I was very angry and shouted some rude things at him. Wouldn't you? There's a limit to everything. When I came out he asked me what I had been doing there. I told him to go home and ask his wife what she did in the toilet. He complained about me to the supervisor....I have so many grievances like this. Small things, but they all add up. The other thing is that every morning when we come to work at 8 o'clock we have to stand in a long queue to clock in. I try and come at 5 to 8 because we are paid according to time. Many of us have noticed that the white women push past us and clock in first. The foreman at the gate never tells them to stand in the queue. None of us would dare do that. Why should they be allowed to do it — not once or twice but every day....

I've been at Imperial for three years now, and I know what I'm talking about. I have three children and I'm alone. My basic pay is £18 but the men get £25. There's a lot of difference between £18 and £25, isn't there? It shouldn't be like that — we do the same work after all. Why shouldn't we get the same money? And as I was telling you, in our section sometimes we get even less than the basic rate if we don't reach the target. I feel very strongly about this — how can I bring up three children on that salary? I had never worked before when I joined Imperial, and at that time I was very relieved to get the job. I didn't really know what to expect. But now everyone says Imperial pays lower wages than other factories. If we don't get more money and if we don't get equal pay, I'm not going back into that factory. I'll look for another job. I know it won't be easy, but I'll look.

Another female worker, recruited this time by the introduction system, outlines her working day from 6 A.M. to 8 P.M. As a woman in a Southall factory says: 'Equal pay? We do twice as much work, we should get double pay.'

In February 1968 I came to this country with my daughter and my husband. We used to live in Mombasa. We stayed three days in London and my husband found a job there in a bank. But we couldn't find a room to live in because the rents were too high for us. So we came to Leicester where my sister used to live. My husband started looking for a job and the first job he found was at Imperial. It was assembly line work — making some kind of screws to fit on tripods. Now he's working as a repairman, but they don't give him a repairman's wages. For this reason he came out on strike.

I had never worked before. I was a housewife in Mombasa. I have four children now, but when I first came I had two. I brought one with me and left my son in India with my mother. Later my husband went to India and brought him here.

I started working in February 1970. Imperial used to put up a notice on the notice boards saying that if any of the workers had wives who wanted to work there, they could work from 6 to 10 — after the day shift. My husband heard about it and came and told me. Since he was at home in the evenings I took the job. It was piecework and I earned £6.50 a week. Four hours a day for five days — that made 20 hours. That's how I started: I still do part-time work. I worked full time for one year but the work was too hard. So now I work only part-time — 9 to 3. But the work, even part-time, is very hard. I get very tired. I have to do riveting. We have to use a machine to join two parts together with a screw. We also have welding in our section, but I don't do that. It's piecework and our section is the machine shop. About 30 women work in our shop — mostly Asian, but also some whites and West Indians. None of us have ever got a promotion, but the white women get the better jobs. I heard from someone that in our section they pay different rates. They don't have a fixed rate for everybody — but I don't know what other people get. I only know what I get. No one tells us

anything and I never bothered to ask anyone before. But now we know that this is happening.

Ever since I've been there I've seen that the whites give their women just one machine to work on while they give us 10 or 11 different machines in a day. You see their job is better. They have just one machine but we have to move around like gypsies. The West Indian women are treated just like us. Another thing is that the setters (we have all white setters) set the white women's machines first and take more trouble over them. Ours they do last and they don't even do them properly. So we have to work slower and then, with piecework, we earn less money. Before our machines are set we have to wait. So we asked for waiting time, but they wouldn't give that to us. White women also get jobs of their choice — they can choose their jobs. But we have to do what the setter gives us to do. The West Indian women work like us, but they go with the white women. Not a single West Indian in our section came out with us on strike. I don't know how they are in other sections. Even some of our own women — Asian women — who didn't support our strike have this same attitude. They don't want to take our side.

I have to be at work at 9 and before that — at 10 to 9 — I take my son to school. I have to wake up at 6 o'clock every morning. I get all my children dressed and give them breakfast. Then I make my husband some tea. By then it's nearly 8 o'clock. Then my husband goes to work. He has to be there at 8. After that sometimes I have to help my children with their homework — reading, spelling, things like that. Then at about 8:30 my 8-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter leave together for school. They go on their own. Then I have to put my two other children — one is 5 1/2 and the other is 4 — in the nursery. After that I rush straight to work.

I work till 3 and my husband works till 5. At 3 I go straight from the factory to get my two chil-

dren from the nursery. And soon after I get home my other two children also come back from school. That's about 4 o'clock. I give them some milk and a wash and then start cooking because my husband eats every day at 6. So by 6 I must have the food ready. I like to put my children to bed early. So after cooking I give them something to eat. I like them to go to bed by 6:30, but sometimes it gets a little later. After that there are always clothes to wash and also the dishes. I like to finish all the work just before I sit down. We usually listen to the news at 9 o'clock on the radio before going to sleep.

After the strike, I don't know. Perhaps I will have to look for another job. If they try and change my job there — give me a worse job — I'm going to leave.

As we go to press, management has sent out notices sacking the majority of the striking workers. On the picket line, nine people were arrested in scuffles with the police, and the next day more than 200 of the workers came to London on a mass lobby of Transport House to try and get the strike made official. Jack Jones and Moss Evans at the head office promised an enquiry, but the strikers are still effectively on their own.

The strike at Imperial Typewriters has, apart from anything else, put paid to certain myths. It has also confirmed that sections of British industry depend almost exclusively on cheap black labor and generally on new waves of immigrant wage laborers. It has shown that these wage laborers are not, as many predicted, a class of potential businessmen with petit-bourgeois aspirations. More than this, their actions indicate certain consequences. Over the company hangs the threat of laborlessness. The strikers predict that Imperial must either give way or collapse. It is the same choice that faces London Transport and the service industries, both run by and large on black labor.

The East Africa Asians, coming as they do from an urban background and with a long tradition of migrant consciousness, are today on the assembly lines of Leicester united

as never before. Their historical background, coupled with the very nature of their productive function, has resulted in one of the most explosive and significant strikes of recent years. They have put themselves on the front line of the class struggle being waged against capital by black workers up and down this country.

We have seen how Imperial Typewriters' factory at Leicester is merely one facility in a multi-national corporation whose business is composed of moving its production around the globe to obtain the most profitable combination of cheap labor and access to markets. We have seen how the prevailing rate of pay for men is £14 below the national average, while that for women is £6 below. We have also examined how the works consistently turned to new and cheaper sources of labor — from white male workers to Asians from the sub-continent, to Asians from East Africa, to women, and so on. We have also seen how the union has collaborated in this international scheme of things : the lieutenants of capital, more concerned with people 'learning how things are done in a civilized society' than with mobilizing sections of the class for political change.

The move away from trade union directives must be seen not only as a practical disadvantage for the strikers, but also as a source of political strength. Their new forms of organization seem to insure a control of the action by the rank and file. The grievance meetings of the entire strike force became the organizational focus. And the Committee's demands are forced to come from there.

The power of the women comes not only from their being half of the strike force, but also from their position as mothers and housewives in the community. Not only do they see capital giving them a low wage, they see it raked back to inflation and can connect it to the livelihood of the community — food, clothing and shelter. In the past, Asian women have largely come out in support of the demands of their men. They had no choice. The alternative was scabbing. This strike is unique in that the women have had the collective power to make their demand for equal pay a priority. They are the latest section of the working class to fall into factory production. Virtually a second generation of Asians in factory employment in this country, they are

aware of the score and less willing to take the horrors. Their militancy on the picket lines, their forcefulness at the grievance meetings and their determination to fight till the end are all proof of this.

Just 300 Asian strikers free of the stranglehold of trade union bureaucracy and relatively new to the production line are fast jumping the hurdles that stand in their way — the division between male and female workers, respect for a union executive's position, fear of the police and law courts and compliance with bureaucratic rules. The struggle for higher wages and better working conditions has brought them into direct confrontation with all these institutions and shown their willingness to take them on. Their discontent with their new productive role and with these institutions is ripe with a new energy confronting international capital. That is not to say that their strength has been tried and tested, but the events of the strike prove that it can and will be.

Mala Dhondy is one of the founders of the Black Women's Group in Britain and a member of the Race Today collective. She emigrated to Britain from India in 1965 and is politically active in the black community, particularly in the London area. Her article is reprinted from the July issue of Race Today.

Race Today is a monthly journal published in Britain by a collective of black activists. The journal details the development of the different sections of the black working class in Britain and the Third World. U.S. sub rate is $10 U.S. yearly.

POSTSCRIPT

On July 22, after eleven weeks on strike, Asian workers returned to Imperial Typewriters. None of their demands were met, save the significant reinstatement of both strikers and public spokespersons. In response, over 500 white workers, the bulk of the remaining workforce, staged a one-day wildcat in opposition to the rehiring by the Litton Industries' affiliate of these "troublemakers."

In some ways, this racist reaction was predictable. Even by British standards, Leicester is a depressed area. With an unemployment rate well above the national average, it is typified by light industries and small shops. Black and Asian workers coming to Leicester in the last decade were forced into accepting the poorest available jobs and were crowded into already substandard council (public) housing. The area has no tradition of labor militancy, or even significant unionization. What union structures exist have long been corrupt and class collaborationist. In this context, minority people become convenient scapegoats.

It was against this background that George Bromley, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) district secretary, appeared on television to denounce the Asians' strike as being "led by troublemakers" and funded by Peking. He went on to suggest that the district had never had any trouble until "this lot" arrived with "ideas above their station." In an official letter to the strikers, refusing to sanction the strike, he charged that "you are ill-led and have done nothing but harm to the company, the union, and yourselves." (1)

The Asians' strike was not conceived of as "anti-union," — one of the key demands was the direct election of shop stewards — though it quickly became a three cornered confrontation between exploited Asian workers, a privileged white union bureaucracy, and the corporation. Early in the strike, in May, workers chartered buses to London to confront the Labour Party and TGWU leaderships and demand that the strike be made "official." This made a good deal of tactical sense. The TGWU is the largest of Britain's unions, and reputedly the most open to rank and file pressures; its leader, Jack Jones, represents the "left" of labor officialdom. In response, an official investigation was begun into the strikers' charges against the local union leaders, the results of which are not public five weeks after the Asians' return to work. The remaining demands, that the strike be officially sanctioned and that strikers be paid £5 a week from the national union's hardship fund — demands with some teeth in them — were denied. What developed was a polarization in which a "white" union, with jurisdiction over Asian workers, refused to support the

clearly class demands for parity of the Asian wildcatters, actively undercut their bargaining position, and abetted the racist and union-busting campaign of the fascist National Front.

Police stationed at union headquarters during strike

Imperial Typewriters, since the middle 60's a subdivision of the American multinational Litton Industries, threatened the local labor force with relocating. Strikers estimated that production had been cut by 50% for the strike's duration, and the corporation used this as a pretext to coax the local union leadership back into line by threatening to leave Leicester. Additionally, Litton executives had themselves long appealed to racial sentiments in their systematization of pay differentials, and in exaggerating the national and racial dynamic of the strike by suggesting to those "loyal" whites that "it's us against those blacks."

In understanding the polarization of whites and Asians, the role of the TGWU local leadership is critical. Reg Weaver, a former TG Executive member, and plant convenor (top plant leader) for more than 21 years, played a key role in separating the strikers from any possible white support. In large measure, this was a tactic designed to deflect long-standing criticism from himself and the other non-elected union machinery, and to suggest that the continuing problem of exploitation was rather a problem of "Asians." As one observer suggested, in commenting on Weaver and the motivation of the white workers: (2)

> The one-day strike was his idea. He summoned the first meeting of white workers and decided the direction it would take. He got up on the platform and asked what the men were going to do about the troublemakers. He declared the union was right behind the men, though later he informed Litton Industries that the strike was unofficial and quite spontaneous.
>
> The "25 troublemakers" formulation had two obvious attractions for Weaver. First, it is not directed against all Asians and is not openly racialist.
>
> It pretends to be aimed only at supposed "troublemakers."
>
> And to get rid of 25 of their leaders would eliminate a lot of rivals. Even to frighten them would be of assistance.
>
> The notion clicked with the white workers, but

for rather more complex reasons.

When you go over the matter with them, it is clear that a sense of having been used fueled the (one-day) strike as much as prejudice and fear.

One worker explained it as follows: "We were the loyal ones, thanked by the management for coming to work during the strike. Then the company decided that they had to back down. So they dumped us."

In spite of this, what must be understood is that the strike of the Asian workers was not a failure. The Asians were reinstated, are organizing against Weaver, and are making links with those white workers who will concede where their class interests lie. As Flynn points out, Imperial management first used Weaver to help smash the strike; he was cast aside when it was clear the strikers would not give in.

It would be mistaken to see Leicester as prototypical of any arrangement of class forces in the future. A declining, light industry and predominantly non-union town, with a history of conservative union leadership, it is no accident that Leicester is the center of National Front activities. Still, the Imperial Strike shows the dangers of racism to the most elementary of workers' rights — the right to organize and to withhold one's labor collectively. In addition it points to the possibilities of Asian leadership in future struggles, and poses sharply, for revolutionaries in any country, the dynamic of race and class. In the context of industrial struggles, civil rights demands on the part of exploited Asian workers for parity with whites, become class demands. As Race Today concluded: "To every twist

and turn of the state, of the union, and of capital both nationally and internationally, the strikers have posed creativity and a flexible response. If a channel of struggle was open, they have used it. If a political space between ideology and inertia has opened up, they have moved into it.... Where the union, the press and capital are playing the strike as a racial one, they name it as a class one, there being no separation between race and class." (3)

Mike Hirsch

NOTES

1. "Racialism on the Rampage," Socialist Worker, July 27, 1974.
2. Lauri Flynn, "Rotten for Whites Too...Report from Leicester," Socialist Worker, August 3, 1974.
3. Race Today, August 1974.

The Miners on Strike

Dave Douglass

The miners' strike of 1974, coming so soon after the big 1972 stoppage, clearly reflects the miners' unmatched combative spirit in this period. The economic victories are such that the miner feels for the first time that he is starting to get something like a decent wage for his life of toil and danger. We are now starting to talk in terms of the £5,000 ($12,000) a year miners...and nobody laughs at that any more. But the 1974 strike was far more important in a political sense than the economic side of the victory. For the first time in the history of Great Britain a section of workers, previously downtrodden and wickedly exploited, took on the most class antagonistic government in memory, fought a battle in which no holds were barred, and won, carrying away the laurels; while the loser, the Tory government, limped from the field vanquished and defeated.

BACKGROUND

When the British mines were nationalized in 1947, most miners believed that this at least was the end of the great period of mass slaughter and inhuman exploitation by the ruthless owners. Here was a chance to run the pits in a civilized way, a chance for workers' control and justice. It was a 'new epoch' and they inscribed it proudly on their union branch banners.

It is important to recognize that nationalization was not simply foisted upon capitalism because of its crying inability to come up with the goods in the mines. It was also a direct result of outright revolutionary pressure by the miners. Nationalization brought with it vast improvements in safety standards, a certain degree of rationalization of tasks, and a subsequent diminution of work severity — the job became safer and somewhat easier. Not a miner in Britain would suggest for one moment that the coal industry return to private ownership. When comparing the government's National Coal Board to the murdering old owners we must remember that the most basic improvement in conditions was a spectacular advance in comparison to underground life and work before nationalization.

However, the miners were to be sadly disillusioned in their belief that they were going to run the pits themselves. The new National Coal Board (N.C.B.) was composed of ex-coal owners, Colonel Blimps, fat industrialists, and the old 'safe' union man. Indeed, apart from the new flag at the mast-head, the men found little change in the colliery offices. The 'gaffers' — assorted managers and foremen — were the same men who had exploited them under the owners.

This nationalization utilized the miners as a source of cheap labor and as props to various government policies, both economic and political. It sold coal at high prices to working people and paid dirt wages to the miners. The N.C.B. was by statute not allowed to make a profit. But its surpluses, of which there were many in the early years, were passed on to the capitalist class by way of cheap coal for private industry. The miners' wages were pegged down "as a stop against inflation". To keep down the wages of

900,000 miners, as there were in the late 40's, was to control a major section of the labor movement and to go a long way toward controlling the rest.

Once the capitalist class directly held the reins of the N.C.B., it took very little pull to head it this way or that, whichever suited the capitalists' purposes at a given time. Although following the track of the N.C.B.'s behavior is rather like following a drunk driver, it is clear that the Board's overall policy has been to run the coal industry deliberately onto the rocks, steering through a gantlet of capitalist vultures who have pecked and pulled at it in every conceivable way.

No one firm can function on its own. Under capitalism, firms attempt to 'integrate' or take over all the other units of a particular enterprise, either 'horizontally' or 'vertically'. In simple terms, this means there is an effort to take over not only all those firms which produce the same goods, but also all the firms which are related in terms of supply, distribution, raw materials, and so on. One firm depends very much on another for its profitability. The capitalist is wise to the fact that he cannot make the type of profit he is looking for unless he captures all branches and related branches of an industry.

However, when the coal industry was nationalized, certain features doomed it to the role of an economic vagabond, forever in trouble and forever hand-over-fist in debt. The collieries were nationalized, but the related trades such as mining supply and coal distribution were not. This made the most important middle section of the industry, namely production of coal, a slave to the rapacious greed of the capitalists on either side in supply and distribution. That was a huge initial set-back.

Even with these gross limitations, the N.C.B. might have been beneficial to the working class if it had been headed by directors dedicated to operating the coal industry in the interests of the people. However, there was a capitalist 'fail safe' device to make sure that the industry and its workers would be held captive by private firms. The N.C.B. directorate drew its members from its own competitors. These directors were bound to earn the easy buck through shady commercial practices or just plain corruption.

After the Labour Party fell from office in 1951 and the Conservatives took power, it suited the interests of the Tories and 'free enterprise' capitalists to have a great floundering animal like the N.C.B. to hold up as an example of 'socialism', 'nationalization', and 'workers' control' in order to convince people that these things really wouldn't work, and that industry could only be run under 'capitalism'. Of course, every time the N.C.B. has had a chance to become commercially sound, it has been deliberately sabotaged by either the government or the paid capitalist lackeys on the Board itself.

For example, in the last insane outburst of the latest Tory government, the pits were to be once more 'radically rationalized' and all unprofitable units were to be closed and dispersed. At the same time, the N.C.B. attempted to sell off to private enterprise all the profitable sections such as the giant computer at Doncaster which has, by selling its surplus capacity, managed to put the Doncaster coalfield above average in profitability. The Board also wanted to sell off the brick-making department and certain sections of road haulage, and there was even talk of selling the open cast works, the only easy money-making concern in the whole enterprise. Now, with the discovery of huge rich coal deposits at Selby in Yorkshire, which alone have the capability of supplying most of Britain's coal needs, there is a cry that these 'super-profit' pits should be sold to private enterprise.

In the early 1950's the N.C.B. was running at what economists called its 'optimum point of production'. It had reached its peak in terms of efficiency in relation to workers, materials, and output. At this time, it was in a first-class position to make super-profits and pay high wages to the miners. But by statute of the government, it was not allowed to make a profit, only to 'break even'; its purpose was to supply coal at the cheapest price possible to the capitalist firms. The miners' wages were pegged down as a 'weapon against inflation' while the fruit of their labor was being stolen at dirt cheap prices by the capitalist buyers.

The National Coal Board was not only the major supplier of fuel, it was also the sole buyer of mining supplies. The

N.C.B. could quite simply have demanded the price it wanted for its coal, and demanded cheaper prices from the mining equipment firms. Of course, neither of these things was done, since it was in the interests of capitalism to destroy the coal industry by plunder. The N.C.B. was not allowed to operate either like a socialist firm or like a capitalist firm.

Capitalism wished to use the industry, bleed it, and keep it as a milch cow, while at the same time holding it up as a commercial laughing-stock to prove the superiority of private enterprise and the foolishness of nationalization.

Then came the Suez Crisis. The Arab states turned the oil off. In reply, the British government turned to the miners again — this time as a prop to their imperialist ventures. The government demanded "coal at any price", no matter what the cost of getting it, how many men were employed, how many machines, and how much equipment was poured down the pits : the target was the maximum extraction of coal "at any price". To speak of a wage rise at this time was tantamount to treason, yet here was a time when our bargaining position had never been stronger. But the miners' 'leaders' were hand-in-glove with the capitalists. The miners were once more to become whipping boys for the whims of capitalism.

As the Suez Crisis passed and the oil began to flow again, the government began to meddle with 'alternative fuels'. The N.C.B. was left in a condition of almost total ruin, vastly overspent and deeply in debt. It was also overcapitalized, with millions of pounds worth of totally useless machinery and a manpower situation that was sheer chaos. Then came the real stab in the back : the government decreed that the N.C.B. had to start coming up with a profit each year. By this time all of the commercial edge that the coal industry had had in the early 1950's was gone, lost in the cause of helping imperialism.

The private firms who bought coal were now turning to alternative fuels, and those that weren't were starting to threaten that they too would switch if the price of coal wasn't lowered. The boot was on the other foot. By this time the mining supply merchants had developed an overseas market and were busily building it up : the N.C.B. had

to pay whatever price they asked, or the suppliers would withdraw their product. Again the boot was on the other foot. The only sources of plunder left for the N.C.B. were the miners themselves — the coal-consuming working-class families who didn't have the money to convert to other fuels as the capitalists were doing. "What, a wage rise when the industry is on its knees? There's no money in the kitty, lads." This was the chorus of the National Coal Board and the National Union of Miners gaffers alike. The N.C.B. started borrowing money at super-interest from the big bankers, then borrowing money to pay back the borrowed money, then borrowing more. During all this time, the ex-owners were still being paid mammoth checks every year to keep them in luxury as a reward for having kept us in poverty.

The capitalists concluded that the pits were uneconomical, no longer sound commercially. And anyway, who wanted coal when there was so much oil and when there would soon be nuclear energy to play around with? Lord Robens was sent in as the axeman to cut down mines and miners.

Private Eye

The number of collieries was reduced from 840 in 1956 to 299 in 1970. The labor force fell from 697,000 in 1956 to 295,650 in 1970. About 15,000 miners from Scotland, Northumberland, and Durham were uprooted from their homes and pushed from one coalfield to another. Whole districts were left barren, villages died with their pits, men of 40 were dumped on the scrap heap never to work again, youngsters leaving school faced a lifetime of unemployment and poverty or were forced by this 'economic conscription' into the army. "The mines are finished." So we were told long and often. "The miners are a feature of a forgotten age, doomed to extinction." Wages, we were told, couldn't possibly rise. The union 'leaders' chanted with the monotony of a mechanical toy: "No strikes or they'll close the pits!" It was simply a matter of waiting for your pension to come up, or if you were young, of waiting for a better job to come along.

However, the big bubble of deception finally burst. The rank-and-file militants began to move. Soon the bulk of the miners were rising to their feet. "If the pits are to be worked for one more minute, well, we want fair wages for working in them." "They can close them if they want; so what, they've closed them before anyway; this time they'll close on our terms."

A great unofficial strike movement swept the coalfields in 1969. At first we were undecided as to which part of our oppression should be challenged first, but as the movement spread, the protests united into one solid chorus of discontent. While wage negotiations were still in progress, the Welsh, Scottish, and Yorkshire miners downed tools and struck for a reduction in working hours for the surfacemen who still worked hours imposed after the defeat of the 1926 national strike. This strike of 1969, which involved 150,000 miners from 130 collieries, united numerous rank-and-file papers, journals, and unofficial organizations around a common tactic and program of demands. The strike failed to immediately win a reduction in surfacemen's hours, but it did ensure that we received the biggest wage award in the miners' history.

The 1969 strike was the cornerstone of all subsequent strikes. It swept aside the old union leadership and gave

birth to a new, 'left' leadership. It caught the capitalist class completely unawares and, within a few days, started to bite deep into their profits. Most of all, it woke the mass of miners up to something the militants had been preaching for years, namely that the country was still very much dependent on coal and that the miners were still in a strong bargaining position. Once the argument was proved, the perspective of the rank and file began to change tremendously.

The unofficial movement, led and oriented in a hundred different collieries by many different forces, was able to maintain its push in a consistent direction decided by internal democracy. Perhaps the two most important points on any one of the militants' programs were: 1) a simple majority was needed to call strike action, and 2) all officials were subject to instant recall and annual election. We are still fighting for the second point, but number one was won hands down. Previously, we had to secure a two-thirds vote in favor of industrial action to call an official strike, but now we need only 55%. This is in itself a major breakthrough. Once the rank and file had the means and the notion to progress, they set off like 'the clappers' to recapture lost ground.

THE 1972 STRIKE

The 1972 national strike was a high point in the miners' history. The rank and file established its control of the strike early on. But many of the more conservative areas remained true to form. Places like Durham and Northumberland voted heavily against strike action. In fact, we just achieved the simple majority in favor of a strike in a national vote. After all, this was the first national strike since 1926. However, once the strike movement got under way, the workers really came to grips with the state and pitched into the battle for all they were worth.

The Tory government was fully committed to breaking this strike. Just prior to the miners' action, many sectors of the working class had been knocked back by the collective efforts of the government and the capitalist class. The government had publicly urged all employers (as if they

needed any urging) to hold out against wage demands; it also declared that employers who paid wage increases were equally responsible (along with the trade unions) for the economic ruin of the country. Now the government was absolutely duty bound to hold out against the workers in the state sector, especially the miners. Indeed, the miners were breaking the new anti-strike Industrial Relations Law, and to many it was touch-and-go whether or not the Tories would use the Law's penal sections against the pit men.

But the workers had many strengths in this big '72 strike. From the word go, the strike was properly co-ordinated at regular union branch meetings in which the rank and file could make their views felt. The local leaders, particularly in the highly influential Yorkshire and Scottish coalfields, had their eyes set on national fame and coming elections. These men went out of their way to parade their militancy and to impel the men to greater and greater feats of class courage. A new-found power surged through the union, solidifying union officials with the rank and file. For the first time in living memory, the union really was 100% solid behind the struggle.

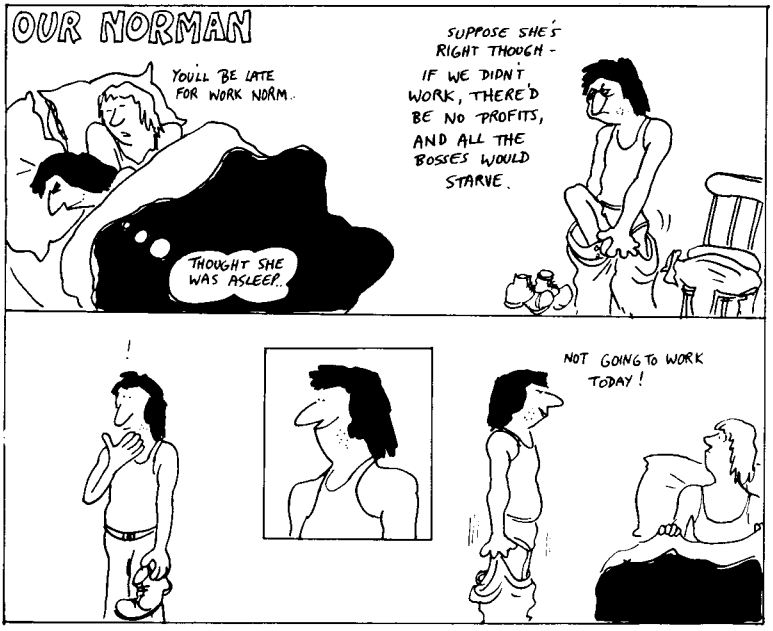
The pickets were absolutely unprecedented in their mammoth size and determination; they were also unusual in their intransigence and in the success they achieved despite real police brutality and the use of scab truck drivers who murdered at least one comrade and injured countless others. The pickets were heavily supported by the miners' wives, whose determination added a new facet to the action. Scab drivers armed to the teeth ready to meet a line of pitmen were in many cases non-plussed by a just-as-sure line of miners' wives and daughters. The miners had moved into battle with their whole community actively engaged. Countless workers from other industries, particularly truck drivers and railwaymen, stood shoulder to shoulder with the miners. The flying pickets, which evolved as a more sophisticated version of an earlier practice of spreading strikes from pit to pit, took on huge dimensions; they traveled from one part of the country to another, pouncing in hundreds on unsuspecting coal and oil depots. They went so far as to form a navy in the Thames to prevent barges from

landing at the coal wharves.

The nature of the miners' pickets was such as to allow the greatest possible access to revolutionary ideology. For one thing, vast numbers of miners were housed in universities near the sites they were picketing; they lived and slept on the campuses, and, of course, talked there. Moderate students were beginning to see the reality of the class war illustrated in the tales of the miners. The reverse was also true: revolutionary students had an unprecedented opportunity to talk and discuss with the miners at meetings, on pickets, and most importantly over meals and over pints of beer in the student union bar. The same was true on the pickets themselves, where large numbers of students joined to stand out in the cold and rain at all hours of the day and night shoulder to shoulder with the miners. What a contrast to 1926, when the university students had driven scab trains and buses to ruin the strike. Now they were halting scab trucks and were joining demonstrations in support of the working class: what a symbol of middle-class disenchantment with the capitalist system!

Metalworkers, laborers, factory workers of all kinds coupled with the political forces of the left to hold back the trucks. Countless socialist and revolutionary papers, leaflets, and journals bombarded the pickets and, in such circumstances as produced long, long periods of sitting and talking, these left publications never failed to stimulate discussion, dissent, and, most often, hardened agreement on the basic points.

The flying picket reached its absolute crescendo at Saltley Gate coal depot in Birmingham. After weeks of escalating pickets, with both miners and police pouring more and more men into the struggle, the situation was beginning to resemble a medieval battlefield black with bodies of men charging and countercharging. Then came the climax. When the news spread through the Birmingham factories that some 5,000 police were in action at Saltley Gate, 20,000 metalworkers downed tools, factories closed, and a great army of Birmingham workers marched to support their miner comrades. The sight of all these workers, flags and banners flying, marching determinedly to the old refrain



'Solidarity Forever' sent the pitmen wild with excitement. The chief of police took one look and rapidly made up his mind: the coal depot would close — it was a hazard to safety and public order. The closing of the vast plant was a major victory for the miners and for the whole of the working class. If the Tories wanted confrontation, the miners were the ones to give it to them...and to come out with the laurel leaves!

Once that big victory had struck home, the Tories resolved to drop the confrontation with the miners but to keep on in their attacks on the rest of the class. They decided they would make the miners a 'special case'. And because the miners were a 'special case', they had a 'special minister' to look into things: so they formed the Wilberforce Enquiry. From the first moment of this invention, there was never any doubt that it would come up with findings in our favor. Wilberforce was a rabbit out of the hat, the same hat which had produced the previously unheard of 'solicitor general' to get the Tories off their own hook when it looked like the dockers would catalyze a general strike to get their

workmates out of Pentonville Prison earlier in 1972. The Tories were forced to settle almost the full claim of the miners in order to take the steam out of the class struggle.

Although the wage claim wasn't met 100%, the miners won a fantastic victory. For the first time in years, the miner felt like he was getting back his position in the wages table. But more importantly, he was regaining his old pride as a class fighter in the fore of the working class. Political meetings and demonstrations of all kinds on all issues suddenly saw very large contingents of miners, whereas previously only the few union branch stalwarts would appear. In the revolutionary groups, quite mature miners started to be seen speaking on left platforms and writing in journals. The wage victory had also meant an advance in class consciousness.

It is worth mentioning the simultaneous advance of the left within the Labour Party. The Labour Party rightly or wrongly is seen as part of the trade union movement and vice versa. Movements and trends in either realm are usually reflected quite heavily within the other. The same was true on this occasion. Coupled with the tremendous victory of the miners and certain other sectors, the left inside the Labour Party started to gain ground. A whole program of nationalizations — of land, banks, oil, etc. — was passed at the National Conference. More important was the really big vote for nationalizations of one hundred monopolies without compensation and under workers' control. While the motion was not actually passed, the vote in favor was very significant. The character of the National Executive of the Labour Party also has changed quite a lot: while it could not be called 'socialist', it was certainly the most left National Executive Committee ever elected. With one or two notable exceptions, the left began purging the right, expelling particularly odious right-wing M.P.s and local councillors.

BETWEEN STRIKES: 1972 TO 1974

During the Tories' Phase Two economic policy of sharply limited wage increases, there was an apparent set-back for militancy among the miners. This was due not to a victory

of the moderates or to a reversal of the overall process which had taken the miners to a peak of militancy. If any doubted the process, the moderates did not gain at the National Union of Mineworkers (N.U.M.) conference of July 1973. Mr. McGahey, one of the leading lights of the British Communist Party, was easily elected Vice President of the N.U.M.. A wage increase of 35% was demanded regardless of the Phase Three wage guidelines. A unanimous resolution called for a Labour government with a "true socialist policy", including nationalization of the key monopolies and the land as the only way of solving the country's problems. Lest any doubt the overt political overtones of the next strike then approaching, one should simply look to the statement of Mr. McGahey on 28 November, 1973 before a full committee of the N.U.M. Executive Committee saying that it was the miners' intention to smash the government and its pay policy and to send Prime Minister Heath on his way down the road.

By the time the miners came to the fore with their new pay claim, they found their negotiations again blocked totally by the government: Phases One, Two, and Three, which laid down absolute maximums to wage rises. The National Coal Board simply stood to one side and said: "We may well have granted you your claim, but the government would not let us. The government will scream if you strike this time. It is the law, order, and democratic government you are fighting." From the very beginning, it was obvious that the N.U.M. was not fighting the N.C.B. as such, but rather the government and its pay policy. While certain fringe deals might be negotiable by the N.C.B., the basic demand had to be met by the government. Heath, however, always a believer in the 'silent majority', pinned his hopes on some vast groundswell of moderate miners' opinion which would defeat any strike ballot. He concentrated all his attentions on secret meetings and telephone calls with N.U.M. President Gormley, an industrial pacifist.

The N.U.M. had presented a claim for a weekly wage of £35 ($84) for surface workers, £40 ($96) for underground workers, and £45 ($108) for workers on the coal face. In line with Phase Three requirements, the N.C.B. had offered

an increase of £2.30 for surface workers and £2.57 for the underground workers. Because of the price rises, this would have meant a wage cut in real terms when compared to the 1972 Wilberforce Award. At least £6 ($14.40) would have been required to put us back into a comparable position. The N.C.B. did offer night-shift bonuses. Well, we had been waiting for this for twenty years; indeed, we were the only major section of the industrial working class not receiving extra money for night shift. The trouble with that offer was that very few miners actually worked the bad shifts the Board had chosen for premium pay. On the question of vacation pay, all the N.C.B. could offer was a fraction of what we had demanded, a fraction which would create differentials between lower and higher paid workers at a time when everyone received the same pay for vacation periods. The union was claiming that everyone should be paid the top wage for vacations and not the lowest or the average. In total, the N.C.B. offered £5 million — about £3.66 ($8.80) per worker, per week.

The argument of the union was simple: we were not free to negotiate; we were being pegged down 'in the national interest'; we were being told to act as a 'block against inflation'. Profits and property speculators were doing very very well. Why should the miners suffer once more?

THE OVERTIME BAN

In the middle of the biggest oil crisis ever to hit Britain, the N.U.M National Executive Committee (N.E.C.) declared a work-to-rule and an overtime ban. They hoped to break the hold of the government without breaking the heart of the union membership. The miners would still get paid while production would be cut by up to 70%. Between the oil crisis, the co-incident power station workers' slow-down, and the miners' overtime ban, the N.E.C. was convinced that we could win hands down without a struggle.

The overtime ban was designed to inflict serious damage on the economy while causing minimum hardship to the miners, who still had to be paid. Since the majority of maintenance in the mines is generally done on weekends, the overtime ban meant that it had to be carried out during

the normal working days; this would produce a reduction in output. Consider, for example, shaft inspection. The workers cannot descend into the mine until the shaft is inspected. This is normally done outside of the usual working hours so as to be ready for the men coming on for the Monday day shift. However, with weekend hours abandoned, the shaft had to be inspected at the expense of a full half or two-thirds of a day's production.

The overtime ban had started after it was approved in balloting at the branch level; this followed a totally non-productive meeting between the Prime Minister and the N.U.M. Executive on 23 October. The ban became effective on 12 November just as the cold British winter started to set in.

The Tories' intransigence with the miners followed the reasonable logic that a wage victory for the miners would lead to a mass wages attack by other sections of workers. At the same time, the miners were breaking the new Industrial Relations Law at every stage. But the Tories were as weak as kittens when it came to taking action against them.

The Tories' first plan of bribing the union leadership failed. And so, on 22 November, the Heath government began their second plan of attack by attempting blackmail. They launched a mass campaign to turn 'public opinion' in general, and trade union opinion in particular, against the miners. Heath's opening shot, in a speech at Nelson in Lancashire, said that the miners had planned their actions to co-incide with the Arab oil embargo. The miners, Heath charged, attacked when the country was being held to ransom by the Arabs. Certain newspapers carried cartoons of the miners dressed as Arab guerrillas with all the relevant captions about sabotage and the like. The miners, however, were not long to reply that if the oil sheiks could be paid whatever they asked for, why not the miners? The revolutionaries in the mining industry, of which there were not a few, pointed out the connections between the crisis of imperialism via the growth of nationalist revolution, and the increasing attacks on the native working class to make up for the loss of cheap labor and materials.

The capitalist press tried to 'expose' the politically-

motivated men in the miners' union. Speeches of rank and filers were reproduced wholesale in the capitalist press to show up the 'red menace'. McCarthyism, so well known in the United States, was exactly what the Tory government was setting in motion. Dubious full-page advertizements financed by "The Aims of Industry Group" or "The Free Enterprise League" or "The Let's Work Together Campaign" started to denounce the Communist leaders of the railwaymen, the power station workers, and the miners as working hand-in-hand to smash 'our British way of life'.

Meanwhile, the miners were straining at the leash to get into the battle proper. But the N.U.M. Executive didn't have the perspective or class courage to match up to the hour. The N.E.C. tactic of causing maximum damage to the stocks of coal, while causing minimum damage to our own membership, was proving limited. They were so convinced of this tactic that they instructed the area assemblies to engage in no local disputes. "Strength" had to be saved for the "main battle". The branch bureaucrats, all too ready to obey without question, also feared the consequences of entering a local fight without any hope of support from their area councils. They religiously carried out the N.E.C. instruction. Local pit disputes were swept under the carpet. Workers would walk out of the pit on a local strike only to be told by their branch officials to get back to work and to stop trying to break the union. Genuine pit level disputes were branded as selfishness, pettiness, or red herrings detracting from the main struggle of the N.U.M. The first ugly cornerstone had been laid for bureaucratic control of the dispute. The true effects of this were to be seen only later.

As the overtime ban entered its second week, Heath declared a state of emergency. Again the press barons of Fleet Street attacked the miners in huge banner headlines each day as reds under the bed, wreckers, dupes of the 'small tight-knit group of politically motivated Trotskyist-Maoist - Communist - Anarchist wrecker revolutionaries', etc. The Tories' concern was public opinion. It had been solidly behind the miners in 1972. Heath was determined to win it for himself or at least to turn it against the miners. Because of the grave 'fuel shortage' caused by the miners'

strike ('taking advantage of the oil shortage and stabbing the country in the back'), gasoline had to be rationed, a 50 m.p.h. speed limit was enforced nationally, television was closed down at 10:30 every night, and a three-day working week was instituted in most industries. So, the people were to be without their cars, without their jobs for two days in the week, and without their televisions after 10:30 p.m. And, of course, the last hour or so on the television just before the screen went into darkness was 'current affairs' talking about the 'communist infiltrators' and the 'greedy miners'. The press headlines screamed for tougher and tougher measures against the workers.

"A Life Underground" — Coal face workers eat their 'bait'

Granada Television

Despite all of this, the bulk of the working class stood solid with the miners. Thousands upon thousands of metal-workers and other workers held mass public meetings, demonstrations, and rallies in a hundred different cities and towns. Local trades union councils arranged joint meetings and solidarity marches with miners. The students once again rallied to the side of the miners, promising £10,000 ($24,000) a week to the miners if they struck, and offering

accommodations. The three-day working week, intended to intimidate the workers into opposing the miners, backfired as workers in factory after factory offered to use their two days off work to join the miners' picket lines.

There was an air of deception about the whole situation. The miners had struck in 1972 and, although there were some power cuts of short duration, there was not the slightest chance of a national three-day work week. Yet after five weeks of an overtime ban, which left production at a full 60%, we were supposed to have had more effect in cutting back energy. The government refused to allow newsmen or television people to see the coal stocks. Finally, some enterprising television men flew over the power stations; and lo and behold, there before our very eyes on the television cameras were acres and acres of coal stocks practically untouched. Indeed, when the truth was made known, there was as much coal at the power stations after five or six weeks of overtime ban as there had been when we started. There had been no need for the three-day working week, no need for the petrol rationing, no need for all the alarm in the press; it was all just one big con to turn the public against the miners.

The revelation was of course greatly used by the Labour politicians with the scent of election battle rising in the air. It also went to prove what the militants had been saying all the time, that the overtime ban was ineffective. It had been an attempt to minimize the extent of the battle in order to play down the tremendous political potential of the miners in this period. A strike could win us the claim, but it could and very probably would also cause the fall of the Tory government. Its potential was unlimited, it opened up again the whole argument for a general strike of the whole labor movement to finish the Tory government and to smash the anti-strike laws. The emotive battle cry of the left rose up: "Support the miners. We must not let them stand alone. It is our battle too."

The National Executive Committee was caught in the middle. Its members realized that the strike was the only means of securing their members' wage claim, but they also were aware of the immensely explosive situation that

would develop if the strike took the form of the 1972 general strike. The N.E.C. resolved to take over the strike, hook, line and sinker. First, they sent out the ballot papers to the membership asking for their approval to take industrial action. The response was fantastic: an 81% overall vote in favor of striking. In the biggest mining areas, it was almost 100%. Remembering all the adverse propaganda in the press and television, the reply of the miners was downright revolutionary.

Heath and the Tories had been making great capital out of the overtime ban. They had claimed that the overtime ban, which did not require a ballot to be called, was only started by communist-inspired leaders because the miners would not support stronger action. They had shouted loud and often: "Why won't the N.E.C. call a ballot?" Now the Tories had their answer: the biggest vote ever for a national strike action in the history of British trade unionism!

The Tories had little room for maneuver. Public sympathy for the pitmen had never been stronger. Though agreeing to settle their own wage claims within the limits of Phase Three, the other unions were supporting the miners to the hilt. Isolation and alienation had failed. Head-on confrontation had failed. The Tories prepared to surrender. They dug up their old 1972 skeleton of 'special cases'. Up popped a 'Relativities Board' to provide for 'special cases' such as the miners who would be viewed on their social worth, over and above the norms of Phase Three. With this the Tories had no need to confront the miners, no need for the slanders, the gasoline rationing, the three-day weeks. They had provision under their own laws for dealing with cases such as the miners.

Too late! Although the union leadership agreed to submit evidence before this jack-in-the-box tribunal, the strike continued. Heath was driven back to his last resort. He called a general election on the issue of 'strikes crippling the country', 'extremists in industry', reds in the unions and the Labour Party, 'reds under the bed', anarchists and IRA everywhere. He lost.

Throughout the strike, in fact, the chief concern of the union bureaucracy was to win a propaganda battle for the

Labour Party. The biggest question during the strike concerned picketing. Without any discussion the N.E.C. decided that no more than six pickets would be allowed on any gate. All hell was let loose over this judgment. Despite that, the N.E.C. still told us just before the end of the strike that two pickets would suffice ! We were later told that the purpose of the pickets was not to stop the movement of coal, oil, or fuel in 'normal amounts', but rather to serve as a 'public relations exercise'. What a bombshell ! What was the point of standing in the rain and cold to watch scab trucks sailing by as often as they wished ? The bulk of the pickets just went home. The few pickets who stayed presented a terribly demoralizing scene : a little hunched group of men devoid of spirit standing around a fire. Worse, nobody but 'officially approved pickets' could attend; no factory or railway workers, no students, no women; no action, no politics, no spirit. Finally, a 'chief picket' was to be elected for each group of men to promote a responsible attitude.

Despite these limits, the 1974 strike revealed a really brilliant flash of class understanding by the miners. Just before the elections, a concerted effort was made by the parliamentary Labour Party to get the miners to 'suspend' the strike while the elections were taking place, just to show that the workers really do believe in Parliament and the niceties of bourgeois democracy. Although sections of the N.U.M. leadership were prepared to concede on this point, the answer from the rank and file was loud and clear and too obvious to be ignored : "No bloody chance ! " Elections or not, the miners wanted justice !

A Labour government was returned by the elections, winning on a platform of nationalizations, repeal of various authoritarian Tory laws, a settlement with the miners, and a return to work for everyone on a five-days-a-week basis. The new Labour government allowed the National Coal Board to negotiate freely with the N.U.M.. Their eventual offer was based very much upon the findings of the "Relativities Board", which were published just after the election.

Though it contained great elements of victory, the offer failed the lower-paid workers. Face workers were offered £45 ($108) per week, as had been demanded. But under-

ground workers were offered £36 ($86.40) per week instead of the £40 that had been demanded. And surface workers were offered £32 ($76.80) per week instead of the £35 that had been demanded. The N.E.C. accepted because it was more concerned for the Labour Party than for its own members. To gain passage of the settlement, the N.E.C. had to violate its own rules. The N.U.M. rule book requires that a ballot be taken of the membership to decide whether the members accept or reject a contract offer. That would have given the rank and file time to discuss the issues during the weeks it takes to prepare a ballot. It would have allowed the revolutionary and left groups a chance to call meetings and influence the workers. So, the N.E.C. committed its final act of sabotage. It demanded a vote of the branches, which required only days to prepare. Only the national, area, and local bureaucrats had occasion to brief the members on their arguments for acceptance. The agreement was a low price for a great movement which could very well and very easily have wrung every penny out of a Labour government that was almost duty-bound to settle with the miners.

But, despite the N.E.C.'s sabotage, the miners won a great political victory. They threw out a Tory government because their class courage was too hard a nut to crack. They won a great many, if not enough, of their economic demands in the final settlement. The elements of sell-out are the sole property of the bureaucracy. The elements of victory belong exclusively to the determination of the miners and the British working class.

DAVE DOUGLASS is a mine worker on the face of a pit in the Doncaster mine fields. He is editor of The Mineworker, a revolutionary rank-and-file paper. He is also a member of the Hatfield Main Branch of the National Union of Miners and secretary of the Thorne and District Trade Union Council.

The Emergency — an official announcement

THE 3 DAY WEEK— What it means

From today, everyone in Britain will only be working for three days a week (with the exception of certain exempt classes of person listed below).

EXEMPT PERSONS

Unemployed
Old Age Pensioners
E. Heath Esq.
Night Shift Workers
Vicars
All workers whose work is essential to the country's survival, or who are on strike
Holidaymakers
Aliens under the Offensive Foreign Persons Act 1968
Criminals
Infants below the age of 2-years
Persons deceased since the Emergency Measures came into force

Following 1 January 1974 it will be illegal for any non-exempt person to work more than three days in any calendar week.

Fines of up to £3,000 will be imposed upon all those who are found infringing this order.

Remember—the survival of your country depends upon everyone pulling together and not working for longer than three days.

WILL I GET PAID?

Patrick Moore writes: Well, there are still an awful lot of things we scientists don't know the answer to. But rest assured, in the end there's an answer to everything. And over the next few months, teams of scientists will be working round-the-clock three days a week to come up with an answer to this one. Good night.

WILL BERNARD LEVIN GET PAID?

W.R.M writes: To all who knew him, Bernard Levin came as a great shock.

WILL MILLIONS BE UNEMPLOYED?

Yes, but only for two days a week. Meanwhile, the country will save millions of pounds a day in wages. So in fact we'll all be better off!

WHAT SHALL I DO WITH THE TIME SAVED?

1. Keep a careful record of all the hours you are not at work. This will give you something to do, and will be very helpful to the Government.
2. If you stay at home, remember that you are not on holiday. Under Article 79 of the Government Panic Measures Act 1973, your home while you are there during normal working hours will constitute a 'workplace'. Therefore the emergency regulations regarding use of fuel, light, heat, TV, etc. must be strictly observed.

SIT QUIETLY AND TAKE AS LITTLE EXERCISE AS POSSIBLE. This will help to save valuable food-stocks which cannot be distributed owing to the three-day week.

HOW CAN I HELP?

Thousands of men and women are urgently wanted by the Government to act as 'Work Wardens'. Their job will be to keep a 24-hour watch for all cases of failure to comply with the Emergency Idiotic Measures 1973, and to institute summary on-the-spot fines of up to £200 million on any idle layabout who is found working.

DETECTOR VANS

During the next few weeks, Government 'work detector' vans will be touring your area, to ensure maximum public co-operation with the new emergency measures. Equipped with highly sophisticated electronic surveillance devices, they are able to 'pick up' heat-traces from anyone engaged in work to a distance of two miles.

This Announcement Is Issued By The Department For Non-Trade and Industry.

Private Eye

Shop Stewards at Ford

Big Flame

The Ford Motor Company has always insisted on the absolute prerogatives of management to manage. The Company waged a savage fight against unionization in the U. S. In Britain, it refused to recognize the unions until 1941, and even then insisted on dealing only with the officials. When Ford took over the Briggs Body Plant on the Dagenham Estate in 1953 their determination to tame the stewards led to a strike over a steward's sacking — after he called a meeting over the sacking of two stewards. A Court of Inquiry found the sacking justifiable. Nevertheless, the strength of the Joint Shop Stewards Committee at Dagenham grew, especially in a period of constant speed-ups. In 1962 came a repeat of the Briggs affair which this time ended in the sacking of 17 stewards. It is doubtful whether the stewards' organization ever recovered from this defeat.

In the same year, the Halewood plant came into operation. The early years of the Halewood plant (near Liverpool) are

the history of the building of a strong shop-floor organization. Ford came to Merseyside looking for cheap labor in a development area, and were determined from the start to impose the strong discipline which they had achieved at Dagenham after years of struggle.

The first battles were over low rates of pay, which the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), i.e. Metalworkers, and the General and Municipal Workers Union (GMWU) had accepted as the price of excluding Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) recruitment from the factory. But under pressure from Dagenham, the battle for standard rates of pay throughout the Ford combine was won, and the TGWU moved into Halewood and eventually became the majority union.

Later, there were the disputes common to every car plant — manning levels (number of workers per section), speed of the line, noise, rest breaks : a shop-floor organization could survive only if it won these struggles. Generally, it did. For four or five years, the struggle to create a shop stewards' organization was inseparable from the rank and file's determination to improve working conditions. This was the period when there was probably the greatest identification between the stewards and the men and women who elected them. This growing solidarity presented management with a challenge to its power within the factory which would eventually have to be faced. In Dagenham in 1962, Ford had taken up this challenge and mounted an attack on the Paint, Trim and Assembly (PTA) Plant stewards, perhaps the worst trouble spot from their point of view. The dismissal of the 17 stewards had a big impact on the Halewood stewards.

RELATIONS BETWEEN STEWARDS AND UNIONS

The main lesson they gained from the massacre was that no shop stewards' committee could survive for long in the face of the combined hostility of unions and management. Instead, they believed that a new start in relations with the officials must be made at Halewood. They would try to build their own local organization through their own efforts, and at the same time, they would accept the existence of

the unions, and use their machinery when it suited them.

As the '60s progressed, this made more and more sense to the stewards. Through the day-to-day struggles at Halewood they built a strong base which gave them a degree of independence from the unions. But this was also a period in which the old right-wing leaderships were beginning to change. In the TGWU, Bevin had given way to Cousins and then to Jones. In the AEU Scanlon replaced Carron. Jones and Scanlon were, it seemed, in favor of exactly the same kind of relationship between stewards and officials as the Halewood stewards. Both used the language of "shop-floor democracy."

The peak of this relationship was 1969. In cooperation with the Labour Government and Barbara Castle's Department of Employment, Ford put forward a wage offer tied to penalties for unofficial action. The penal clauses, which would have meant in effect a collective fine on all workers in plants where wildcat stoppages occurred, were obviously designed to isolate the militants. The proposals were accepted by the trade union officials on the Ford Joint Negotiating Committee (NJNC).

Once news of the deal got out, a strike led by Halewood Transmission workers spread throughout the combine. Eventually, the Company was forced to withdraw the main penal clauses (the last one vanished in the 1973 agreement), and two of the officials who had stuck by the deal were compelled to resign from the NJNC. Encouraged by this success, the stewards began to campaign for convenor (chairperson of stewards in a plant) representation on the NJNC, and for parity of wages with the better paid Midland car workers. The leadership of both the AEU and the TGWU came around on both issues within the year.

In his book WORKING FOR FORD, Huw Beynon points out:

> In a situation where no plant bargaining over the rate of pay or work was permitted, the stewards found their one alternative lay in the official union. They united the plant by pushing for a national pay increase through the formal union machinery, and this strategy continued after the 1969 settlement.

On the key issue of wages, the Ford stewards were in a position of dependence on the officials. That, of course, was Ford's intention on centralizing wage bargaining through the NJNC; the machinery placed a severe limit on the stewards' independence. But in 1969 that seemed a small price to pay for the support of Jones and Scanlon. Two years later the strategy lay in ruins.

1971 SCANLON DEAL SETS BACK STEWARDS' IDEA OF USING UNION OFFICIALS

The setback to the Halewood stewards' hopes came with the sudden and unexpected end of the 10-week strike for parity in 1971. Jones and Scanlon completely rode over the heads of the NJNC negotiators and, in a secret deal with the Company's European boss, reached a settlement.

The price was the imposition of a secret ballot on the workers which quickly killed off the strike. For stewards and rank and file alike, it was a demoralizing defeat. But how bad it really was became clear only in the days after the return to work. In April, management launched a blitz on the shop floor at Halewood. Lines were speeded up, suspensions distributed like confetti and the stewards' freedom of movement cut back. It was like a return to the bad old days when the plant first opened and the management had the upper hand.

To the stewards' dismay, the unions remained silent despite their appeals for help. In exchange for the wage settlement — 8 phased over '71-'73 — the unions had promised Ford that for the two years of the contract:

* there would be no strike or other action on wage claims.
* there would be no claim leading to higher wage costs.
* there would be no action over grading changes.

In other words the union officials had accepted a wage freeze, and the shop floor was on its own.

STEWARD SACKED

It was obvious that the management blitz was aimed at more than just recouping what they had lost during the

strike and with the settlement. Ford were looking for a decisive defeat along the lines of what they had achieved at Dagenham. This was how the stewards saw the sacking of John Dillon, a Paint Shop steward, early in June 1971. The similarity to what had happened to the Dagenham stewards was remarkable — Dillon was charged with holding 'an unauthorized meeting.' The strike which followed was nevertheless almost as solid as the parity strike, although many stewards were noticeably less happy about taking 'their men' out.

After a week, the strike was threatening to spread to the rest of the combine. National officials began talks with management. The result was reminiscent of the secret ballot deal. A position of strength was frittered away through negotiations, and the unions compromised. John Dillon would be reinstated, but only on two conditions, the second of which was revealed only after the return to work. First, he would be removed to another area of the plant, from the militant wet-deck to the backwater in the garage area. Second, he was to be deprived of his steward's credentials and would never be allowed to become a steward again. Management and convenors ratified the deal at plant level and the next morning it was put to a bewildered mass meeting which accepted it. The only persistent opposition came from Dillon's old section, which refused to accept a replacement steward. (There is a sequel to this story....in late 1972, after they had decided to join a march through Liverpool in protest against the Government's Housing Finance Act, the bulk of the wet-deck was sacked. They were reinstated on condition that they moved to other sections or the opposite shift.)

There was never a return to the self-confidence, militancy and popularity of the Halewood stewards at the beginning of the 1971 Parity Strike.

THE RIFTS BETWEEN THE STEWARDS AND SHOP FLOOR HAD BEGUN LONG BEFORE

The Dillon strike marked a turning point for the working class in Halewood. From this point onwards it became

clearer to the rank and file that they had to rely increasingly on their own efforts, that the stewards weren't necessarily going to do the job for them. Rather than this being an entirely new situation, it was in reality a return to a growing trend on the shop floor in the middle '60s. In fact the closeness of the shop stewards to the militancy and interests of rank-and-file workers during 1969-71 was the real exception ... a temporary thing. The combination of a series of unusual events had temporarily halted the stewards' decline into docility.

What were these events? We have already described the success of the stewards' approach to the union leaderships over parity and NJNC membership. In addition, a growing militancy was beginning to sweep over workers in many industries. These were the years when a temporary alliance between leaders like Jones and Scanlon, stewards and rank-and-file workers grew up in opposition to Labour and Tory Governments' attempts to introduce IN PLACE OF STRIFE and the INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ACT (anti-strike legislation similar to the Taft-Hartley Act in the U.S.). For a short time, many Halewood workers perhaps forgot the atrocities the stewards had been accomplices to in 1967 and '68.

In 1967 the stewards, under pressure from the union leaders, accepted a new job evaluation scheme. It was intended by Ford to stop a long period of stoppages caused by grading grievances — the workers' only way to increase earnings. The debate over whether to accept the deal almost split the stewards and led to an estrangement from many shop-floor workers. The reasons the stewards agreed to the new deal were telling: many of them felt that the constant strikes over grading were producing disunity and ripping the shop stewards' committees apart. Ford went to a great deal of trouble to sell the idea of job evaluation. The stewards were blinded by pseudo-science and by being taken into the management's confidence in working out the scheme. They believed it was in their interests to do away with the old complicated grading system. By accepting job evaluation they put the workers permanently at the mercy of the management's stop watches.

The opposition to job evaluation came to a head with the spread of a strike of women seamstresses from the Soft Trim in Dagenham to Halewood in June 1968. The strike was essentially over the women's grievance over the new grading they were given after the acceptance of job evaluation, and resulted in the women workers of Ford being granted equal pay with the men.

Following the women's strike there was a strike by men in Halewood PTA which took up the issue of grading again. The strikers elected a strike committee which contained no shop stewards. Such was the shop-floor anger at the stewards' deal with management. They wanted to know why the stewards had accepted the job evaluation scheme in the first place. After a few days the strike fizzled out, but the strike and especially the formation of the strike committee had a deep impact on the stewards. In fact, their feeling that they were losing the support and control of the shop floor was an important factor in forcing them to press for wage parity the following year. They were desperate to regain the support they had lost. The issue of a national fight for parity with the Midlands carworkers was one which could once again unite the rank and file behind them.

In the 1960s, like employers in every other industry, the car companies saw that the biggest obstacle to their achieving a higher level of profitability was, as always, the strength of the workers. Alone, any employer was too weak to solve the problem, even using the traditional weapon of speed-up. What was called for from the bosses' point of view was a new system of industrial relations. Looking back, we can see that it was neither IN PLACE OF STRIFE nor the Industrial Relations Act which were the most effective forms of state intervention, but wages policies carried through with the agreement of the unions. And it was Ford, in cooperation with Jones and Scanlon, which was to set up the model — as it had often in the past — for other employers and even for the Government.

The result of the 1971 parity strike was a two-year contract, which was effectively both a wage freeze and a productivity deal. With industrial peace guaranteed by the unions and the shop stewards, Ford was given a free hand to

increase productivity while at the same time holding down wages and increasing car prices. It was obvious to Ford workers that this was a bummer. Likewise, it was obvious to many employers and to the Tories that it was a model contract for them. It took until the end of 1972 for the state to introduce the system on a national scale with the three phases of the 'Counter Inflation Act.' The 1971 Ford contract became a model for the law. In 1973 the Government returned the favor by giving Ford the support of the law for refusing a wage rise larger than a couple of pounds.

Only when a new contract was being fought for would the stewards emerge as the militant leadership again. But it's impossible to have it both ways. It doesn't inspire confidence in your leadership if you act as a supervisor for most of the year and as a militant for a few weeks every two years. In 1973 it was obvious that even the stewards didn't feel at home with their role as militants as the struggle over the claim approached. The memory of Jones' and Scanlon's 1971 sell-out was undermining their confidence. The impact of these developments was fully felt on the shop floor. Nobody could rely on Jones and Scanlon for support in any struggle, even if many carry on doing so. After many years of relying on the unions for support against the Company, the stewards realized that they would be as alone if they opposed the unions' line as their counterparts had been in Dagenham in the years up to 1962.

More and more in Halewood, it was taken for granted that when a stoppage occurred the stewards would try to ensure that production was maintained by sticking to the procedure...the Company's procedure. But two months before the national agreement expired an unexpected episode occurred which did nothing for the Halewood stewards' already low standing on the shop floor.

FORD'S NEW YEAR RESOLUTION — SPEED-UPS!

On Friday, December 29th, the Ford management at Halewood announced their intention to start moving men between various sections of the Body Plant and the PTA. They said the program of mobility of labor would start the following

Tuesday, January 2nd, but they did not specify how many people would be moved or from which sections they would be moved. Not a word was heard from the unions or the convenors, although it later turned out that the PTA convenor at least had had advance warning from management of what was to happen. Few stewards got any details of Ford's intentions, but rumors were going round the two plants that between 120 and 600 men would be shifted by the end of the third stage.

The timing of Ford's announcement showed that they were worried about the reaction they might provoke — they chose the day before the New Year's Day holiday and hoped that the festivities might put out of everybody's mind what they could expect the following Tuesday when they returned to work.

Whenever an employer starts talking about "flexible manning" or "mobility of labor" or "more efficient use of the workforce," there is always the same thing at the back of his mind — how to get more work out of each worker without having to pay any extra for it. In an assembly-line factory there are two main ways that the workload can be increased: by making everybody work harder to keep up, or by cutting the number of workers on each section. Either way the result is that each worker ends up doing extra work, and because the 1971 wage agreement laid down that there could be no action taken to get higher wages for two years, there is no chance of bargaining for a higher rate to compensate for the speed-up. That means that any change in work practices which leads to more work has to be resisted.

When the Company decided to move workers around in January they tried hard to make it appear as if it was just a slight reorganization, but no one on the line in Halewood had any illusions that their smooth talking was anything but a disguise for a speed-up, for a one-sided productivity deal without even a token wage increase in return for more work. Of course there was no reason why Ford should have offered any compensation, since in 1971 the unions had signed away all the workers' right to bargain over wages until March 1st, 1973.

For two years Ford had been cashing in on this agreement with the unions by increasing production while wages stood still. The same week the Company warned of the new labor mobility, it announced record production figures as a result of the long series of speed-ups since the end of the 1971 strike. Ford was going to show no sign of getting soft before the '73 contract talks got under way.

Finally, Halewood workers had another cause for suspecting the worst from Ford. Nobody had explained what was to happen to the 'surplus labor.' Workers with mates in the Transmission Plant could hear how management there disposed of its surplus : workers would be shifted from job to job until one day they just gave up and left the firm.

MANNING CHANGES START

True to their promise, on the following Tuesday night Ford went into action. On the Escort trim seven men were taken off the section. The men who were left responded by working to their own rules and refusing to do the extra work. Unfinished cars began travelling down the line, spreading chaos because it was almost certain that they would have to do the circuit again.

The convenor's advice was "Let's negotiate." The stewards obviously had no intention of fighting. Although they had had four days' notice they had made no preparations. As usual they were suggesting that the men "try it out." This could mean only one thing. If they tried it out, according to the procedure, they would end up pulling the same score with seven men fewer. The stewards would sit, cups of tea in their hand, watching and then agree with management that it could be done after all.

This time the men were unimpressed by the idea of negotiations. The Trim line was stopped and the men were told to go home. Instead, they refused to move and sat down. Several hours later, with the Trim still immobile, the rest of the PTA was sent home. The same night in the Body Plant (which adjoins the PTA) three men were taken off the White Lines, the section where the bodies are prepared for the Paint Shop, but were replaced by two men from other

sections.

Ford's strategy was clear. A reduction in manning was one objective, but just as important for the Company was the disruption of work groups who knew and trusted each other to stick together against management. Splitting up militant sections is an old tactic at Ford, and never so popular as when a pay claim looms up. According to the Blue Book, the rule book which defines the procedure union and management are supposed to follow in their sparring matches, the firm was not permitted to begin a manning alteration on the night shift. But when it suits them — which is surprisingly often, when you consider that they wrote the Blue Book — they break the procedure. That night, on the White Lines, the workers decided to break the procedure too.

THE SNAKE

The Body stewards spent the hours between midnight and 3 A.M. locked in debate with the plant manager. But the manager was adamant: the manning changes would stay. When the stewards reported back to the White Lines the men decided to sit in. Fifteen minutes later they were informed that they had been laid off.

At this point the normal routine would have been to send the rest of the plant home soon after the section in dispute. Understandably, this frequently leads to resentment, especially if it happens in the middle of the night when the buses have stopped running. Ford usually rubs it in by circulating a bulletin on the next shift, carrying their account of what happened and allocating blame. Ford takes advantage of the situation to set workers against each other.

But this time, everyone knew that the White Lines would not be the only section affected by the manning changes. Ford was trying to take on one section at a time so that they didn't set the whole plant against them. The White Lines knew this too and decided to spread the dispute. They quickly organized what the FIAT workers in Turin call a Snake. They marched to the Press Shop. Their target was calculated, for when the Press Shop closes down the vital

supply of body panels to Dagenham and the continental plants, as well as Halewood, is threatened.

120 men marched to the Press Shop chanting "Out, out, out," calling on the workers there to join them in solidarity. "You help us this time and we'll come out for you when you're in trouble." The Press Shop held a meeting there and then and decided to go with the White Lines.

Seeing the Press Shop heading home for bed too, the rest of the Body put their coats on and left. The Snake had proved irresistible. Three stewards played an important part in the events. There were the two White Lines stewards. They had seen their task as encouraging the development of the struggle, rather than standing by the Company's procedure, as the Trim line stewards had done. And there was the senior steward in the Press Shop who called a meeting on the spur of the moment. Would he have done this without the powerful moving force of the White Lines?

So, halfway through the first night of the manning changes, the Body Plant and the PTA had gone home. That's not so very unusual. Ford will accept the occasional loss of a shift's-worth of production, relying on the convenors to get the lines started the next day, while negotiations go on. But this night's events had shaken management. For the first time at Halewood since the June 1971 strike over Dillon's sacking, a dispute had overflowed from one section, and groups of workers had taken their own initiative, firmly rejecting the very idea of negotiation.

At the start of the following night's shift, the PTA convenor called a meeting outside the gates. The mood was exhilarated and the meeting was noisy. Nobody would go back to work until everyone who had been moved the night before returned to their old section. The stewards knew that a recommendation to return to work would invite trouble. At the same time, they were obviously in a quandary about what they could recommend instead.

Shouts for an organized picket of the day shift were ignored by the convenor, as well as the suggestion — in a Big Flame leaflet — for a march to the Transmission Plant. In fact, to everyone's bewilderment, nothing was put to the vote. The stewards knew that nobody would go in to work,

but they weren't going to propose that. The meeting broke up in confusion. The PTA was at a standstill for another night.

Meanwhile, the Body plant was meeting and deciding to stay out. Most workers had probably gone home by the time the newly-elected convenor turned up to take over the meeting. Hot from talking to management, he announced that for the time being Ford would run the line at 35 an hour instead of the normal 67. So, what was left of the Body worked that shift at half speed.

Would the feeling about the manning changes die down? The stewards seemed to hope so. They certainly were doing as little as possible to prevent it. One sign of this was their reluctance to tell the opposite shift what was happening. The convenor of the PTA first informed the day-shift stewards of what had happened on Tuesday night at midday on Thursday! Like management, they were pinning their hopes on limiting the dispute to a few sections on nights. Unfortunately for them a man was taken out of the Engine Compartment section in the Body Plant on Thursday afternoon.

The workers on this section reacted like the Trim line. They worked to rule until they were laid off, then they sat in. Events then moved quickly. On Thursday night, nobody from the PTA turned up to work. And the night shift of the Engine Compartment walked out in solidarity with the opposite shift. Despite management's offer of a line speed of 19 instead of the 35 the night before (compared with the normal speed of 67!), the whole of the Body Plant decided not to work. Ford's strategy had misfired. Instead of inflicting a timely defeat on the shop floor just before the wage claim, they had stirred up a hornet's nest. By now, they were desperate to get the men back to work. So, it seems, were the convenors.

Both shifts of the PTA met in Liverpool Stadium on Friday morning. After two days of struggle, the convenor, Billy McGuire, thought it was safe now to recommend a return to work "pending negotiations." Amid shouts and boos, the motion was narrowly carried. Outside, workers stood around asking "Why wasn't the Body Plant invited to the meeting?"

"Why did the stewards call a two-shift meeting when they had done nothing to involve the day shift in what was happening?"

The vote to return to work was the answer to both questions.

The following Monday night, the Trim line workers — who had lost seven men — went in to work but refused to touch every fourth car. The slow-down inevitably began to spread throughout the plant. In the Body Plant the Engine Compartment was doing 19 an hour. A couple of days later the deputy convenor asked them to go back to 67. They told him to clear off. It took a week for things to simmer down, but Ford had taken the hint. Nothing more was heard of Stages Two and Three. Far from inflicting the strategic defeat they badly needed at that time, Ford had only managed to push hundreds of workers into unified action which the stewards had temporarily lost control of.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MANNING DISPUTE EVENTS?

We can't judge the events of those two weeks in isolation. With only a short time to go before the contract was due for re-signing, what happened in January had an important bearing on the future of the wage claim. In fact, we would say that the stewards' attempt to fight over the manning changes was the beginning of the undermining of the fight over the claim.

In a broadsheet given out in Dagenham at that time, we said:

> The militancy and rebellion at Halewood has shown itself in many ways, but the message is loud and clear: the rank and file at Halewood are ready to start a new phase of the struggle against Ford — the fight for the 35-hour week, a £10 increase, full lay-off pay... against the Freeze, against the Government.

What did we mean by this?

We did not mean that everyone on the shop floor was sure that the battle over the claim had to start then. This was obviously not true. We were saying that a great potential was present. For a week and a half the situation was snowballing. Despite the stewards' defusing of the struggle, the mood was defiant: they would not compromise with Ford this time, and they had thrown up new and effective tactics to prove they meant it. This was the highest point in the workers' struggle at Halewood since June 1971.

It was the job of any leadership to respect and understand this potential. Anyone who was serious about winning the claim would have seen that this was a perfect opportunity to start the battle. Whether the time was right to begin a strike or work to rule, or whether instead it was better to make preparations only — e.g. section and mass meetings to discuss strategy, planning flying pickets and the formation of links with other workers in struggle over the Freeze — is not the main point. The question was, was it a time to look forward not backward? It was a time when a genuine leadership would have welcomed the militancy rather than stunting and suffocating it.

The time to fight is when you are strong. This can't always be predicted. Class struggle is not orderly, like a game of chess. This is what the employers and union officials would like it to be. It is disordered and unpredictable, and unless you seize your opportunities when they arise, by tomorrow they have gone.

This way of seeing things was totally foreign to the convenors and most of the stewards. Whatever the provocations, they wanted everyone back to work, to wait for March 1st, the day the contract would run out. Honoring the agreement came first with them. In effect, they were saying that the time might be right for the men, but it didn't suit them, or Ford. For them, the manning dispute was an irritating diversion from the coming fight over the wage claim, which they viewed as a separate issue.

This is a ridiculous point of view at any time: getting us to work harder is only the other side of the coin of paying us as little as possible. To separate the issues was even more dangerous at such a time. If greater manning flexi-

bility had been introduced last January, it would have been an important step towards the destruction of shop-floor organization and militancy. Ford management could see the connection between the manning dispute and the Freeze, even if the convenors couldn't. That's why they reacted so strongly after 18 months of relative peace in the factory.

At the Stadium meeting, a platform speaker pointed out that "you have to expect this sort of thing in a capitalist factory." Later, at a branch meeting, the PTA convenor said that in his opinion some of the lines were overmanned, and he couldn't understand why management had not taken action before. Nobody can deny that in a capitalist factory you expect the bosses to try this sort of thing. From their point of view, they would be mad if they didn't. But that's no reason why the workers should let them get away with it. Nor does it justify a convenor's aiding the bosses in doing it.

WHY THE STEWARDS BEHAVED AS THEY DID

Why did the stewards behave as they did? (As will become clearer, we are referring to the organization rather than the individuals, who, as we have mentioned, did not always conform to the majority line.) One common explanation is that the stewards are all corrupt. This is unlikely, and besides, it is clear that although many stewards are mistaken in their views, they hold them sincerely and are not the stooges of management, paid or unpaid.

Another view is that stewards are dominated by right-wingers. The solution in this case is to replace them with left-wingers. We don't go along with the diagnosis or the prescription, but this is a much more plausible outlook than the view that the stewards are bent. The main weakness of both explanations is that their starting and finishing points are the personal qualities of individual stewards, when it is surely the case that we are dealing with the ideas and behavior of stewards' organization.

We believe that the best way to understand why so many stewards seem to be 'bent' or 'right-wingers' is by looking at the job they do. It's by looking at what it means to be a

steward that you start to get to the root of the problem. The steward's role can be looked at from two angles. First, the part they play in the union set-up, and second, their day-to-day job in the factory.

THE STEWARDS AS PART OF MANAGEMENT

Most workplaces have developed rules, written or unwritten, for dealing with the day-to-day conflict between workers and bosses. Ford is no exception. Although the Company has always insisted on its sole right to manage as it sees fit, to make final decisions on vital issues like work allocation and line speeds, the Company has been compelled to hand over to the union officials and senior stewards some say in control, if only to gain the union bureaucracies' help in dealing with shop-floor rebellion. The main agreements between Ford and the unions are collected together in the Blue Book, called by Huw Beynon, the author of WORKING FOR FORD, "a history of workers' defeats." The Blue Book lays out a complicated procedure for dealing with day-to-day disputes which to some extent recognizes the right of stewards to be consulted in the event of change or conflict. But these rights are nowhere near as broad as they are in the engineering industry, where the piecework system has given stewards a large degree of control over the speed of work and job conditions, and even rates of pay.

The early days at Halewood saw bitter struggles to win and enforce the recognition of stewards' negotiating rights, and this was clearly a progressive tendency. It brought under some control the tyrannical way that Ford prefers to run its business. But there are serious drawbacks to this struggle for stewards' rights that have become obvious over the last few years.

The steward's job has come to be defined by procedure. Procedure recognizes the stewards, as long as they don't challenge the basic principle: Ford's right to exploit for profit. This means that they go into every struggle with an eye for compromise because they always accept in practice that the workers' needs as a class are tied to the interests of capital. In this way, Ford subtly lays down the limits of

the fight against the Company.

Of course procedure can be used. It is useful to sling the rulebook at Ford every time management ignores it, if only to demonstrate to the uncommitted workers the Company's cynical attitude towards legality. And, moreover, compromises can't always be avoided. But the question is, are compromises made for tactical reasons, or are they the basis of any struggle? An example will illustrate this.

Just after the return to work at Halewood in April, a militant was sacked for "bad time-keeping." He was seen walking out of the gates early. It was a clear case of victimization, because he walked out with over 100 others. Still, it was true he had walked out early. From management's point of view, bad time-keeping isn't acceptable. For obvious reasons. So, they take disciplinary action. The workers' point of view is different. There is no pleasure in working for Ford. Few workers would disagree that if you get the opportunity, you go home early. This applies to many stewards, yet the idea of a fair day's work for a fair day's pay is so strong and loyalty to procedure so entrenched that few stewards would openly support a worker who walked out early.

And it's difficult to bluff your way out, because bad time-keeping is often an easily proven offense. The only way to win this kind of issue is to say openly what most workers felt instinctively: "I am not concerned about the needs of the capitalist for productivity; I don't want to work a minute more than is necessary." The steward who behaves as a steward denies himself this way out. He can argue that there are mitigating circumstances, but in the end he will agree to management's right to take disciplinary action. This is exactly what happened in April. The procedure was followed through every stage up to the involvement of the union official, and then the man was sacked.

However left-wing he is, or was when elected, the steward finds himself trapped by the rules of the job. Nobody should be surprised to hear a senior steward remark "You have to expect these things in a capitalist factory," because this is largely what his job is about: accepting capitalism in principle, but claiming the right to negotiate over this or

that detail. The problem is that it's the principle of capitalism which is at the heart of our day-to-day existence in the factory.

HOLDING BACK THE RANK AND FILE

> The parties agree that, at each stage of the procedure set out in this agreement, every attempt will be made to resolve issues raised, and until such procedure has been carried through, there shall be no stoppage or unconstitutional action.

So runs the Blue Book. Management's greatest fear is the collective action of the shop floor, free from the control of the union officials. Thus, procedure is aimed at whipping the initiative out of the hands of the rank and file and placing it in the firm, safe hands of officials and management. And doing this preferably while production recommences. So, it wasn't accidental that the cry of the stewards during the manning dispute should have been "Back to work lads, you can leave this to us to sort out."

The shop steward is the first backstop in the procedure for dealing with disputes. When there's trouble, he steps in, acting on behalf of the workers in his section. This delegation of responsibility for the struggle has important consequences. First, it tends to cool the situation down. Procedure is deliberately intended to take so long that by the time a verdict is reached, workers have lost their anger and will to fight. Second, it builds up the self-confidence of the steward at the expense of the people who elected him. It reduces the workers to the passivity that the employer prefers for them.

It's the same wherever you look. At mass meetings, the stewards dominate the proceedings, displaying their eloquence and their ability to hold an audience. At best, the audience is permitted a question, but denied the microphone or the vantage point of the platform or the steward's years of experience of addressing meetings, what worker can hope to make a point stick in opposition to the convenor and his cohorts ?

If the meeting takes place during a strike, it may well be

the most active form of participation in the struggle for the ordinary worker. The stewards do the planning and organization, tour the factories and sites speaking and making collections, and then put out a weak call for pickets. But the workers are not used to doing anything more than holding their hands in the air. Why should they, the stewards are there to do it for them. Electing a steward is delegating active participation in the struggle.

So when a situation like the manning dispute breaks out, where there is a lot of initiative and self-activity from the rank and file, the stewards can do one of two things: either they can join in and respect the new level of the struggle, as some individual stewards did; or they can plod on in their official role and put forward "steward strategies" that take the struggle backwards — resumption of work, stewards to negotiate, etc. This is what the stewards' committees did in the manning dispute.

SHOP-FLOOR ALTERNATIVE TO THE STEWARDS

The manning dispute was not an everyday occurrence. It would be wrong to imagine that the workers at Halewood are always militant and raring to go, or that the only thing that prevents them is a "reformist" leadership which is holding them back. The shop stewards only have authority at times like the manning dispute because it's given to them the rest of the time by the shop floor.

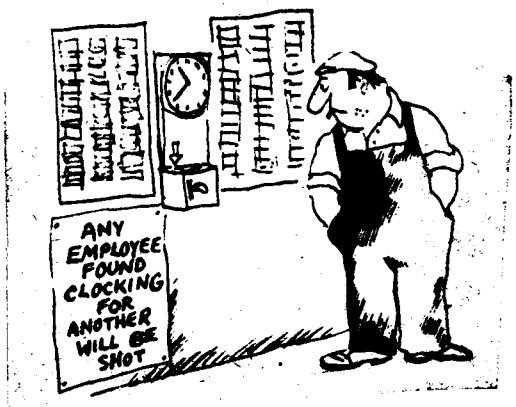
In fact the manning dispute itself shows not only the strengths but also the weaknesses of the shop floor at Halewood. The strengths have already been emphasized: the spontaneous mass rejection of Ford's attempts to increase productivity and control the workforce. Here were the beginnings of a genuine class consciousness and action — the separation of the needs of the workers from the interests of the bosses. New ways of fighting were developed during the course of the manning dispute — the value of the Snake on the 2nd of January can't be overestimated, because it challenged the usual way in which the section in dispute walks away, goes home and leaves itself powerless to fight.

But it's here also that the weaknesses come in. The new

awareness and initiative of those days never became permanent or conscious enough. It was never translated into an organizational alternative that could seriously challenge the stewards for more than a few days. For example, at the mass meetings at the time there was an enormous amount of disillusionment with the actions and recommendations of the stewards' committees, but beyond booing and jeering this was never expressed.

What was needed was for a group of workers who saw what was happening to have organized to stop the stewards' cooling down the struggle, and to put forward strategies that could have developed the militancy that was evident and directed it towards winning the coming battle over the contract. This would have meant, for instance, getting together to produce leaflets and to plan action in mass meetings. Until more people in the struggle speak, we'll get nowhere. Because this never happened the stewards were able to ride the situation out. Even after all the events of January it was the same shop stewards' committees who were there to lead the fight over the claim.

BIG FLAME is a revolutionary socialist organization based in Liverpool, London, and Manchester which has focused its organizing work on the auto industry, the docks, the tenants' movement, and the women's movement.



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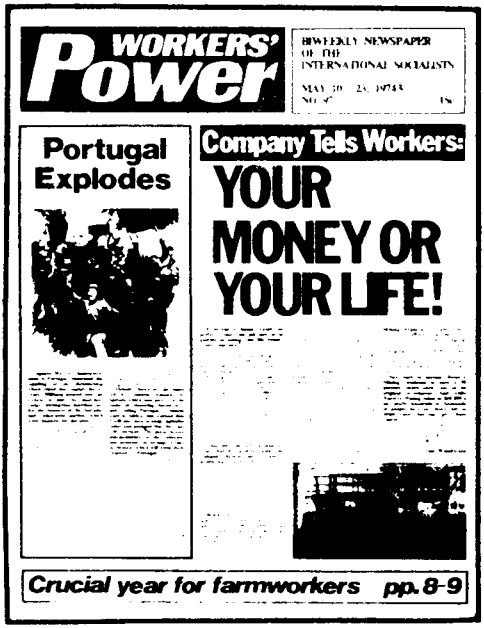

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