

THE DEEPENING POLITICAL CRISIS IN IRELAND



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The Issues Behind The OIL STRIKE

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The recent decision taken by Justice Moore, representing the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission amply illustrates the extent to which he and the representatives of the twenty-three oil companies involved are prepared to go in smashing the oil workers. This decision will enable the oil magnates to apply to the Commonwealth Industrial Court for a ban clause to prevent further stoppages in the oil industry. Fines will then be imposed on the unions and these will amount to \$1000 per day the strike continues — clearly an attempt to impose on the oil workers restrictions on their right to strike.

The intensity of the struggle between capital and labour in the oil industry shows that oil officials are preparing a show-case in destroying any form of militant action proposed by the oil strikers.

To this end they have two forms of weapons to use against the strikers. One is the use of the penal powers and the second (which shall be dealt with later on) is the role of the union officials.

THE DEVELOPING FIGHT

The spate of strikes in the oil industry has at its nub the question of the 35 hour week. This was one of 48 demands that the four unions involved in the dispute — the Electrical Trades Union, Australasian Society of Engineers, Federated Ironworkers Association, and the new Amalgamated Metal Workers Union — presented to the oil representatives as a log of claims for a new two year award in the oil industry.

Initially the oil companies wouldn't even consider discussing the 35 hour week demand which lead to a strike in Victoria and Queensland on June 9 and NSW and South Australia on June 22. On June 26 union officials called the men back to work which allowed the oil companies to resume distribution of petrol and this, of course, weakened the unions position somewhat. But on June 30 the nationwide strike continued despite vague offers of wage and conditions settlements if the workers returned.

At the same time there appeared in the capitalist mass media both threats of severe petrol cuts to be imposed, and home heating oil restrictions. Also coupled with the scare tactics on petrol were threats to many thousands of workers throughout Australia. These tactics are strikingly similar to those used in the big power strike in Victoria — the power cuts which weren't necessary and the use of the unemployment threat if the strike continued. The oil companies have admitted now that the BF refinery which is unaffected by the dispute can supply most of Victoria's needs which gave the lie to the threats of dismissal, in that state at least.

On July 1, the oil companies applied to arbitration to intervene and to end the strike; refusing at the same time to call for negotiations with the representatives of the unions involved. This however failed and the strike continued nationally with about 1500 men involved. On July 11th, as could be expected, the Minister for Labour and National Service Mr. Lynch intervened strongly urging employers to use arbitration and accused the unions of picking on a particular industry in an attempt to "create unrest". A few days later Justice Moore, following behind the oil officials said he wouldn't discuss any claims until there was a return to work. This was after a hearing in which eleven claims were presented before the court, these including a \$27 per week rise, special and overtime rates and shift allowance and conditions.

Pressure on the union officials to force the workers to return to work forced them to call a meeting involving Hawke, the four unions directly involved in the dispute and other unions. At this meeting it was decided to urge the men to resume work, despite expectations that the Victorian workers wouldn't agree.

gate vote taken nationally the workers decided 316 to 271 to return to work, with Victoria voting 187 to 27 against.

As Justice Moore refused to grant an interim pay rise other than a miserable \$3.60 to \$4.80 the workers decided to go out again, against the union officials' advice. This was the excuse Moore was looking for — he once again refused to discuss any claims while the workers were out.

THE ROLE OF THE UNION BUREAUCRATS

The whole outlook of the position of the union officials can be summed up in a statement from C.A. Dolan, the ACTU Junior Vice-president and the union representative in the Arbitration Court: "... And if Arbitration is not going to settle this, then God help us." Very clearly he recognized the threat of rank and file action if the dispute couldn't be resolved through "the right channels". The position of union officials in this capitalist epoch, with few exceptions, is tied to the role of arbitrating any fights which occur. Due to their privileged social position, they must seek to defend their own interests against the rank and file and the working class as a whole. They also must play a contradictory role — that of appearing as the genuine leaders of the rank and file and that of dispersing and dampening any militant action from below.

ACTU president Bob Hawke, as a mouth piece for the union officials has once again revealed his role as a labour-faker, urging consistently that the unionists return to work in order to have their claim brought before arbitration. Arbitration, as has been mentioned before, has never served the interests of the working people. Other labour-fakers in the oil dispute have also urged a return to work as against militant proposals to continue the strike action.

Communist Party member and Victorian Secretary of the AMWU John Halfpenny has also played a questionable role in not politicizing the struggle or seeking to extend it in any way either in publicity or in solidarity strikes.

ACTU president Hawke must seek to contain the labour unrest by channelling militant actions into Arbitration. In this way he tries as does Whitlam and other top leaders of the ALP, to win the "moderate" or "middle of the road voters". Granted that the Labor Party will give far more concessions to the working class than the brute force of the Lynch Laws, the ALP will seek to introduce productivity deals etc to the detriment of the workers.

Despite the negative role of the union officials and Hawke, the rank and file are beginning to take the initiative themselves and this was well illustrated when spontaneous (or "unofficial") strikes occurred when Justice Moore refused to hear claims presented by the unions. In many disputes in the labour movement occurring today, the rank and file are seizing the opportunities ahead of the union officials. However it is crucial that in order to

ensure maximum efficiency, organisation of these "unofficial" strikes is needed, both to win maximum support and to act as a counter-weight to the union bureaucracies. Strike committees cannot act within a vacuum but are organized on and around the demands at the rank and file, seeking to gain as much solidarity action as possible.

THE ELECTIONS AND THEIR EFFECTS

With rumours of an early election in the air both the Liberal/Country party coalition and the Labor party are concentrating heavily on the issues raised in the labour movement as these are continuing to become even more restless. The intransigence of the oil company officials in their every effort to smash the oil strike illustrates in a vivid way the split between sectors of the bourgeoisie over how to deal with labour militancy. The uncompromising attitude of no negotiations on the oil dispute until the workers return to work, no concessions whatsoever, represents one wing of the capitalist class who wish to see labour unrest put down with force and who would welcome the return of McMahon in the forthcoming elections.

THE PLANS OF THE GOVERNMENT

The Liberal Country Party coalition has considered the dispute as a god sent gift to improve its electoral prospects. Trying to extract as much advantage, they have undertaken a course designed to increase the employers' intransigence as well as intimidate the strikers. Strong pressure has been put on the employers designed to harden their stance. Statements by various politicians threatening the oil workers with deregistration, fines etc have been made with increasing frequency. Leaks from government officials concerning enforced payment of any fines imposed by the arbitration court were only matched by leaks warning of the possible use of troops. The intimidation of the unions was carried through the media as well. The media speculated about the use of troops and without comment printed news items such as the presence of Major-General Kenneth Mackie GOC Eastern Command during Ministerial discussions of the situation.

On the other side, there are those who express doubt about the effectiveness of this method of shackling the working class and smashing their unions. They favour a more subtle approach through the machinations of the Australian Labor Party, through the Cameron Proposals etc.

Should the strike be won by the militant efforts of the unionists it will shake even more the confidence of the ruling class and this can possibly lead to a further split with some putting their support behind the DLP — which is advocating a Chifley Style settlement, (Chifley the ALP Prime Minister in 1949 used the army to smash a strike within the coal mines in NSW), in all future showdowns.

THE HAWKE PLAN

The oil maintenance workers strike took a new turn on Tuesday July 23 when the ACTU president presented the so-called

"Hawke Plan": The essence of the plan was to offer to a group of small oil companies, in particular Ampol the opportunity to provide for emergency supplies, by getting the men to go back to work in a few refineries. The reaction of the oil companies was a strange one: they kept on changing their mind. They were not sure whether or not they were prepared to accept the ACTU's conditions which included the limitation of distribution to five companies only and which challenges the basis of the oil industry cartel. The aim of the Hawke plan is to divide the employers. It is based on the assumption that the big oil companies: Esso, Shell, and Mobil have been the main stumbling block for the industry accepting the unions demands. The other five: Caltex, Total, HC Sleigh, BP and Ampol are regarded by the ACTU leadership as being more likely to accept the demands. The Hawke plan, which actually was initiated by Laurie Carmichael — the Assistant Secretary of the AMWU, and a leading member of the Communist Party — was endorsed overwhelmingly by the oil industry workers. The national vote was 559 to 62 in favor of the limited return to work. As DIRECT ACTION goes to press it seems that the return to work which only effects a small minority of the workers is going to be of an extremely short duration. The oil magnates have made it clear that the ACTU terms are unacceptable to them. As soon as the men return on July 31 they will be required to fill tankers belonging to the banned companies and this will lead to either a lockout or an immediate walk out by the unions.

FOR STRIKE COMMITTEES! LET THE RANK AND FILE MAKE THE DECISION

The attempt to divide the employers ranks under a militant leadership should be commended. If successful it can lead to a reversal for the ruling class. But let us not forget the role of the current leadership and its attempts to get the men back at any cost only a week previously. The plan has several advantages: it stops the employers from laying off any workers by providing fuel to industry. No longer are they able to exercise pressure on the strikers through the ranks of other unionists. It also points out clearly the intransigence of the bosses and that it is they who are "holding the public to ransom." On the other hand the Hawke scheme might be an elaborate roundabout plan to get all the strikers back to work. The only way the oil workers can safeguard themselves is by taking control of the dispute into their own hands and the setting up of strike committees. Hawke and Dolan (of going back to work fame) should not be allowed to control the situation. Only a rank and file leadership can carry the struggle through to victory.

A defeat for this strike would be a defeat felt throughout the Australian working class, as it would lead to far more stringent measures to smash any workers' struggle in the future.

FULL SUPPORT TO THE OIL STRIKERS FROM THE WHOLE WORKING CLASS!

It is essential to win support amongst all sectors of the working class. Only the full strength of workers can enable the oil workers to break the isolation which has been imposed by the capitalist mass media and only the full strength of the Australian workers can ensure the victory for the oil strikers demands. Full publicity must be given to the oil strikers demands with solidarity action being taken by other workers. Only united action will result in victory!

NO ARBITRATION!

Arbitration has always been the instrument of the bosses in suppressing the working class through "legitimate" legislation. Arbitration can and will lead to the defeat of the oil strikers demands; it will negate the militant actions already taken by the strikers.

NO STATE INTERFERENCE! NO TROOP INVOLVEMENT!

The threat of using troops as scab labour in the dispute is intimidatory and must be opposed by all the trade union movement — other unions will be next:

By Andrew Jamieson

this is what happened! One can agree-