

# Freedom

DECEMBER 19 1970 Vol 31 No 40

## FAILURES IN POWER AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

AT THE END of a week of the power men's work-to-rule three things emerged:

1. The extent to which this nation of 50 million depends upon the continuance at work of 124,000 electricians;
2. The extent to which this nation of 50 million doesn't give a damn for the welfare of those electricians; and
3. The complete failure of the Electrical Trades Union to ensure that adequate presentation of their case was put before the public by every means of communication possible.

This combination of factors has resulted in bitterness and in some cases violence on the part of the bewildered public and a swinging of public opinion towards support for the Government's 'get tough' line with the unions.

Much of this is due to the suddenness of the power cuts and to the surprise felt by most people at the effect in terms of inconvenience and even danger, each time the power failed. Nobody likes to discover that they are completely dependent on somebody else, and the sudden realisation of the importance in our lives of the working men behind every plug and socket and switch, and the amount to which we depend on the current they generate for us and keep coming through the wires for us and keep maintained for us and keep safe for us has shaken rigid millions of unthinking people who have grown used to having every thing laid on for them at the flick of a switch.

The great British Public moan like hell at every price increase in public utilities—but never think that at the end of the line is a man with a family and kids just like them with a standard of living to fight for—and that the present Government is determined to depress the standard of living of every worker in the country if they possibly can, in order to maintain some financial myth like the balance of payments.

'Alienation' is a popular in-word nowadays, and electricity is a classic product to provide a classic example of how alienation exists in modern society.

### IS ANYBODY THERE?

When we all fired our cooking ranges and warmed our homes by coal we could see, feel and smell the coalman coming to our cellar door and tipping the dirty, heavy black stuff right where we told him we wanted it. We handled the coal ourselves and knew it had been dug out of the bowels of the earth by men risking their lives in the dark to get it for us to burn. It was real and we could believe in real men at every stage of its production and distribution: we saw trains full of it (the great puffing trains themselves were fired by it) and railway sidings piled high with it. It existed.

But electricity? Ask the average person what it is and he looks at you blankly and mutters something about energy. Most of the housewives and unproductive parasites who are getting incensed about the power men's action today haven't a clue about anything more than changing a fuse. Who are these power men? The only representatives of the electricity boards that we usually see are the meter-readers who whizz in and out like lightning at inconvenient moments of the day and who seem to be responsible for us getting a bloody great bill for juice that we are convinced we haven't consumed.

When the dustmen went on strike we could understand what was happening, for dustmen are people that

we can see and smell, if not touch. We see them grunt as they heave our overloaded dustbins into their clanking dustcarts. Where they take it all we don't wish to know, but at least the dustmen can be seen to be real. But electrical power workers...? If we think of them as real people then they are simply taken for granted, and since they run a public utility upon which we depend twenty-four hours a day we don't expect them ever to stop working for us no matter what the conditions or pay imposed upon them from above.

### APPALLING PROPAGANDA

To this natural alienation has been added the propaganda powers of the media—all securely in the hands of the workers' traditional class enemies. Press stories of the effects of the work-to-rule have not told us about how Lady Balls-worth's *Coq au Vin* was spoiled when she had the Duke to dinner, or how they were downing their brandies by candlelight in the Athenium—we have instead had our humanitarian withers wrung by tales of the old folks' homes and the hospitals in danger, the kidney machines that might stop and the operations postponed.

A tremendous amount of appalling propaganda has gone unanswered, reaching its lowest point in the vicious, ugly, unfunny and reactionary cartoon by Jak (whose work is always ugly and tasteless and who has certainly earned himself a lamp-post with this effort) in the *Evening Standard* for December 10. This was challenged—by trades unionists on the *Standard* staff, who refused to print the paper unless a statement was printed alongside the cartoon, expressing disagreement with it and solidarity with the electricians.

By the end of the week feelings were rising among newspaper workers—especially among the electricians on newspaper staffs—against the tide of propaganda against the power men, and by the time these words appear in print it may be that they will have had an effect on the reactionary rubbish spewed out.

But here we come to our third point: the failure in public relations by the ETU, who have done practically nothing to put forcefully the men's case before the public.

In the first place most people think of the action as a strike, which it was not. It was a work-to-rule, which means what it says, but since the public simply see the lights go out—this means 'strike', and the Press has gone along with this.

### THE PRICE OF PRODUCTIVITY AGREEMENTS

What a work-to-rule means is that the workers operate strictly according to the rules and laws for working and for safety laid down by the employers, in agreement with the official trades unions. Now in recent years, productivity agreements have been forced upon the unions in return for wage increases, which have

blurred the edges of each man's work. A certain amount of shift-work, of overtime, of overlapping and understaffing, of doing another man's work, of redundancy, has been agreed by the unions to get the wage claims met and chalk up a 'victory'.

Well, the bills for these 'victories' are now being presented. Not only is the present wage claim being resisted, but the concessions which have been wrung out of the workers in previous battles are now being shown to be regarded as 'normal' working and further wage increases can be blocked.

As well as all these agreed 'blurring of the edges', in the actual day-to-day running of electricity supply, many of the rules have to be ignored. Men have not only, for instance, to stand in for somebody else from time to time, to keep the wheels turning, but they have in fact to operate working arrangements in conflict with procedures laid down in the Electricity Board's Book of Rules.

'Work-to-rule' means simply that you work your 8-hour day and go back to doing things as the rule book and the official agreements say you should. The fact that this means blackouts and reduced voltages show how bloody silly these rules are and how the running of agreements depends all the time upon the goodwill and the co-operation of the workers.

The same workers which the yellow press is now calling murderers and vilifying as callous, greedy and all the rest. (The fact that the same yellow press defends, lives off and believes in an economic system which is greedy, callous and murderous is overlooked!)

### FACTS

The facts are that over the past

three years, productivity has risen by 22 per cent while manpower has fallen by 17 per cent—26,000 out of a work force of 150,000. So 26,000 fewer men are producing 22 per cent more electricity! During those three years, power men's pay has dropped well below the national average. The basic pay of an electrician in the power industry is £15 17s. 6d.! But take-home pay, because of compulsory shift-work, overtime, etc., is in the region of £24 a week (which shows how much more than a straight 8-hours they have to work), and still, power workers are paid less than electricians in, say, the building industry and much less than those in, say, newspaper production.

So those who actually produce the juice, and steer it to your homes and factories, get less than those who help the consumers at the point of use. More, those who are at the receiving end are in touch with other, richer industries, in touch with the consumers, while those tucked away in the power stations are not. We are back to our alienation. As far as dangerous situations arising from power cuts, the yellow press omitted to say that the union issued explicit instructions on how to avoid emergencies arising in hospitals, while the Board itself has said that the supply would have to drop by something like 80 per cent before hospitals need be in any real danger. In fact, no cuts were more than 30 per cent. It seems that what might well have happened is that some officials in power stations might well have deliberately organised provocative and irresponsible cuts in order to aggravate public opinion against the power men.

But here we come again to the union's failure on the public relation side. No doubt it is a ticklish prob-

lem, since all the mass media was against them, but surely some more determined effort to tell the public the facts should have been made. The union was not paying out any strike pay, and have plenty of money in the kitty. Why could it not have bought space in the newspapers, or time on commercial radio and TV to explain, first, exactly what the men's demands were; secondly, the background history of the time the dispute had been building up, and thirdly, just what a work-to-rule means as distinct from a strike? After all, for public utility workers, public opinion is very important—especially with the Labour Relations Act in the offing—and if the battles looming on the horizon are to be won, then a great deal of public education has to be carried out.

If they were not prepared to do it that way, then the sort of action taken by the *Evening Standard* chapel should have been taken on a bigger scale and much sooner. But the initiative was left with the bosses and their influential friends, and the best that can be said now is that a salutary lesson should be learned on just how dishonest and scurrilous the attacks can be from the mass media.

The other lesson that should be stressed is just how important the workers are! And far from becoming less important as industry gets more complicated and technical, they are getting more. The system gets more vulnerable, the more complex it becomes, the Government were even having to admit that troops could not take over the power stations if the full generating staffs were to come out, since they didn't have the necessary knowledge to run them. Since there's no substitute for workers, why don't they substitute themselves for the bosses?

JUSTIN.

## Lessons of December 8th

ABOUT HALF A MILLION workers came out on strike on December 8 in response to the call made by the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions. In spite of the massive campaign that was built up during the preceding weeks in the press and on television against this strike action, the turnout was good, but the mass media are still being used to generally attack any action by trade unionists. There is no doubt that the opposition to the anti-trade union legislation has stirred up a hornets' nest and any group of workers who are putting forward a militant policy are coming under attack.

From this one can only conclude that although the strike of December 8 was played down by the mass media, it was in fact a success. It was the biggest demonstration of the working class since 1926, particularly in Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds and Southampton, while many places in Scotland were also affected. Most of the workers involved not only stopped work but also demonstrated their opposition.

### FUTILE LOBBY

In London about 20,000 took part in a

march that was a mile long, but the only impressive thing about the demonstration was its sheer size. The speeches in Hyde Park by Kevin Halpin, Chairman of the Liaison Committee, Bill Lindley of the Lightermen's Union, Bill Keys, SOGAT Division 'A' President, and Sid Bidwell, Labour MP, contained nothing that had not been said before. About 2,000 men went to the House of Commons to lobby MPs, but as on previous occasions, the police only let a few in at a time while they tightly contained the others. Many resented this treatment and there was considerable pushing and shoving, with one or two being dragged off by the police. The lobby was a futile exercise as always, but we are continually called upon to do this by the Liaison Committee.

What are the lessons to be learned from the strike of December 8? Firstly that there is a considerable number of trade unionists who are willing to strike against legislation that they abhor. Secondly, that when such political action is taken then those who side with the Government and legality are basically frightened when so many stop work. The Press pulled out all the stops.

They called the strike 'undemocratic' and claimed that the Government have a mandate from the electorate, based on an election at which, incidentally, they won with less than 50% of the votes. But this sort of statement shows the attitudes of the Government and

Continued on page 2

**DEMONSTRATION AND MARCH**  
against  
**TRIAL and SENTENCING**  
of **BASQUES**  
Trafalgar Square  
3 p.m.  
Sunday, December 20  
to  
**SPANISH EMBASSY**  
via  
**IBERIA AIRLINES**  
Regent Street









