

Ch3. Worse Off and Weaker

The Effect of Tory Policies on the Working Class



Dole office in Liverpool (Photo: John Sturrock, Report).

Wages and conditions

Today, workers are increasingly being subject to straightforward blackmail. Employers are telling their workforces that because of the economic situation (produced by monetarist policies), they've got to choose between better wages and conditions or keeping their jobs — they can't have both. In the public sector, time and again management are pointing to cash limits as the reason why they can't concede a decent pay rise without making more people redundant:

'Any increase on this offer will have to be paid for by more productivity, more redundancies and maybe more closures. There's no more cash. The government have made it clear that they will stick by their cash limits. They will not give us more money.' (Bob Scholey, Chief Executive of the British Steel Corporation speaking on the radio in the 9th week of the steel strike.)

The same thing is being told to hospital workers, local authority workers, teachers and civil servants.

Living standards

Inflation has doubled since Thatcher took office. Mortgages are at a record level. Rents are about to shoot up. Gas and electricity are up. VAT has added nearly 4% to our bills — and so on. The effect of inflation is to cut real wages. Before long, we predict that there'll be a hysterical media campaign about inflation, but it won't be demanding a total price freeze. As usual, it will be

aimed at wages. If monetarism and the Employment Act don't hold down wages, the police will be used to crush strikes and impose wage controls. Even during her election campaign, Thatcher said she couldn't rule out a wage freeze, despite the Government's supposed policy of non-intervention in the market-place.

Unemployment

The worldwide capitalist slump will be made worse in Britain by the government's monetarist policies. In industry after industry thousands of sackings are being planned if they haven't already been carried out. Whole cities like Liverpool are being decimated. Because of the public spending cuts, thousands more jobs are being lost in schools, hospitals, local authorities, and government departments.

Meanwhile, the Tories are cutting back unemployment and social security benefits so they don't keep up with inflation. Earnings related unemployment benefit will end on January 1st 1982. And from about the same time, unemployment benefit will be taxed. The government have also announced a major campaign against so-called 'scroungers' (allied to more spying on claimants).

Cutting the welfare state

The welfare state was never as good as successive governments claimed. But it was a big improvement on the workhouse. Now it's being cut to shreds, and the private sector built up for the rich. The Tories do not believe people have a right to health care, housing, education, social

services; those who have the money get the services, those who don't go without.

The human misery caused by these and all the other policies can't be measured. In the home, women's workload will increase as a direct result of the cuts in public expenditure. Individual racist attacks will increase as a direct result of government policy as people look for a scapegoat for their own worsening situation. As life gets harder, people will turn against one another. So there'll be more daily violence, and in the family there's going to be more men battering their wives and children.

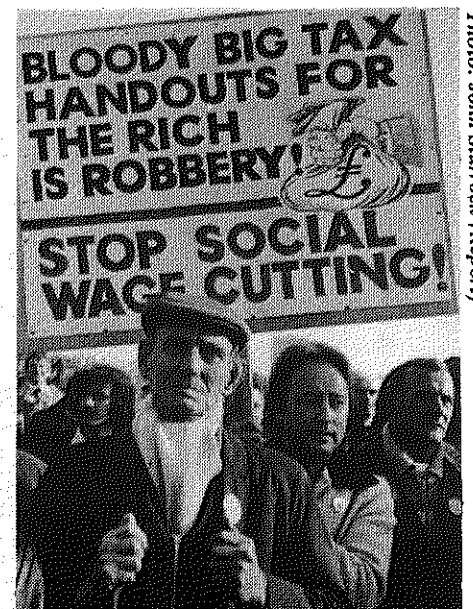


Photo: John Sturrock (Report)

Ch4. Keeping Us Down

How the Tories plan to get away with it

The government's plans to stop an effective fightback can roughly be divided into three. First, the attack on trade union organisation through the Employment Act and the cutback in welfare payments to the families of strikers. Secondly, measures to dramatically increase divisions in the working class. And finally, repression – preparations to use the police and army on a wider scale against workers.

The Employment Bill

The main purpose of this Act is quite simply to make *effective* strike action illegal, or at least very costly to the workers involved by making them liable for heavy damages. These are the basic provisions of the Act:

Restrictions on picketing:

Workers will face huge financial risks if they want to show solidarity by supporting the picket lines of other workers – for example, workers from a local factory supporting hospital workers fighting closure of their hospital, or even patients from that hospital supporting those workers.

The same will be true of 'secondary picketing' – we call it effective picketing – pickets on other branches of the same employer, or the head office, or the docks, or places holding stockpiles. For example, if the work at your factory was being transferred to another plant in the same company as part of a plan to close down part (or all) of your factory, you could be sued for picketing the plant where the work was going. And if you

didn't pay the damages, you'd go to gaol.

There are also the same restrictions on strike action in solidarity with another group of workers.

Tightening up the closed shop:

Any crank or scab will be given a green light to opt out of union membership, while continuing to reap the benefits of collective action without taking part in it. New closed shops will be much more difficult to get because they'll need an 80% vote in favour.

Secret postal ballots:

The government is attempting to encourage trade union leaders to use secret postal ballots more frequently by offering to pay for such ballots. No doubt many union leaders will go along with it – knowing that this will frequently be an effective way of getting themselves out of mass action.

The essence of trade unionism is *collective* discussion and *collective* action. That way we can feel our power. Not surprisingly, employers prefer to see our decisions made by post rather than at meetings because if each worker votes alone at home, he or she is isolated from the views of fellow workers, and much more open to the influence of the press and TV.

Codes of Practice:

The Secretary of State is given the power to draw up 'Codes of Practice' on any aspect of industrial relations. This Code of Practice 'would have status in law in that it could be taken into account in court proceedings.' That means that

such a code could be used in evidence against a picket charged with, for example, obstruction.

The Tory code will undoubtedly include all the ideas in the TUC Concordat with the previous government: no unofficial picketing; no more than six workers on each picket, to be identified with armbands; pickets to be controlled by full-time officials or an experienced union leader with a letter of authority.

These are the key sections of the Act. There are others – making it easier for employers to sack people, abolishing ACAS recognition procedures, the ending of legal immunities for trade unions. The attack on maternity rights is dealt with in the following section.

Divide and rule measures

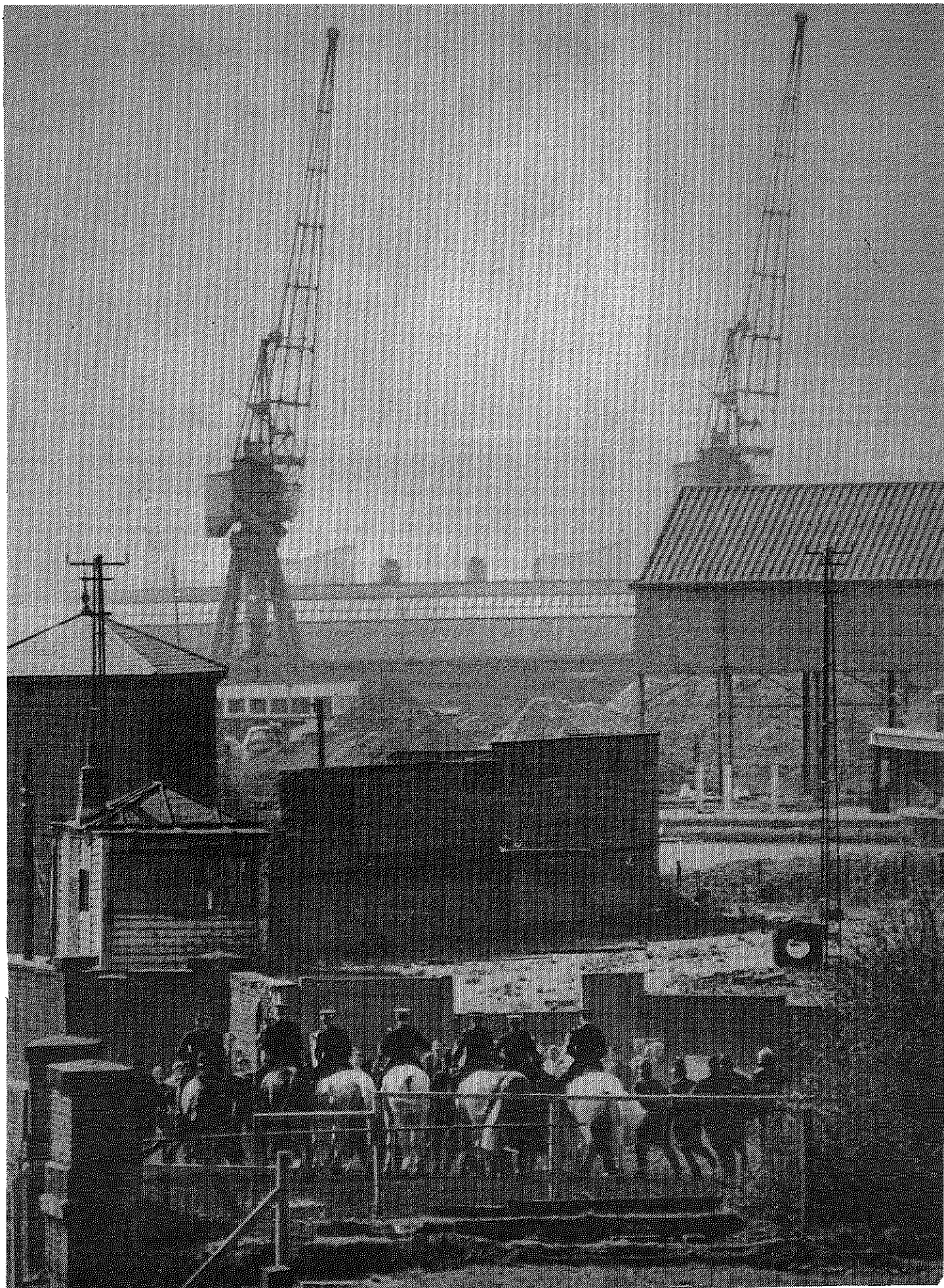
The Tories and the employers intend to exploit every division in an already divided workforce by attacking the weaker sections hardest. We can expect a major campaign to increase differentials between skilled and unskilled workers, between white and black and between men and women workers. The government has evidently decided to hit women particularly hard, attempting to force them back to their unpaid work in the home. This is the only explanation for the attacks on maternity rights in the Employment Act.

Their proposals would mean that a woman will not have the right to return to her job after having a baby if she works for a small firm employing 5 or less. As small shops and offices are

Photo: John Sturrock (Report)



Steel strike: winter 1980. A mass picket by workers from the British Steel Corporation attempting to close Sheerness Steel, a private steel company where workers defied an official strike call. Workers could now be sued for taking part in action like this under the Tory Employment Act.



City of London Police train in breaking picket lines inside Poplar Docks, London April 1980. The men in donkey jackets behind the police horses are policemen playing pickets. The group of men standing to the right are high ranking police officers watching this final training session – preparation for even greater use of the police under the Employment Act? (Photo: Carlos Augusto IFL)

Photo: Chris Davies, Report.



It's no accident that immigrant workers have the worst jobs with the lowest pay. Divide and rule is one way employers keep control. The Tories want to deepen these divisions.



Photo: Michael Ann Miller.

traditionally an important area of employment for women, this means that thousands of women won't have any maternity rights at all. In other firms, a woman will lose the right to maternity pay and her job back if she doesn't follow a bureaucratic procedure involving a total of 3 letters at specific times. And the right to your own job has gone. It only stays if it is 'reasonably practical.'

Among other attacks on women are the cutback in nurseries, the introduction of new technology in offices and the big campaign that 'women's place is in the home.' It is hardly surprising that from 1976 to 1978 there was a sharp

increase in registered unemployment among women — a trend that the government will make sure continues.

The new immigration rules:

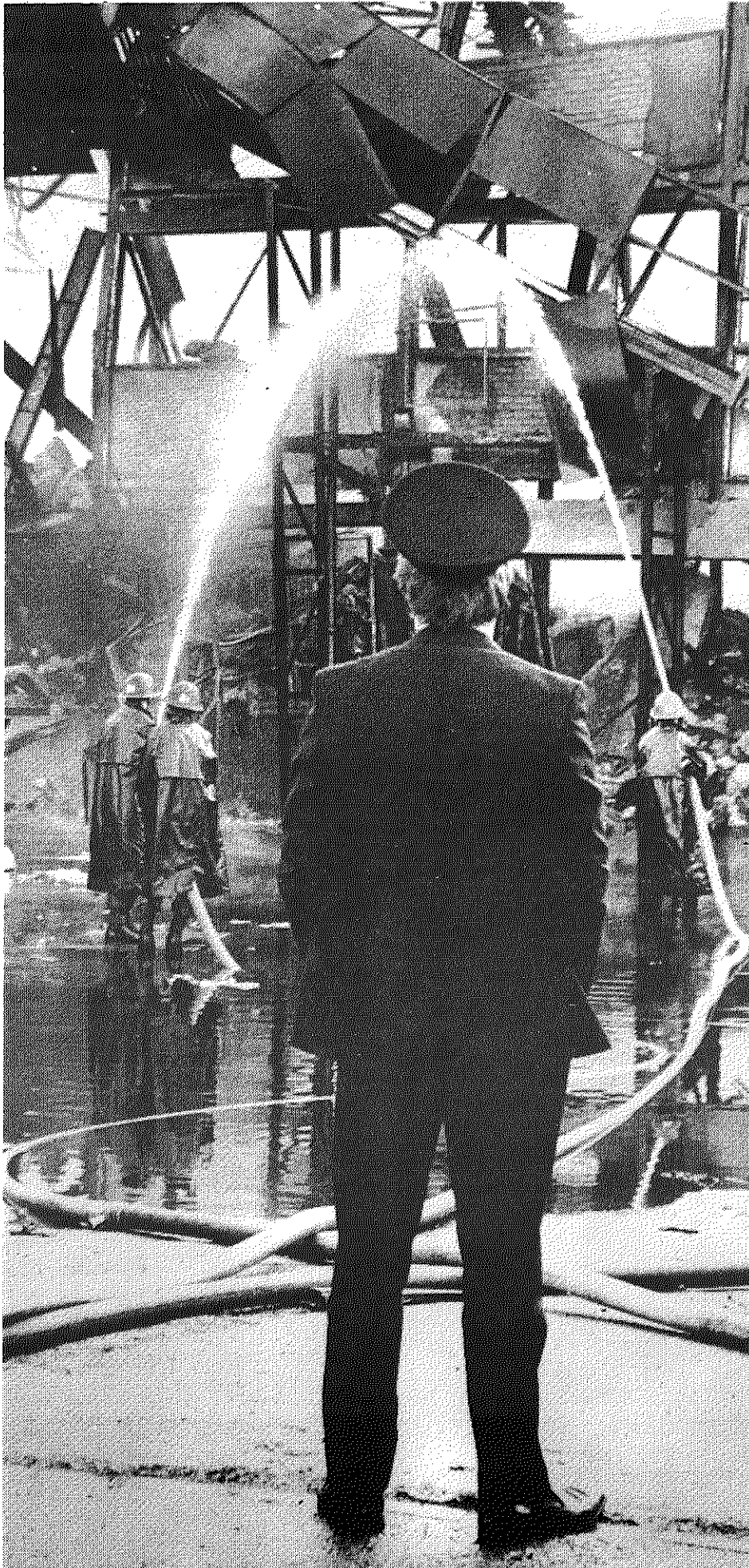
The new controls will keep out the husbands and fiances of women not born in Britain, regardless of whether they are British passport holders (unless they happen to be white). Children under 18 will only be admitted if unmarried, while elderly relatives will be subject to even harsher tests.

This is state racism. It's designed to make racism in the working class respectable. And it will give the police even more excuses for the harassment of all

black people living in Britain on the grounds of searching out 'illegal' immigrants. It is a move towards the European 'guestworker' system. This system brings in foreign workers for a specific length of time, with few civil rights and working for low wages. It is a system that has crippled the working class in places like Germany — and is an attempt to use black people as scapegoats. There's no doubt that the strict application of the Act and Labour's racist 1971 Immigration Act will make any black worker contemplating trade union or community activity think twice. The Prevention of Terrorism Act is already having that kind



Anger about the Tory's new controls on immigration brings these Asian women on the streets. (Photo: Andrew Wiard, Report)



of effect in the Irish community — with repeated arrests and deportation of militants who're in no way involved in military activity.

The role of the media:

All these measures will undoubtedly have the effect of increasing the differences in standard of living, how hard we work, and social status of the different sections of the working class. They'll be combined with determined campaigns by the mass media to isolate any groups of workers who do successfully start a fight-back against any aspect of the Tory attacks. That's why we've got to work out ways of defeating these divide and rule policies.

Repression

If all else fails, the ruling class will resort to *state violence*. The Tories are clear on this even if we are not. Just before the last election, the present Defence Secretary, Sir Ian Gilmour, explained why public spending on the armed forces should be increased:

'Instead of being treated worse than other people, the Armed Forces should have better treatment. They have a unique strategic importance . . . They are used to keep community services running when other workers go on strike.' (Hansard record of Parliament 26/3/79)

The use of troops in the Glasgow dustmen's strike and in the firefighters' and ambulance workers' disputes was seen under Labour. It will happen again. Thatcher has kept her election promises: army and police wages are up with increases much larger than the rate of inflation. Public spending on the police and armed forces is the only part of overall government spending to increase in real terms.

Joint police-army exercises are now regular events — geared to controlling 'civil disturbances.' And of course the British Army has had plenty of experience dealing with 'troublesome' sections of the working class — in this case sections of the Irish working class in Belfast and Derry. But for the moment in Britain, the job of maintaining direct control falls to judges and the police. Under the Tories, police behaviour at Grunwicks and in Southall will become the norm. The police violence outside Hadfields during the steel strike is what we must now expect on any effective picket line.

Some workers scoff at such talk. When Heath jailed five dockers, organised workers freed them. When police tried to break the miners' pickets, the Birmingham engineers shut down the Sattley coke works. We are not so confident that these victories can be easily repeated. We have great faith in the *potential* strength of our class. But neither can we forget that Des Warren and his building worker colleagues rotted in gaol. We cannot forget that the attacks on black workers, on Irish workers, on women, are already under way. The government's divisive propaganda, the power of the media, the *existing* divisions and weaknesses in our movement must all be overcome if we're to start winning.

A striking fireman watches as troops scab: December 1977 during the firefighters' strike against the Social Contract. And now the Army is in training for more frequent use in workplace struggles. (Photo: Andrew Wiard, Report)

Ch 5. Organising to Win

Lessons from Recent Struggles

It's now urgent for socialists to work out effective ways of fighting this political offensive. That's what the rest of this pamphlet is about. Already we've pointed to the key problem: the fact that workplace organisation in so many sectors is in a bad way. There's increasing demoralisation among the rank and file, and a growing cynicism about the role of shop stewards. This is the major lesson to come out of British Leyland.

So the major priority right now for all militants is to start

rebuilding workplace and trade union organisation at work. That'll mean consistent mass work among the rank and file, a political fight against the way they're trying to use divide and rule tactics against us, and a serious campaign for greater democracy and participation at all levels of the union. We go into this in more detail in the next two chapters. The remainder of this section is concerned with all the other lessons that have come out of the many struggles of recent years.

Struggles in the Steel Industry

The steel industry is one of those sectors where the bosses have been trying to destroy shop floor organisation by repeatedly threatening and carrying out closures and sackings. Management have been attempting to use a period of falling demand for steel to force much lower real wages, worse conditions and new working practices. Just how damaging this can be was seen in June 1978, when the British Steel Corporation closed the Shelton steel works in Stoke and 1,600 jobs disappeared:

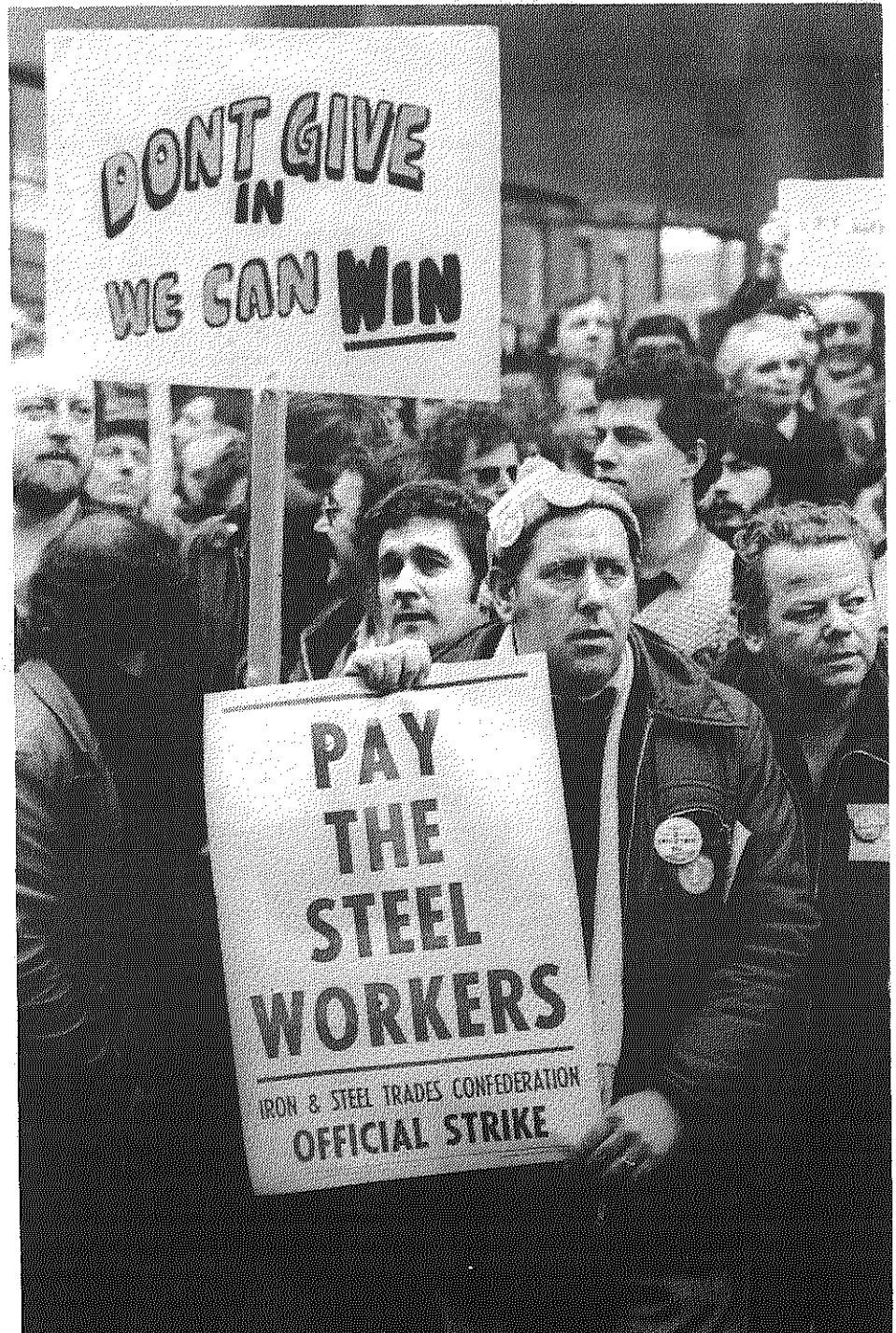
'In our fight to keep Shelton open, we played it by the book. We proved the economic viability of the plant; we produced an advance employment plan; we accepted management's demand for redundancies of 16% of the workforce; we let them introduce work measured incentive schemes.

We did everything they asked for — and still we lost. It's because we were so reasonable that they thought they could get away with closure. What happened here is a lesson to everyone. Don't fight closures on management's terms.

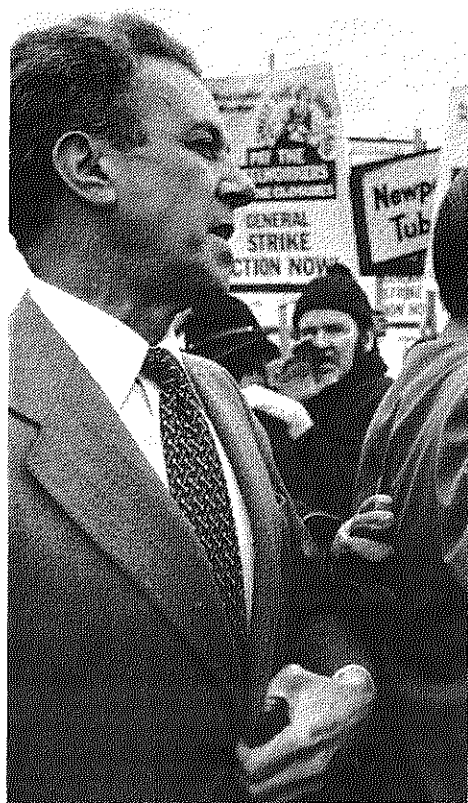
(Member of Shelton trade union action committee)

Fighting on management's terms — accepting their right to make a profit off our back — is a guaranteed loser in any struggle. We've got to reject the choice between accepting attacks on our wage levels and conditions, or losing our jobs. By 1980, steelworkers were no longer willing to accept that kind of blackmail. They weren't willing to fight any longer on management's terms.

The steel workers were up against tremendous odds. They were up against the government and a determined employer. They faced the threat of even more closures if they won. In the ISTC they had one of the most right-wing unions in the country. They were up against the TUC who early on wanted them to settle for 3%. And there were all the problems of the divisions between the skilled crafts and the semi skilled workers in the industry.



The confidence of rank and file steel workers with a message for their leaders in the 7th week of the strike. (Photo: Mark Rusher, IFL)



GOING



GOING



GONE

Keith Joseph on the run from rank and file steel workers fighting loss of jobs in S. Wales. A high point of the strike. Photos by John Sturrock (Report)

Despite all this, by the middle of the strike, the rank and file had built up a real momentum. They rejected the blackmail of more closures and demanded that the union start fighting the closures BSC had already scheduled. They began to impose on their union leaders the demand for 20% with no productivity strings. They rejected token picketing and took

on the police in mass battles to close down private steel works.

To organise this mass involvement, there were frequent mass meetings in some areas, called by local strike committees. These cut across the divisions between craft and semi-skilled workers. By the 10th week of the strike,

these strike committees had formed a national co-ordination which had the possibility of taking the lead in the struggle. But still there was too much reliance on the full-time union officials. And the national organisation of strike committees never felt able to take over from the official leadership, who ended up by selling out the struggle.

LESSONS:

Don't fight on management terms. Don't accept their blackmail. Prepare to fight for both higher wages, better conditions and shorter hours *and* against closure and redundancy. And never *rely* on trade union officials.

Fights Against Hospital Closure

Among the first and most successful struggles against hospitals being closed down by the Labour government public spending cuts was the **occupation** and work-in at the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (the EGA), the only hospital for women in London. Not only did the workers occupy the EGA. They went out and made contact with shop stewards in other hospitals and nearby firms. They got the backing of Trades Councils, community groups and women's groups. They realised that to *win*, they would need maximum support and solidarity. So they explained to the patients, to previous patients and to local residents why they were fighting the closure and the cuts. They helped to make a film about their occupation – made by a socialist film group, the Newsreel Collective – which was shown in union

branches and hospitals all over the country.

The campaign's tactics were militant. They occupied, staged mass pickets, blocked main roads – and when the Health Minister announced a closure date, workers at other hospitals went on strike. Through this rank and file activity, they forced the unions to act more militantly – and they showed the way to other hospital workers facing closure who increasingly began to use similar tactics.

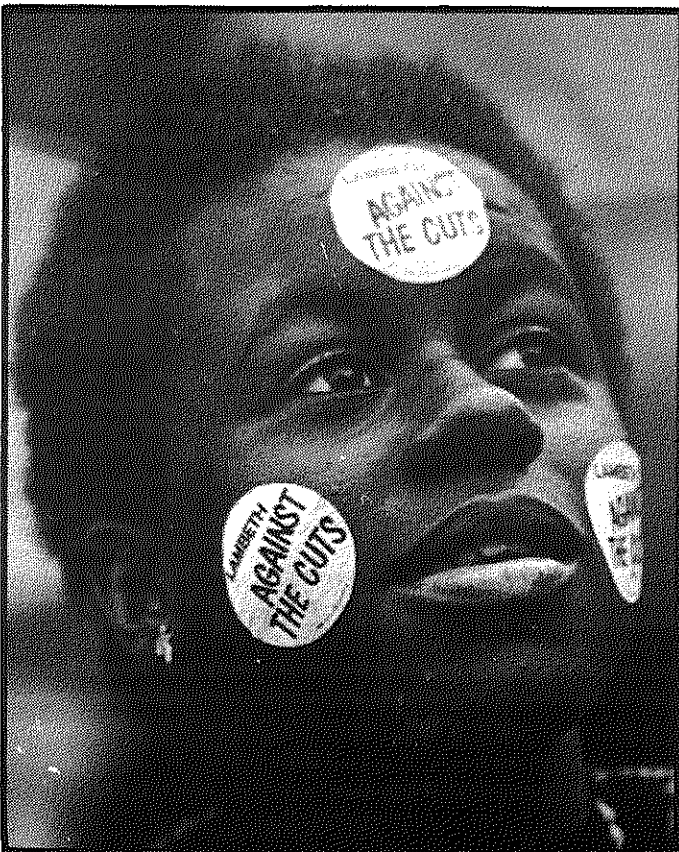
The EGA struggle is also an example of a campaign that was not simply fought defensively *against* this or that cut. It was fought as part of a struggle for a better and socialist health service. The EGA workers talked about the need for *more* hospitals where a woman can be certain of being treated by women medical staff who are sympathetic to her needs. And

they've put more emphasis on *preventing* ill health, so after the occupation started, they provided space for a screening service for healthy women to check up for problems before they become serious.

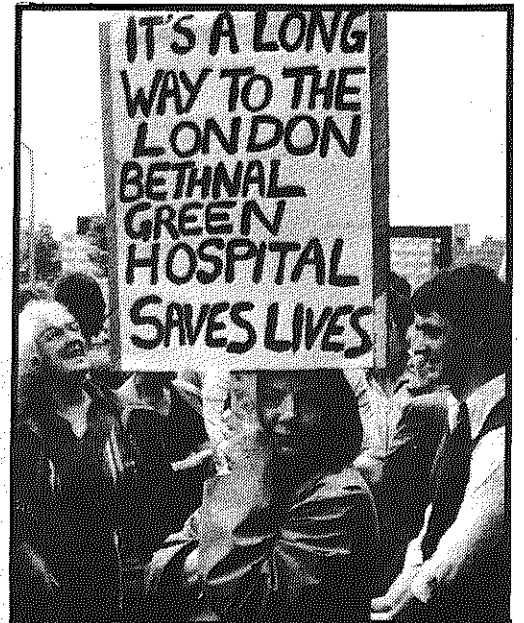
The Tories recognised the total nature of the struggle. One of Thatcher's first acts on being elected was to deal the campaign a political blow from which it didn't recover. The EGA was to be kept open, but only if money could be raised through charities and the women's movement. The EGA would go private! This went against the whole campaign which was to ensure that a specialised but widely needed service was available to all, regardless of income. Maggie Thatcher understood very well the need to confront this political campaign to reverse the cuts in the NHS. It was the Prime Minister's first attempt to boost the



Militant tactics at the EGA: hospital workers block the main road outside the hospital in protest against the proposed closure.



Protesting against the cuts: Lambeth November 1979.



LESSONS:

The traditional sectionalism of the trade union movement has to win, we *have to* understand the links between different groups fighting cuts, between the workplace and the community, between private and public sector workers.

In order to launch a struggle on the scale that will be needed for class policy, we've got to start fighting with an openly socialist line. It's only *offensive* demands that can unite the class against

private sector at the expense of the welfare state.

Problems have been caused in other hospital campaigns by divisions among the workers. For example, at Bethnal Green, the work-in was seriously undermined when nurses agreed to job transfers to other hospitals. This has not been a problem at St Benedict's hospital in South London:

'A key factor in the success of the occupation so far is the fantastic support of the nurses who have the powerful support of a very militant shop steward in the Royal College of Nursing. The local NUPE and COHSE full time officials have also been very active. As a result, out of 170 nursing staff, so far only two part time nurses have accepted transfers to other hospitals.'

(Interview with secretary of the occupation committee Arthur Hautot in *Big Flame*, January 1980)

At St Benedict's, they've got a policy of developing mass participation in the struggle. Staff meetings are held twice a week and are open to all hospital staff. They made sure there were more women than men on the occupation committee to reflect the high proportion of women on the hospital staff. At first some of the women were lacking in confidence but they're getting stronger and more involved as the struggle goes on. The big problem facing St Benedict's is its isolation. Four other hospitals locally are being shut down, but they've taken no action. And there's not enough support from other workers in the area. This was a big problem at Bethnal Green:

'In "Cuts and the NHS" by the Politics of Health Group, the Bethnal Green occupation is criticised for not defining its aims clearly enough in relation to the needs of the local community. Perhaps that's true, but they leave out the main reasons why the Bethnal Green campaign and most of the anti-cuts campaigns over the last two years have not succeeded. And that is that the working class movement has simply not been sufficiently strong, organised or powerful to defeat the whole strategy of cuts. The fact is that individual campaigns on their own cannot win this overall fight.'

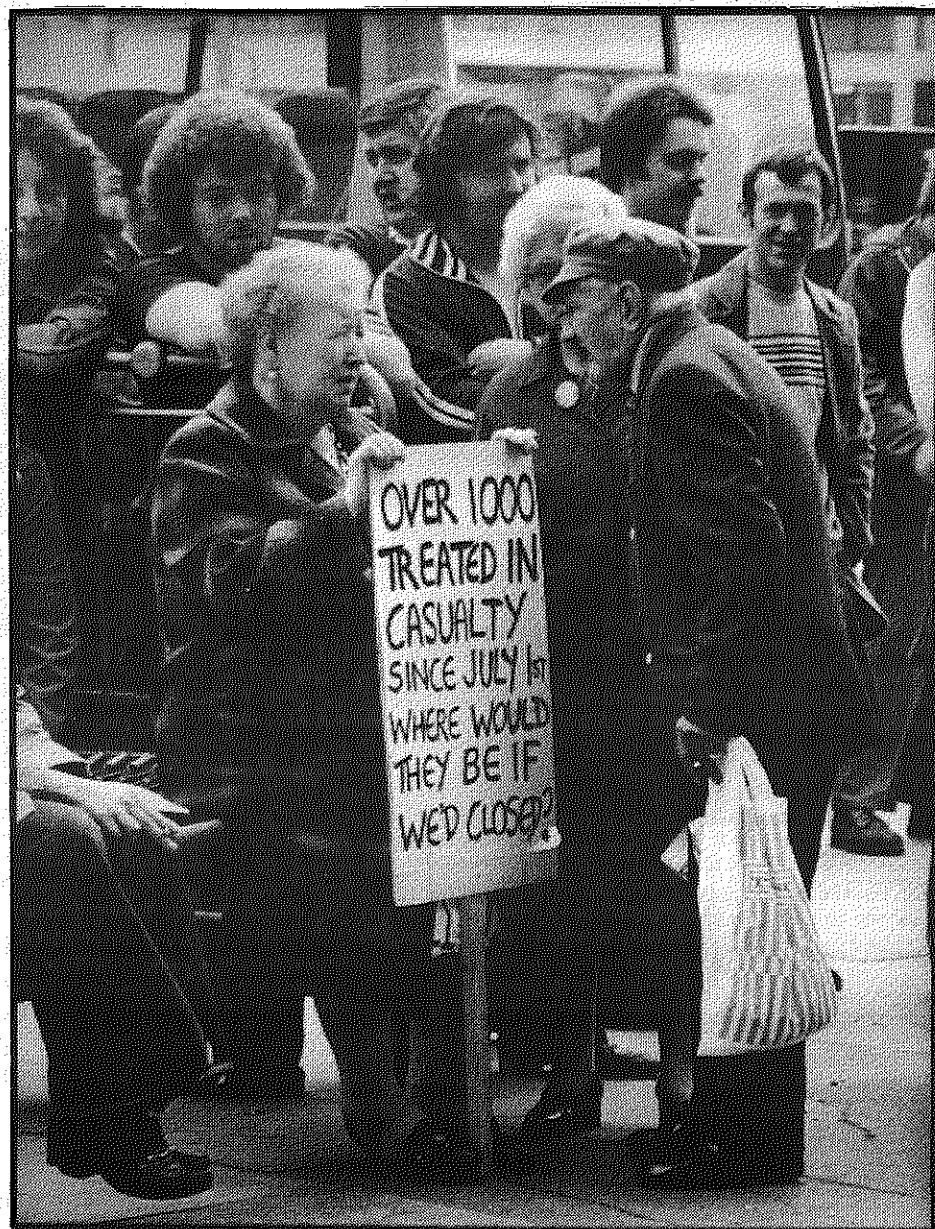
(From a review by the national co-ordinator of Fightback in *Big Flame*, November 1979)

a long history. But today it's no good to us. Groups of workers in the public sector who're between the employed and the unemployed

and to reverse the whole drift of anti-working class perspective for *working class needs*. Attempts to divide us.



St. Benedict's in S. London: winning the support of patients and local people in the community and nearby workplaces. (Photo: John Sturrock, Report)



'We need this hospital' - demonstrating against the proposed closure of Bethnal Green hospital.

Grunwick

In August 1976, 150 Asian workers – mainly women – went on strike at Grunwick for union recognition. They'd joined APEX. Within a month, postmen at the nearby Cricklewood sorting office blacked all Grunwick mail in solidarity (Grunwick was a mail order photo firm). The High Court ruled that the blacking was illegal, and Tom Jackson, leader of the post office workers' union, ordered it to be called off.

Meanwhile, the strike achieved national publicity when the first mass picket resulted in about 80 arrests – although it was totally peaceful. As a result, Len Murray promised TUC support and 100 Labour MPs declared that they were right behind the strike.

In June 1977, the really big mass pickets began. With the energetic support of the secretary of Brent Trades Council, Jack Dromey, the strike committee had

contacted workers all over the country. Thousands attended, and were met with unprecedented police violence. Despite the numbers, the scab bus got in.

Now the TUC stepped in, determined to take control. Again with the advice of Jack Dromey, the strike committee agreed. At this time, there were growing tensions on the committee, particularly between those still expecting TUC support, and those who didn't have so much faith in the official trade union movement. In July a mass picket of 20,000 was led in a march by the TUC away from the factory, leaving the scab bus to get in without any opposition. It took considerable persuasion by members of the strike committee to get the hundreds of Yorkshire miners to agree to leave the picket lines on the gates and go on the march.

At this time, the postmen put the

blacking back on, despite the court decision. The UPW executive forced them to call it off under threat of expulsion, and fined four officials hundreds of pounds for organising the blacking! APEX ordered the strike committee to call off the mass pickets and pin their hope on an official government inquiry and on a House of Lords appeal court ruling on whether ACAS could impose a decision on the management forcing them to recognise the union. Not surprisingly, the owner simply ignored the Scarman inquiry which ruled in favour of the strikers, and the House of Lords supported the Grunwick management.

As strike leader Mrs Desai said after going on hunger strike outside the TUC in protest at their lack of support:

'Official trade union action is like honey on the elbow: you can smell it, you can see it, but you can never taste it.'



Towards the end of a long struggle.. Members of the Grunwick strike committee on hunger strike outside TUC headquarters in November 1977. Despite fine words at TUC conference, TUC leaders had done nothing to support them, and had actively opposed solidarity action by other workers. (Photo: Andrew Wiard, Report)

LESSONS:

Don't *rely* on trade union leaders or officials, or the TUC, or Labour MPs to win your battles. They'll always pull out if the going gets rough. Whatever they promise in the way of support, always remain sceptical. Use whatever support they do give, but always keep control in the hands of the rank and file.

Don't rely on courts, tribunals, the Arbitration Service (ACAS) or special government inquiries or Courts of Inquiry to win your struggles. Much more often than not, you'll lose. And that's one of the clearest lessons of the steel strike.

Perhaps the most important lesson to come out of Grunwicks – and we've seen it before in the miners' strike in 1972 at Saltley coke works and in the struggle to release the 5 dockers held in Pentonville Prison – is the potential strength of mass rank and file mobilisation and picketing. Solidarity wins. Sectionalism loses.

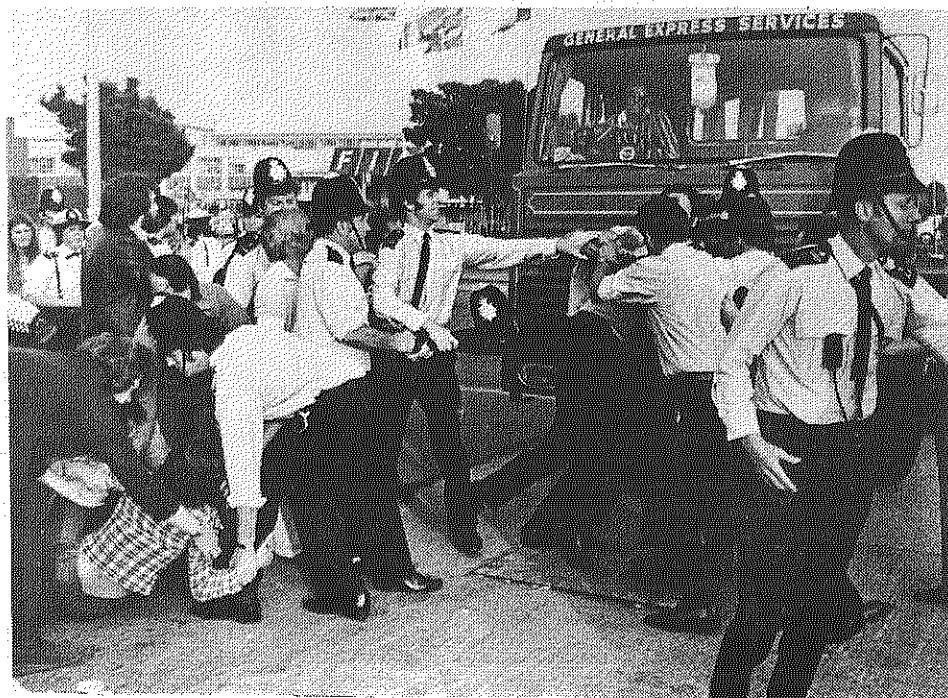


"We Won" – the power of the women at Trico. (Photo: Chris Davies, Report)

Trico

In the face of outright opposition from a majority of men working in the factory, and from some of their husbands, women at the Trico windscreen factory in West London held out for 21 weeks in the summer and autumn of 1976, to win a total victory in their battle for equal pay.

During their strike, they worked hard to build up considerable support in the community and nearby workplaces. And they refused at any time to have anything to do with the Industrial Tribunal judging their case. The Tribunal ruled against them – but they stayed solid and won.



A member of the Trico Strike Committee knocked down by a scab lorry - one of 5 that tried to break the picket line, aided by the police. (Photo: C. Davies, Report)

LESSONS:

To win major struggles these days, you've got to be prepared for a very long battle. That requires high morale, and maximum support in the community and from other sections of the working class.

Don't rely on tribunals to win struggles. In the first four months of the Equal Pay Act, out of approximately 4,000 complaints about equal pay, 1754 went to an industrial tribunal. Of these only 18 were successful.

The 1979 Low Pay Strikes

Photo: John Sturrock (Report)



The first three months on 1979 saw the bitterly fought low pay strikes in the public sector. As action by hospital workers, school cleaners and dinner ladies, dustmen and other local authority workers spread in support of their demand for a £60 minimum wage and the 35 hour week, the media vented their wrath in a campaign of unparalleled

hysteria. NUPE was labelled a 'fascist union' by the Daily Mail, and the extreme right-wing leader of the Electricians' Union, Frank Chapple, called hospital workers 'terrorists' in a Sunday Express article.

From the beginning, the public sector union leaders refused to call all-out strike action — instead leaving it to local areas

and sections to take whatever action they saw fit. The inevitable result was that the strike was very patchy. In the best organised areas — for example among local authority workers in Hackney and in Camden (both in London) — there was determined action which led to employers making concessions: in Camden, they won the whole claim.

But overall, the outcome was disappointing for many of the workers involved. The union leaders recommended acceptance of a 9% offer, plus £1 on account for full-time workers pending the Clegg Commission 'comparability' study, and nothing on shorter hours.

Low paid and part-time women in particular didn't gain much from the strike; the Clegg Commission recommendations gave the lowest grades (90% of whom are women) the lowest rises. In fact, the interests of women were very badly represented in the claim itself, which took no account in its demand for a 35 hour week that many women in the public sector are part time workers who already work less than 40 hours, and receive very low hourly rates. Roughly 75% of the membership of NUPE (the

union with the largest number of members involved in the action) is women, but they are totally under-represented at all levels of the union. There's no doubt that this weakened the struggle.

Other divisions also took their toll. 'One of the worst problems we've got is inter-unions rivalry — especially between NUPE and the G&M. In our hospital we held a meeting last week of all four unions to try and stop these squabbles. And lack of information is a real problem. There could be a strike down the road and we'd only hear about it after it was over.'

(Margaret Carlin, NUPE nurse, Glasgow Stobhill Hospital, quoted in *Socialist Worker*, 10/2/79)

Although there is a growing shop

stewards' movement within NUPE and the public sector generally, this inter-union rivalry and the lack of national and local co-ordination resulted in the better organised areas remaining isolated from each other, and unable to support the weaker areas. And this absence of a strong nationally co-ordinated movement of the rank and file made it much easier for union leaders like Alan Fisher to brush aside calls for all-out strike action.

It also meant that there was no organised force *within* the strike putting forward socialist answers to the real worries facing many of the low paid public sector workers. The most pressing of these was the fear that if the employers conceded the full claim, it would lead to a massive loss of jobs — especially part-time jobs — harder work, and worse services.

LESSONS:

The need for a nationally co-ordinated rank and file movement within the public sector unions — fighting with an openly socialist perspective, and taking a full part in the struggle for women to build their power in the unions and where they work.

Lucas Aerospace

In 1971, workers at Lucas Aerospace factories around the country were faced with massive redundancies due to 'rationalisation' and a recession in the aircraft industry. 600 jobs had been lost at Willesden in London, where an extremely militant and bitterly fought occupation had failed to prevent closure. They realised that to prevent further closures, a new strategy was needed. As one of the workers at Willesden said:

'We realised that the morale of the workforce very quickly declines if they see that society, for whatever reason, doesn't want the products they make. We therefore evolved the idea of a campaign for the right to work on socially useful products. It seemed absurd to us that we had this skill and knowledge, and that society urgently needed equipment and services which we could provide, and yet the market economy seemed incapable of linking the two.'

A Corporate Plan was then drawn up, co-ordinated by the Combine Committee which they'd formed to link up white

collar and manual workers at all Lucas Aerospace sites in Britain. The Plan was drawn up through discussion in every factory — combining ideas from top technologists to semi-skilled operators on the shop floor. Through a detailed questionnaire, the workers were asked what sort of products they could build, and also as 'consumers' in society, what sort of products they felt were needed.

The results were amazing — over 150 different products which could be made on existing machinery: portable life support units for patients suffering heart attacks; a portable and cheap kidney machine; a combined battery and petrol-powered engine which will cut fuel consumption by half and last 20 years without maintenance; solar energy heaters for homes; a Hobcart to enable Spina Bifida sufferers to move around.

The Company at first refused to even acknowledge the plan for three years until, in the face of stiff resistance to its plans to restore profits by closing three factories and sacking 2,000 workers at

the beginning of 1979 it agreed to examine the Plan. From the time the Alternative Plan was devised, there have been no enforced redundancies. It's done a lot for the morale of the workforce, and the whole plan is excellent propaganda for what life could be like under socialism — the workers' creativity that could be released. But the Plan has run into strong opposition from the right-wing in the unions, with the result that the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions has put every difficulty in its way.

For further information about the Lucas Alternative Workers' Plan and about the relations between the Confed and the Lucas Combine, we'd recommend *Revolutionary Socialism No.5: Interview with Mike Cooley*.

and *Diary of Betrayal* by the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards' Committee — available from CAITS, North East London Polytechnic, Longbridge Road, Dagenham, Essex (40p).

LESSONS

Plans like these for the production of socially useful alternative products are a direct challenge to capitalist rationality, and show the importance of introducing socialist ideas in the struggle. As long as they involve the whole workforce, they can be a crucial boost in fighting closure — where the self-confidence of the workforce is the key to winning a militant struggle. But Workers' Plans must never be seen as an alternative to militant tactics.

Massey Ferguson Triumph Speke; Courtaulds: Struggles against closure

For almost ten weeks in January 1977, the Massey Ferguson tractor plant in Coventry was taken over and occupied by its 1,200 assembly line workers. It was a struggle over productivity, manning levels, piece work rates and against the suspension of the section most immediately involved. They won a total victory – but only after the occupation turned into a militant strike when the Company obtained a High Court writ against the occupation. From the first day, the occupation was run on the basis of mass participation with weekly mass meetings and weekly news bulletins, regular occupation or picket duty for every worker and frequent meetings of line stewards and their strike committee.

'The mass meetings weren't what many factories normally get – a speech from the convenor and no chance for the lads. The meetings were chaired by one of the most active stewards, and there was always a good discussion with perhaps 30 blokes speaking from the floor.' (Massey shop steward)

This tradition had been fought for over the years by militants and socialists. It enabled them to get over what could have been a crushing blow to morale – the enforced ending of the occupation. And the JSSC were able to win support in 1980 for a one day strike in protest against the closure of the Massey plant in Knowsley near Liverpool:

'When the workers at Knowsley first heard of the closure threat they placed an immediate embargo on the movement of finished products out of the factory. Then they called a delegate conference of all Massey-Ferguson UK plants which supported a resolution proposing no movement of work from Knowsley. When

the first lay-offs were announced the immediate response of the workforce was occupation.

The stewards are aware of the need for the full support of the workforce and ensure they are informed of all developments through, amongst other things, mass meetings of up to 300.'

(*Big Flame*, April 1980)

They also picketed and leafleted other Massey plants, but at the Manchester plant, after initial support the workers voted overwhelmingly at a mass meeting to accept work from Knowsley with no management guarantees. The Manchester stewards bear a heavy responsibility for this. In Coventry the stewards leafleted the workforce to explain the issues and took collections for Knowsley. In Manchester this was not done, nor did the stewards take any recommendation to the mass meeting. But the Knowsley workers weren't prepared to allow these management attempts to divide the workforce nationally go unchallenged. So they started militant picketing of the Manchester plant.

Compare this with the struggles against closure at the Courtaulds plant in Skelmersdale in 1976 or Triumph Speke in 1978. At Skelmersdale, the Union Action Committee relied on heavy lobbying and Government intervention (including nationalisation) to save their members' jobs. The Government did nothing. Meanwhile, the stewards did nothing to involve the rank and file – probably because the rank and file had long lost trust in them. In a document put out by the joint union committee at the plant, they talked about 'the pressures representatives had to tolerate from shop floor workers.'

'Shop stewards had to take many rebuffs from their own members for accepting new agreements . . . and had the extremely difficult job of selling the changes in work practices wanted by management.'

In the same document, the union committee attacked:

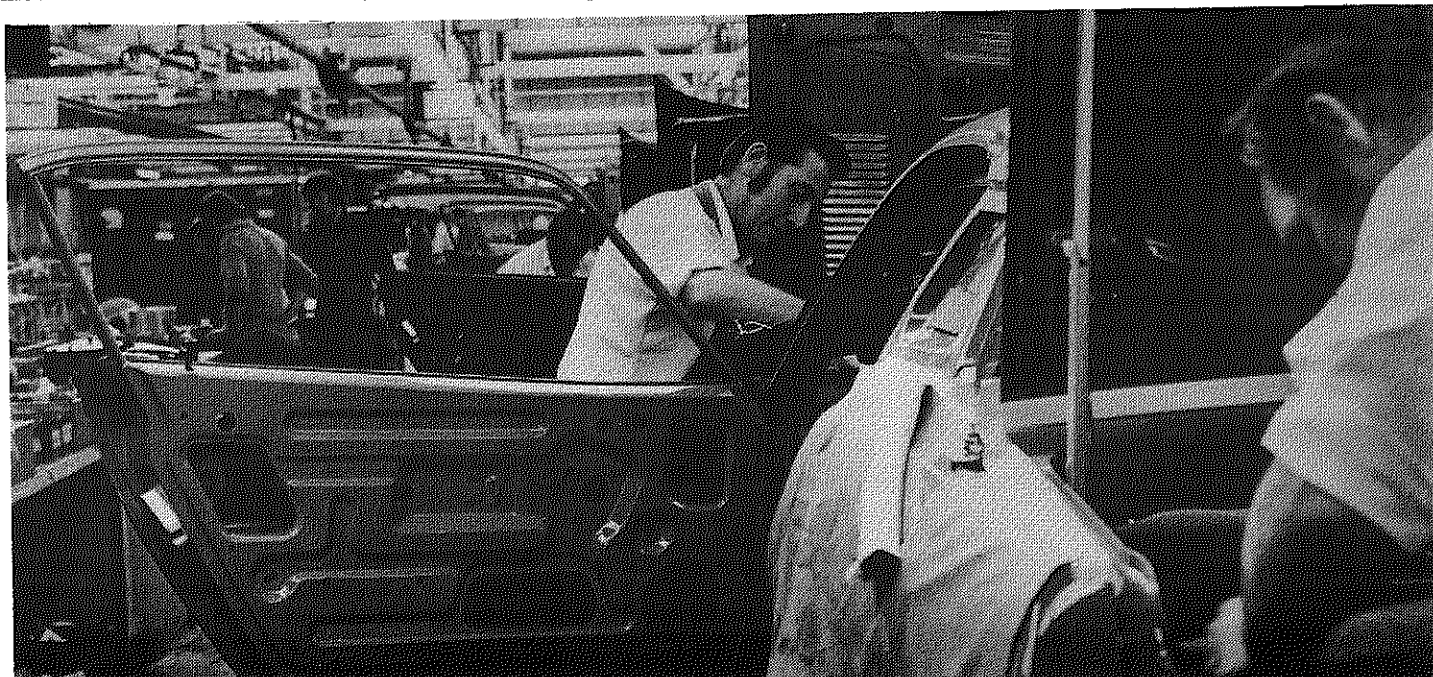
'extremists among the rank and file; and though these people are a minority, they feed on bad union/management relations in order to poison the minds of the less militant.'

At Leyland Triumph at Speke in Liverpool, there had been a 17 week strike against severe manning cuts immediately prior to the closure announcement. But during this strike, there was only one mass meeting, and no involvement of the rank and file. All power was delegated to the stewards:

'I think that some of us are a bit inclined to want to do things by ourselves if you know what I mean – without the membership. But when you come right down to it, you can't do bugger all without the members. You certainly can't fight a closure.'

(Steward from Triumph Speke)

This *delegation of power* which is another part of traditional trade unionism was crippling when the crunch came. The stewards weren't able to involve the rank and file, especially when Leyland came up with an increased and very divisive offer of redundancy money. And they had other problems too: the Leyland plant at Canley, Coventry voted to accept the transfer of the TR7 from Speke. (Canley has since been scheduled for closure.) And they got no support from union leaders or from the Labour government who they spent a lot of time lobbying.



Who wants to work on an assembly line? These lines at Triumph Speke are now silent. The factory closed in early 1978 without a fight. The result of traditional trade union politics? (Photo: Angela Phillips, IFL)

LESSONS:

Only the most militant tactics can win struggles these days. But militant tactics without rank and file support are a non-starter.

Mass participation in a militant struggle is one of the keys to victory.

It's a long and hard battle to turn an apathetic and demoralised workforce into one that's active and ready for a major fight. It involves a fight for:

- * No secret meetings between stewards and management
- * Regular report back meetings on all sections
- * Frequent mass meetings
- * Regular workplace bulletins from the shop stewards' committee and the trade union branch
- * Branch meetings in work time to make it easier for everyone, particularly women, to attend.

To fight closure and redundancies, there needs to be very high morale. Where a redundancy scheme is involved there's got to already have been a tradition of mass participation in struggle built up. There has to be a feeling of real loyalty, solidarity and class consciousness among the workforce to make it worth sticking it out. Otherwise people go for the money.

It's no good convenors and stewards complaining that 'the workers are apathetic and won't fight — they just want the redundancy money' if those convenors and stewards have themselves not fully supported *every* previous struggle in the plant on wages, manning, safety, racism, discrimination against women.

Bringing it all together

WAYS OF INCREASING OUR CHANCES OF WINNING AT WORK

The lessons of these struggles add up to a new approach to organising at work. It won't *guarantee* victory — there are no simple solutions. But as long as these lessons are taken into the work place, into trade union branches and shop stewards' committees, then we'll stand a better chance of winning. These are the main points of the strategy:

Rebuild work place organisation

Rebuild work place organisation where it's been undermined by participation schemes and repeated defeats. Fight for the democratisation of the unions at all levels, against the tradition of not getting the rank and file involved and against sectionalism.

Go on the offensive

For more pay and less workload; shorter hours and more jobs; better services and more housing — no matter what the employer says he can afford. Stop fighting on management's terms — reject their right to make a profit off our backs.

Socialist politics

You can't win struggles these days without a strong and united rank and file *and* socialist politics. When increased wages and better conditions hit profits or eat into public sector cash limits, employers will threaten us with loss of jobs. Faced with economic slump, they'll try to throw thousands on the dole. Without socialist politics, you have no argument to mobilize people against this. The fight for a socialist health service, for the development of plans for alternative production are an important way of taking the offensive. Since capitalism can't meet our needs, we have to fight for a better system — and that's a part of all

working class struggle against the employers.

Start preparing in every workplace for fights against loss of jobs

Today, no workplace is secure as employers try to restore profits or meet cash limits through closures, cuts, redundancies, staffing cuts, productivity deals, and new technology to undermine working class strength.

The key demand is 5 hours off the week with no loss of pay

Militant tactics and mass involvement

To fight against closures and cuts and for better wages and conditions requires mass involvement, high morale, militant and imaginative tactics, and a campaign to get widespread support in the community, from other workplaces and from the unemployed. You can't produce these things out of thin air just when they're required. That's why you have to prepare right now for these struggles — fighting against the normal trade union traditions of trusting your leaders to do everything for you.

Fight divisions in the working class

Give real support to immigrant workers and women who're fighting the racist and sexist divisions of work and pay. We should be fighting against differentials. Link up the unemployed with those at work in the struggle for more jobs, higher pay and for the 35 hour week.

For combine committees and international links

We've seen the importance for winning factory closure struggles that there's solidarity between different factories in the same company — refusing to accept

transfers of work from any plant threatened with closure. So we support company-wide combine committees, preferably involving manual and white collar delegates and with a real base in the rank and file. In the same way, it's now urgent to start developing links between workers in the same industries. The rank and file combines linking Ford workers, dockers, brewery workers and rubber workers in Europe are good examples. Although it won't be easy because of the political repression in some of those countries, these links must also extend to the Third World.

These are the lessons from struggle. We've got to find new ways of organising and fighting against a capitalism that is drastically restructuring itself against our interests, our needs and our power. Nowhere is this clearer than in the struggle against new technology. At present, no clear answers and lessons have emerged in this crucial struggle to prevent the bosses undermining our strength. That's why we have included to examples in this chapter. However, we'd offer the following guidelines to fight for new technology on working class terms:

- * Total opposition to new technology where it results in work which is damaging to physical or mental health because of its intensity, or where it gives employers unprecedented control of the work process and the workforce.
- * Acceptance of new technology only where there is no loss of jobs at the workplace (whether it's through enforced sackings, voluntary redundancies or 'natural wastage') and where the benefits of the increased productivity are shared entirely by the workforce — through a shorter week and higher basic pay.