

SHREWSBURY -----

REPRESSION AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE



by Dave Bailey

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INTRODUCTION

One wet evening in mid-February, the police rounded up a number of men from several towns in North Wales and drove them to Shrewsbury prison under full security guard. The following morning they faced charges ranging from damage to property to intimidation, assault and conspiracy.

These men were some of the building workers who formed the flying pickets used so effectively in last year's building strike. There are now 24 of them facing their second hearing in Shrewsbury Court on April 25th. Meanwhile a further half dozen are appearing in local courts in the area.

These men are being prosecuted for doing what thousands of workers have done for decades and in many countries in defence of their jobs and their standard of living. And, as so often when the ruling class wants to intimidate workers, the charges are trumped up. Many of them for example, refer to incidents alleged to have taken place on a site at Telford, yet the police detained nobody on the day, and even escorted the pickets to two further sites to continue their picketing. For collecting money during the strike, some are charged with collecting money with menaces. Now they are being tried on photographic evidence collected by Special Branch and on the basis of testimonies six months after the event. Needless to say, the site agents who intimidated the workers with a shotgun are not appearing in court.

CONSPIRACY = INTIMIDATION

As for the conspiracy charges, many an innocent person who has nevertheless pleaded guilty in Court will tell you that a conspiracy charge is nothing more than crude intimidation. To prove it in court, all the prosecution has to do is allege that you 'intended' to do something, regardless of whether you are charged with doing it or not. It carries an unlimited sentence. The police use this every day as a makeweight: that is you are given a main charge plus conspiracy, and the police will promise to drop the conspiracy charge on condition you 'admit' to the main charge. So, even before you get to the Court, you are faced with a choice of pleading guilty or facing an indefinite sentence. The Tolpuddle Martyrs, to take the most famous example, were transported for 'conspiring' to form an illegal association (a trade union) under the Combination Acts.

"GOOD LAWS" AND "BADLAWS"

The ruling class are fond of trying to confuse workers struggles by using the Courts to draw a line between those workers who picket 'peacefully' or protest 'peacefully' even when faced with armies of police and lorry loads of scabs, and those who fight force with force. This scrupulous moral concern is not however applies by the ruling class to its own activities in the class struggle. This has been shown time and time again. For example, last month, at St. Thomas' Hospital

site in London, a squad of police waded into a picket line to let through a special police-style van loaded with scab labour. It was unfortunately not possible for the pickets to distinguish the 'violent' policemen from the 'nonviolent' policemen, as they were being thrown across the road. Neither did they have any Courts to which they could bring the culprits for trial. In the miners strike last year, pickets found themselves faced not only with violent police, but scab lorry drivers driving coal at 50 mph through the line with the open connivance of the police (one miner was killed in this way). When the miners at Dover decided to test the neutrality of the law by complaining to the Director of Public Prosecutions about a lorry driver wielding iron bars to get through picket lines, he simply stated: 'It would be necessary...to prove that the truck driver carried the bar with the intention of using it to injure.... I do not therefore propose to take any action in the matter'. No doubt the capitalist press has no intention of causing injury either when it incites the "public" to attack railwaymen, hospital workers and other strikers. The simple fact is that the ruling class claim a sole right to violence in the class struggle under cover of 'law and order'. Workers in all countries have learned this from practical experience. An example taken from one of the first big strikes of the 1930's in the United States shows the naked use of force by the state forces and organised scabs: This incident occurred during the Toledo Auto-Lite strike in May 1934:

'On May 23, there were more than 10,000 on the picket lines. County deputies with tear gas guns were lined up on the plant roof. A strike picket, Miss Alma Hahn, had been struck on the head by a bolt hurled from a plant window and had been taken to the hospital. By the time 100 more cops arrived, the workers were tremendously incensed. Police began roughing up individual pickets pulled from the line... Suddenly a barrage of tear gas bombs was hurled from upper factory windows. At the same time, company employees armed with iron bars and clubs dragged a fire hose into the street and played water on the crowd. The strike sympathisers replied with bricks, as they choked from gas fumes and fell back.

But they retreated only to reform their ranks. The police charged and swung their clubs trying to clear a path for the scabs. The workers held their ground and fought back. Choked by the tear gas fired from inside the plant, it was the police who finally gave up the battle. Then the thousands of pickets laid siege to the plant, determined to maintain their picket line.

Then followed one of the most amazing battles in US labour history. The Marines had landed in the form of the National Guard... On May 24, the guardsmen fired point-blank into the Auto-Lite strikers ranks, killing two and wounding 25. But 6,000 workers returned at dusk to renew the battle." (pp.22-3 Labours Giant Step, Art Price,

Pioneer Press)

ARMY, NEXT STEP

Thus when the state finds it impossible to destroy resistance by clubs and tear gas, the army is brought in to shoot down the workers. It would be a mistake to think this has happened only in the U.S.A., or in Western Europe. In Britain too, openly armed repression has been used; notably during the strikes in the South Wales coalfields prior to the First World War, and during the marches of the unemployed

workers in the 1930s when several men were killed in Liverpool, Birkenhead, South Wales, and elsewhere.

Finally, when the strength of the working class hinges for a moment on the courage of individual leaders, these too will be arrested, beaten and even killed by the state. The prisons of the international capitalist class have been filled with such men and women.

NEW STAGE

Today, in Britain, we have moved into a new stage of the class struggle. In order that the working class emerges victorious it is necessary to learn again the lessons of the past. We must prepare ourselves very seriously for the attacks of the ruling class which will inevitably grow more and more vicious. And these attacks on workers and their leaders will take both 'legal' and 'illegal' public and secret forms. As yet, the working class in this country is not in a position to destroy the armed forces of the capitalists or create Courts with which to bring them to trial. So, for the moment we must look seriously to the task of defending ourselves from the state by all means necessary.

WHAT PREPARATIONS ARE THE RULING CLASS MAKING?

The arrest of the Shrewsbury 24 should not be thought of as just an isolated incident. For the ruling class it is a test case and a warning to the working class in the struggles to come. If they are allowed to convict the Shrewsbury men, it will open the way for the police to beat up, intimidate and frame who they like, as an alternative to the cumbersome and unpopular Industrial Relations Act.

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ACT

The Industrial Relations Act - itself the beginning of a serious attempt to bring the Courts directly to bear on the unions, is - universally hated by the working class. So the Government have avoided using it in the strikes against Phase 2 for fear of provoking the sort of mass response which was seen over the Pentonville Five. Such a mass response could have developed into the General Strike (which the TUC has refused to contemplate), but which could have smashed through the Pay Laws. Instead, the Government put the Act in cold storage and, defeated one section of workers after another in the fight over Phase 2 by simple determination, knowing that the leaders would not co-ordinate their pay claims. But while all this has been going on, and now Scanlon feels safe enough to offer concessions on the Act, the Government has given the green light for a different type of

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repression. Now we see prosecution of pickets under the laws of 1875 rather than those of 1972, plus, of course, the systematic strengthening of the police force. They hope the use of these old laws will do part of the job of the I.R. Act, because workers will see them as somehow "different" from the new courts and legislation.

PICKETING CENTRAL

Even though there have been setbacks on the pay front, we must not let the state get away with this new attack. The flying picket is one thing which the employers and the Government are more frightened of than all the empty rhetoric of the trade union leaders. It has played a big role in winning over the active sympathy of other groups of workers in big strikes, such as the miners strike, when the union leaders refuse to do anything effective by way of solidarity. The flying picket can decide the fate of a strike, and this the British capitalists cannot tolerate, especially at the present time. Intimidating the picket is a number one priority for them. And we should not imagine that because there have been victories for the Government over Phase 2, that the state will retreat. The class struggle like war, is not conducted according to the Geneva Conventions. The Government will seek to press home its advantage by systematic physical and legal assaults on workers. Defending pickets should be a number one priority for us.

NEW FORCES

To do this, a new type of police force is being built up. In 1965 under the Labour Government, the Special Patrol Group was created. This organisation is designed to fill a gap. On the one hand they had the regular police (increasingly unable to deal with the trade union movement) and on the other the army (which is sufficiently organised, but whose use would provoke a massive response from the working class). The SPG is small, high mobile, trained in all the necessary military techniques of the army, and at the same time able to appear as just another part of the police. Recently it has been strengthened and was introduced to the world with the gunning down of two Pakistani workers at the India High Commission. Then it was turned on the pickets at St. Thomas's Hospital site, Hull dockers, and other picket lines.

UNION NON-LEADERSHIP

As usual, the trade union leaders have avoided this thorny and dangerous subject of repression. The most despicable example is the Shrewsbury case. The two main unions involved here, UCATT and the T & GWU, at first promised legal aid to the building workers. But then, a week before their first hearing on the 15th March, when thousands of dockers, steelworkers and building workers downed tools,

the offer was withdrawn. The men were told that a one-day stoppage would do "a great disservice to the union". Clearly, the union leadership hoped that the men would admit to the charges, thus preserving the 'respectability' of the unions and freeing them, from any chance of having 'conspiracy' charges laid against the union for their official policy. If the demands and aspirations of the workers can be satisfied within capitalist society, the union leaders reason, then the capitalist state has to be presented as a neutral body which can be used by either side in the struggle. Everything is played according to the 'rules'. The state, arbitrates between the hostile classes, and both sides are all very 'respectable'. Thus it is that when the ruling class breaks its own rules, the union leaders pretend to themselves that such things don't really happen. So the men must have been guilty after all. The men are criminals who overstepped the law which is there to defend us all. It is all nothing to do with trade unionism.

NOTHING DONE

Neither our famous leaders of the T & G and the UCATT, or the eminent TUC, have done anything at all over the Shrewsbury case. Despite the massive show of solidarity on March 15th, despite the thousands of police who occupied Shrewsbury for the day, and in the face of the campaign which is being begun by rank and file bodies up and down the

country, they have to this day refused even financial assistance. And of course industrial action in response to state repression is not exactly their strong point, even when the Industrial Relations Act is used. But when conducted through the criminal law.... these gentlemen are nowhere to be seen.

OUR TASKS

Both financial and industrial support for the Shrewsbury workers is critically important. All bodies of the labour movement should make donations to the men even if the trade union bureaucracy does decided to give the building workers legal aid. Then the Shrewsbury workers will be able to chose between money given with the aim of getting them to plead guilty and money given them out of unconditional class solidarity. But more important still, of course, is decisive industrial action to get the charges dropped and stop the vicious attacks of the state.

WHO HAS STRENGTH?

No more convincing proof could be given that the law is a matter of who has strength rather than a classless machine, than the fact

that the release of workers on trial has been achieved many times through industrial action. In 1950 a Lancashire miner called Horrocks was sent to jail for breach of contract in leading a strike at Sutton colliery. Sympathy strikes spread rapidly and he was released after two days. Committal orders on another 50 miners were subsequently dropped. The threat of a Scottish coal strike by the NUM was sufficient to gain the release of the Longannet miners last year. And of course, finally, the struggle over the Pentonville Five was the most convincing demonstration of all that the law is a farce, as the Government fished around and dug up somebody called the 'Official Solicitor' to get them off the hook. The fate of a worker in a court is not determined by some piece of paper called 'the law' but by the balance of class forces. A massive campaign of industrial action is needed to get the discharge of the Shrewsbury men.

PREPARE NOW

In this period we must be prepared for every similar case of repression. If we fail, the ruling class will press its advantage. The trade union bureaucracy has proved hopeless, even on the fight against the Industrial Relations Act. Rank and file workers must therefore be politically armed and organised to respond. It is not just a matter of mobilising once workers appear in court or are threatened with imprisonment. We have to make it a thousand times harder for the police to attack by a campaign in the labour movement for a programme for effective defence of pickets.

There are a number of important things which can be done. First, it is essential to remember that the police, Special Branch and other agents of repression are centrally lead. They are highly mobile while at the same time any internal organisational problems they may have are concealed from public gaze. It is possible for the police to concentrate very large forces against one picket line, without any advance warning of where they are going to strike. This enables them to appear a thousand times stronger than they actually are. In this way, the police can bluff workers into submission by giving the impression that enormously greater force could be used than is actually possible. The police tried this at Saltley last year. But in this case their source of strength

was revealed as a source of weakness. When thousands of workers from all over Birmingham struck and joined the picket lines, thus calling the police bluff, the Saltley depot had to close.

BASIC DEFENCE

But in order to be in a position to expose this actual weakness of the police and so defeat them, it is vital that the labour movement achieves the same sort of central organisation as the agents of the capitalist state. Organisations such as Trades Councils should create action committees to co-ordinate the defence of picket lines. Since the need can arise for such action in a matter of hours it is essential that such committees should comprise delegates from all the factories and work places - not just branch officials. If Trades Councils or the dominant unions in a given area will not do this, then the other forms of organisation must be created which will do the job. But in any case workers should demand that the unions make all their resources available for this. These measures should be made basic matters of principle for the trade unions.

CAPITALIST CRISIS

But we must also recognise that because the need to attack

pickets and demoralise the rank and file leadership of the working class is not the result of a particularly 'bad' government. It flows from the need of the ruling class to drastically increase the rate at which they exploit the labour of the workers, for the British capitalists profits are in a desperate condition. We must, therefore, be prepared for more sophisticated attacks even if we were able to fight off the present wave. And this can take more violent forms. The morale of the British Army is so bad and the crisis of British imperialism in Ireland so deep, that it would be very dangerous for the ruling class to use troops against the unions at the present time. But if the workers beat off the ruling class political and economic offensive then they will undoubtedly be used at some stage and almost certainly in any general strike as was the case in 1926. This is why it is necessary now to break with the idea that because the police are armed with truncheons, pickets should not be. Self-defence of pickets is the only effective way to deal with the police, the scabs and 'unofficial' armies. Not to take this step where suitable is to leave workers unprepared for a real show of armed force by the state - a show of force which can thoroughly shatter the workers struggle.

This lesson has been learnt once on the Clyde in 1919 when the wave of strikes undertaken in solidarity with working class leaders such as Gallacher and McLean, who were on trial were rapidly brought to an end by the army occupation of Glasgow.

Conscious preparation of pickets capable of taking on the police on their own terms played a big role in the many strikes which took place in the USA during the Thirties. Even when National Guardsmen had been called in to shoot strikers, the meticulous organisation and deployment of the workers forces was able to overcome these attempts at demoralisation by the state. Farrell Dobbs in his book 'Teamster Rebellion' describes some of the planning and organisation which went into the Minneapolis Teamsters strike of 1934:

"A big garage building at 1900 Chicago Avenue was rented to serve as an operational headquarters. Besides its capacity to handle picket mobilisations, the building was large enough for a commissary, the necessary offices, and a mechanical repair department. It was also to house a field hospital.... (so that those injured by police and armed scabs would not be arrested in state hospitals). A garage had been rented because the strike would be a mobile one, with expanded use of the cruising picket squads which had been developed during the coal strike. In that department, charts of the city were being made up, picketing instructions drafted, and picket captains selected....."

"The union's approach to the unemployed workers brought spectacular results. Hundreds upon hundreds of jobless poured into the strike headquarters, volunteering their services. A significant number of college students pitched in to help the union. A majority of the city's population proved sympathetic to the strike and soon a spontaneous intelligence service was in operation. People telephoned reports of scab activities, and other information was mailed in anonymously. Typists slipped in an extra carbon to make a copy for the union when a boss dictated something they felt the strikers should know about....

"Up to now the workers had gone about their activities barehanded; but they found that attempts to exercise their right to picket peacefully were being repressed with police clubs and blackjacks. They decided to take steps to enforce their democratic right to prevent scabs from grabbing their jobs. It would have been a tactical blunder for members of an isolated vanguard to attempt measures such as the strikers were about to take, they would only get clobbered by the police. In this case, however, the means used in self-defence had their origin in a spontaneous mood that had been generated by capitalist repression....All day Sunday the strikers equipped themselves for battle; Baseball bats appeared, garden hoses were cut into short lengths.. to make improvised helmets, heavy cardboards were stuffed into the sweatbands of hats. A fellow striker would be asked to test it out with a club, and if the result was negative, more cardboard would be added."

THE SHREWSBURY CAMPAIGN: WHAT WE MUST DO

The Shrewsbury 24 come up again for hearing on April 25th. Last month, the police blócked off Shrewsbury, depriving those on trial of the support of thousands of their fellow workers who had come to demonstrate outside the Court. This time, we must make sure that huge delegations are sent to Shrewsbury on that day.

We must also campaign in the labour movement for solidarity strikes on that day. The Court have fixed the second hearing for a day on which building workers in many areas are covered by an agreement which deprives them of three days pay if they are absent from work on the 25th (the previous two days are paid holidays). This makes solidarity by workers outside the building industry even more urgent.

In addition of course, a key aspect of the campaign must be the collection of funds to pay legal fees.

A mass campaign of industrial action, meetings and demonstrations up and down the country can force the state to drop their charges before the men are sent to the High Court. The Government must be shown that it has not won the decisive victory over the working class which it is now claiming.

The IMG see the Shrewsbury case as a key test in the class struggle, the outcome of which will affect the relation of forces on the picket lines up and down the country in the future. And since we are likely to see a pattern of bitter local strikes over the summer, the strength of the picket lines will become key.

The IMG intends to take all possible opportunities to mobilise for the 25th. In those places where we have comrades in the building trade such as in Edinburgh and Rotherham we are pushing for strike action, helping to organise coaches of workers and students to go to Shrewsbury and in Rotherham moving that the UCATT joint shop stewards committee produce a special bulletin for mass distribution. In Sheffield we are initiating moves through the AUEW for a meeting on the 18th April of workers representatives throughout the area to plan action and delegations to Shrewsbury. In the Oxford Council of Action we have campaigned on this issue and the delegates to the Council of Action have committed themselves to gaining support in their various union branches. In the midlands we are fighting for a co-ordinating committee to be set up to conduct the campaign. And of course those comrades holding positions in Charter, the rank and file building workers organisation, are doing everything possible to get Charter to conduct a campaign. We also intend to fight within London conference against the Freeze and against the Government on April 14th for a plan of action on Shrewsbury. We call for every

other political organisation in the working class to take Shrewsbury seriously and make it a priority campaign for their forces in the unions at the present time.

ALL organisations of the labour movement, Trades Councils, union branches, action committees etc. must put their shoulder to the wheel.

THE INTERNATIONAL MARXIST GROUP

The International Marxist Group is a revolutionary socialist organisation which believes that the struggle of the trade unions against the employers and against the present Tory government is completely inseparable from the struggle against the entire system of capitalism. We therefore support every struggle against that system and its effects, including every struggle on the issue of wages and conditions, the struggle of blacks against racism, the struggle of women against oppression and the struggle of the Irish people against British rule. We believe, however, that all these struggles can only be brought to success if linked to a general strategy of nationalisation of all major industry and the establishment of workers control. In addition, as the struggle against capitalism is an international one, we are members of the Fourth International. To achieve these ends it works within all the organisations of the working class and welcomes co-operation with any group or individual on any of these issues for which we campaign. In this way we believe both the superiority of revolutionary socialist ideas can be seen in practice, and an organisation can be built which will be able to fight all parts of the capitalist state. The IMG has produced a series of articles in its newspaper, the Red Mole on the building industry and in particular on the Lump. For further details about these and other activities of the IMG fill in the form below.

INTERNATIONAL MARXIST GROUP

(British section of the Fourth International)
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Please send me more information about the IMG

NAME

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OCCUPATION