

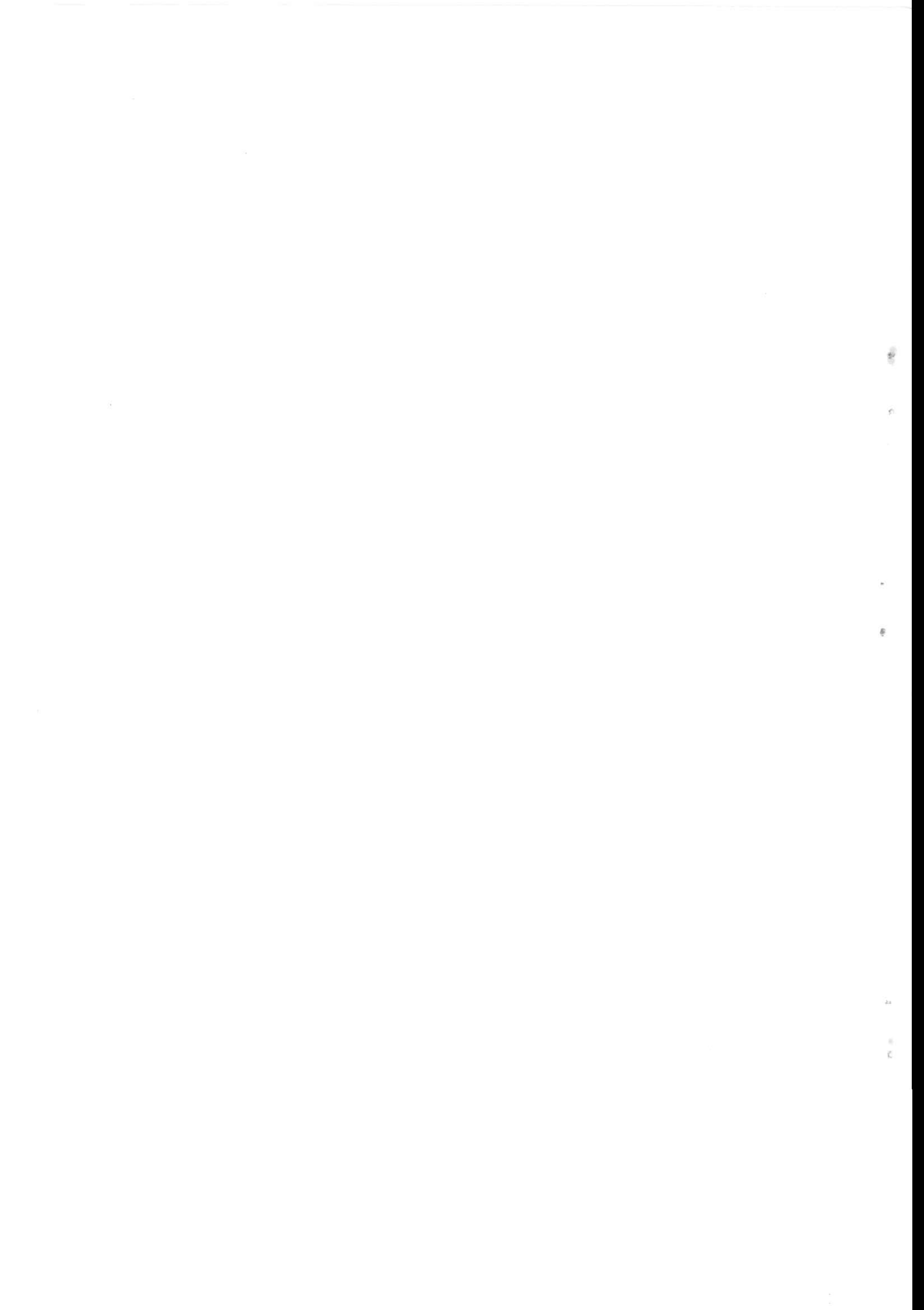
leyland in crisis:



cowley under fire

PRICE 20p.

by cowley img



INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday, April 10th, the management at the British Leyland Assembly Plant at Cowley issued the following "Supervisory Brief":
A meeting has today been held at the company's request with the T&GWU, attended by the full-time local official, at which an official complaint was made regarding the conduct of Mr. A. Thornett, a deputy senior steward of the T&GWU at the Cowley Assembly Plant...

"In view of his failure to behave with the expected level of responsibility the company informed the Trade Union that it was no longer prepared to afford facilities to Mr. Thornett to act in any capacity as a Trade Union representative in the plant. With immediate effect, he was directed to return to his normal employment as a driver in the Transport department."

Thus began one of the fiercest attacks mounted on the Trade Unions in the car industry since the defeats of the Shop-Stewards Movement at Ford's, Dagenham in 1962. The ensuing strike was the latest in a 4 year war at Cowley over the company's attempt to impose a new system of payment and work discipline, Measured Day Work, to replace the piecework system.

The outcome and aftermath of the strike has been a major set-back for trade unionism at Cowley. British Leyland now has the potential of following up this setback and inflicting a major defeat in the Plant, as serious as that at Dagenham. This pamphlet has been produced by the Oxford Branch of the International Marxist Group (IMG) with the purpose of helping to deny British Leyland that victory. If this is to happen it is vital that those militants who have been the backbone of the resistance to the company's recent attacks learn the lessons of this set-back and develop policies to meet the coming struggles.

Much of the pamphlet consists of a critical account of the role of the leadership exercised by the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), formerly the Socialist Labour League (SLL), in the Shop-Stewards Movement at Cowley. This is not because, as is often said, the left groups are always attacking each other, but because the role of the WRP has been one of the factors in leading to the present situation. Alan Thornett himself is a member of the Central Committee of the WRP. Until the recent elections, a majority of the T&GWU Senior Stewards have been members or supporters of the WRP. The 6,000 strong 5/55 Branch (which included all the T&GWU members in the Assembly Plant) has been dominated by the WRP's policies for years, and as the leading Trade Union body, the 5/55 Branch has been the main policy-maker for the trade unions in the plant. If we identify the policies followed by the Trade Unions in the Assembly Plant with the policies of the WRP, it is because in most cases it would be purely formal to distinguish them.

The WRP has recently published an account of the recent struggles (Victimization at Cowley, by Stephen Johns) which claims that the outcome of the fight over Thornett's victimizations is a vindication of the WRP's correct leadership. We think the WRP greatly underestimate both the defeat suffered by their own leadership and the set-back inflicted on the Trade Unions in the Assembly Plant.

To indicate the extent of this setback, compare the present situation with 4 years ago, when years of campaigning against Measured Day Work enabled the Socialist Labour League to unite the workforce in a six week strike against its imposition at Cowley. This year, after the management had got away with breaking several key factory agreements, Alan Thornett was unable to get backing from any substantial section of the workforce to prevent the removal of his credentials as Deputy Senior Steward. Now for the first time since the Plant was fully unionised in the late '50's, the union bureaucracy has got a large measure of control over union affairs in the Plant.

Three main factors combined to bring about this situation. Firstly, the end of the boom in demand for cars in 1974 meant that the company needed more urgently than ever before to take on the unions in Cowley and were prepared to sacrifice production to this end. Secondly, the Regional and National bureaucrats of the T&GWU collaborated blatantly with the company in order to regain control of a plant which had never been submissive to union officialdom. And thirdly, the WRP leadership of the shop-stewards in the Plant failed to meet the problems posed by the imposition of Measured Day Work, and their practices led to progressive isolation from the shop floor. This meant that they were unable to get backing from the majority of the workforce to resist the company's attack and prevent the sabotage by the union bureaucrats.

Of course it would be nonsense to claim that correct policies and practice by the plant leadership could have guaranteed victory, or that even if correct policies are adopted in the future there cannot be further defeats. What we can say is that aspects of the WRP's leadership which were clearly incorrect contributed to the recent setbacks and made the task of the employers and the union bureaucrats easier, and that if the militants break from these practices this will give the best chance of turning the tide at Cowley and rebuilding the strength of the union for the battles that inevitably lie ahead.

Chapter One

THE ECONOMIC STATE OF B.L.

world car crisis

The world car market is in the grip of a deepening recession. Since the beginning of 1974 sales falls have been dramatic: in Britain, 22%; in Germany, 31%; in the United States, greater still. The problems of the car producers have been intensified even further by the rising petrol and raw material costs- petrol has risen 50% since the beginning of the year and is bound to rise more; steel, rubber and electricity have done the same. This has thrown every major car producer in the western world into crisis with short-time working, layoffs and labour cutbacks common. The fall in profits has been sensational: in the first quarter of 1974 General Motors' fell 85%, Ford 66%, Chrysler 98%, and Toyota 83%. Fiat made a loss and Citroen, the largest French car producer, avoided bankruptcy by a hair's breadth, only saved by a hasty merger with Peugeot. British Leyland, in the six months ended March 31, 1974, made a loss of £16.5 million as against a declared profit of £22.8 million during the same period last year.

From the employers' point of view, the present situation is intolerable for any length of time as most car plants only turn in a profit when production is near to capacity. The fight is on to increase market shares at each other's expense, and to step up the profits from their workers by increasing the rate of exploitation through speed-ups and redundancies.

Intensified competition can only lead one way- the weakest go to the wall. In the giant international league British Leyland, desperately trying to fight its way back from the brink of bankruptcy, is one of the weakest. The severity of its position is reflected in its increasingly vicious attempts to step up the rate of exploitation of its workers. British Leyland needs a major cut-back in its workforce and a massive speed-up in order to stay in business.

B.L. is formed

In the years following World War 2 the British car industry was in an extremely favourable position. With all its major European competitors destroyed by the war, both the home and the export markets were wide open. At its formation in 1952 by a merger of Austin and Morris, the British Motor Corporation (BMC) could sell every car it could produce at high rates of profit- and with very little attention to efficiency, quality or after sales service. The post war expansion of consumer credit, which created the boom conditions of the 1950's and early 1960's guaranteed this seller's market. Between 1952 and its merger with Leyland's in 1968, BMC was a shareholder's dream. £30 invested in BMC ordinary shares in 1952

(when the Corporation was formed) would have yielded £330 by 1967 (when BMC merged with Leyland) in dividends on the original shares plus the many free share issues. And this average return of 73% per year takes no account of the investor's capital gain.

But while BMC paid out its earnings to its shareholders, its European rivals rebuilt their factories with American capital and the most modern machinery, continuously reinvesting their profits in the most up-to-date plant, equipment and management techniques.

So long as the boom conditions persisted and the demand for cars outstripped production, British producers were protected from the consequences of their inefficiency. By the mid 1960's, however, the tide had turned. With all the rebuilt European car plants now in operation, production capacity caught up with- and even began to overtake- demand. For the first time there was a surplus of production. At the same time the boom faltered and stopped, and demand ceased to expand at the same rate as before, as is clearly shown by the figures for the annual rate of increase of vehicle sales in the Common Market Countries:

1955	16.6%	1961	14.6%	1967	9.0%
1956	17.6%	1962	15.9%	1968	8.2%
1957	16.4%	1963	16.4%	1969	8.1%
1958	15.4%	1964	13.9%	1970	7.2%
1959	14.8%	1965	12.3%	1971	6.6%
1960	15.1%	1966	10.9%	1972	5.3%
				1973	4.2%

The battle for markets was joined in earnest, soon to be intensified by Japanese competition. At this point, all the hidden weaknesses in BMC came to the surface and it began to go under. The shares began a steady fall as shareholders, having made their killing, left the sinking ship.

Other British motor manufacturers were also finding themselves unable to compete in world markets with the international giants. One after another they were being forced to the wall and bought up by American competition: Ford's were long established in Britain, Chryslers bought out Rootes and General Motors bought out Vauxhall's.

It was at this point that the Labour government brought together into one haphazard corporation all the remaining British Motor manufacturers: British Leyland was born. It was only the Labour government's action in forcing a merger with the more dynamic and profitable Leyland that saved BMC from bankruptcy. To this day it is the Austin Morris Division which is dragging BL under despite the regular profits being produced by the specialist cars- Jaguar, Triumph and Rover, plus the bus and truck division.

the crisis today

If it is to survive, British Leyland has to convince the banks that it will be able to make profits in the future. At present the company is engaged in a major effort to raise more loans and it is this, more than anything else, that has prompted the recent speed-up in Cowley and the victimization of Alan Thornett which arose from it. It is also in support of this effort that the company is parading 'the defeat of the Left' in Cowley, in the hope that this

will- in the eyes of the banks- restore the company's credit-worthiness.

That credit worthiness is stretched far beyond what the company's profit figures would suggest. In every year since its formation, British Leyland has declared a profit. Almost certainly in every year it has been, in real terms, unprofitable. This is because BL, like most companies, hides the effects of inflation when presenting its profit and loss account.

This is done in two ways: firstly, the company has to put aside funds to renew its plant and machinery and these are put in the accounts on the basis of the price paid when they were originally bought. But of course the cost of machines is going up all the time, like everything else, so when they actually do have to be renewed they cost much more than they did originally, and the money has to come from somewhere else to pay.

Secondly, the company counts the rise in value of their stocks of materials caused by inflation as part of their profits- but since they have to carry these stocks to operate and they have to pay the increased prices to renew them, this "profit" exists only on paper.

If you take these factors into account BL's declared profit of £21 million in 1971 was really a loss of about £10 million. The declared profit of £28 million in 1973 was in fact a loss of about £24 million. This non-profitability does not mean in the short term that the company must go bankrupt. Companies can make losses for some time without bankruptcy so long as they can maintain a sufficient flow of cash to pay their wages and bills. But it is important to understand the means to which BL has resorted in order to maintain this cash flow.

In the first place, it had increased its bank overdraft to £100 million by the end of September 1973. There are limits beyond which the banks will not lend.

Secondly, the corporation has held back on investment; it has used up its factories and machines without putting aside enough money to replace them when they wear out. Even the £500 million, 5 year investment plan announced with such a fanfare last year is peanuts compared to those of competitors. And even that had already been stretched to 7 years and is threatened with further cuts.

Thirdly, and most importantly, BL has stopped paying its bills! Between September 1972 and September 1973, its total debt to other companies for parts and materials rose by £100 million to £360 million. Yet at the same time BL forces its creditors to pay up on the nail. That sort of behavior can only be kept up for so long. Sooner or later the suppliers will demand payment or cut off supplies of parts. So this is a once and for all gain and BL cannot hope for much more on this score.

Without all these measures the three day week would have broken the company. Even as it is, it has made things very bad. By the end of March this year, £50 million cash in hand had been turned into another £40 million on the overdraft- a loss of £90 million in six months. That money has come from over draft facilities granted by the banks for investment. The banks may well be unwilling to allow this situation to continue.

It is for these reasons that the company attaches such importance to beating the unions at this time. The future is bleak for BL and its only hope of survival is to make its workers pay for the crisis. Increased exploitation of its workforce is necessary condition for BL's survival as a capitalist concern.

But even this might not be sufficient. Any major economic recession, such as the one currently looming, could force BL into bankruptcy despite a massive speed-up. All that is certain is that without a speed-up the company cannot survive for very long.

Chapter Two

MEASURED DAY WORK - THE 'FINAL SOLUTION'

The company has had three main possibilities for making greater profits from its workforce:

1. to increase efficiency through new investments,
2. to hold down wages below those of BL's main competitors,
3. to step up work efforts to increase output-per employee- in other words, speed-up.

The first option is ruled out by the present financial position of the company. That left only the last two options. But the implementation of these measures needed to replacement of the piecework system by another which gave the company far greater control over both the organisation of work and the outcome of wage bargaining. That system was Measured Day Work (MDW) and its introduction at Cowley in 1970 marked the beginning of a struggle in which Alan Thornett's victimization is the latest battle.

the attack on piecework

Piecework- payment by results- was favoured by employers over straightforward time payment systems because it served as a way of making workers increase their own rate of exploitation. Particularly where Trade Union organisation on the shop floor was weak or non-existent and where workers had little bargaining strength over piece prices, the system of piece work forced workers to drive themselves to crushing work rates in order to get a living wage. And the system still works very well for employers in a great many factories today.

But since the war, with the growth of strong Trade Union organisation on the shop floor- the Shop Stewards Movement- in the car industry, the low levels of unemployment or shortages labour, and the rapid growth of demand for motor vehicles, the piecework system came to be a powerful weapon in the hands of shop-stewards in forcing up wage rates through shop-floor bargaining over the rate for the job. In particular when the employer wished to introduce a modification or a new model, the stewards were able to take advantage of the employers need to meet sales deadlines to jack up the rates.

Every success reinforced the strength of the shop Stewards Movement. The shop steward, directly associated with every increase in his member's wages, became a power on the shop floor. The result was that the system of payment got out of the control of management. As long as profits remained high the employers could tolerate this situation, but by the mid 1960's the boom had begun to fade; demand was slackening, competition was increasing and profit margins declining.

In 1968 the Coventry and District Engineering Employers' Ass. asked George Cattell- a Rootes director- to study their problems. The result has since become known as the Coventry Blue Book. Cattell called for "The complete elimination of bargaining- about money or payment between the operator and the ratefixer". His answer was- Measured Day Work.

why MDW?

Under MDW, a factory- wide or company-wide wage structure is established which is negotiated at long intervals by full time union officials. By taking all wage negotiations off the shop floor, MDW destroys the wage bargaining role of shop stewards by abolishing the fight over the rate for the job, thus striking a severe blow at shop floor organisation. Furthermore, when wage reviews- are set for fixed times, the company can prepare for set-piece confrontations by stock-piling finished goods and being capable of sitting out long disputes.

The strength of the Shop Stewards Movement is further undermined by another aspect of MDW. Since workers are paid a flat hourly for a fixed effort, the negotiation of the level of effort becomes the only important sphere left to the shop stewards. Yet if a shop steward takes action over work efforts, he risks being regarded not-asbefore- as the person who always secured wage rises, but as the person who has caused a stoppage and a subsequent reduction in his members' wage packets. The company's aim is therefore, with the help of so-called "scientific" work management techniques, to set the effort levels as high as possible and to penalise workers who fail to reach them.

The potential advantages of MDW to BL were obvious, and in 1970, Pat Lowry, head of the Engineering Employers' Federation, was brought to BL to lead the attack on the workforce as Director of Industrial Relations.

The company's aim was, and still is, to get one set of wage negotiations for the whole combine, preferably at two year intervals. However the management decided to impose MDW factory by factory. (In fact they have not yet been able to progress beyond this stage in the plan.) The first nut Lowry chose to crack was the Assembly Plant at Cowley, where BL's new model, the Marina, was about to go into production.

The company forced in the new payment system at Cowley against determined resistance and a six-week strike led by the SLL. But at that stage, although piecework had been abolished the management was far from having got the full control over work organisation that was the aim of MDW: the shop stewards organisation was still strong and had the potential of resisting the reduction of wages and increase in work efforts that the company wanted.

Now, after four years, it is clear that wages at Cowley have been held below the rate of inflation and have declined relative to many other jobs in the area. And, even more importantly, the shop floor strength of the union has begun to crack-up. With the successful removal of Alan Thornett's credentials as Deputy Senior Steward, the replacement of the shop stewards leadership with a company man and the splitting of the T&GWU 5/55 Branch by the union bureaucracy, the

company is a step closer to getting what they intended out of MDW. To see how this has happened, the following chapters trace key elements of the history of these four years, showing how the SLL/WRP leadership of the shop stewards proved unable to meet the new problems posed by the imposition of MDW, and how the union bureaucracy sabotaged resistance to the company's attacks for their own ends.

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Chapter Three

AFTER THE 6 WEEK STRIKE

In August, 1970, the Cowley Assembly workers started a strike against the introduction of MDW on the new Marina lines, and for the retention of long established piecework agreements. (As is often the case, MDW was not explicitly the issue that sparked off the strike, but neither management nor the workers were in any doubt that this was what was at stake.)

The Senior Stewards had been preparing the workers for this battle for years. In September, 1969, they had launched a monthly T&GWU 5/55 Branch magazine, the Branch News, with the main aim of educating their members on the purpose of MDW and stiffening the resistance. As a result of this strong leadership the strike was able to win support from other workers in the factory who were not immediately involved. The strikers held out for six weeks, in face of threats by the company to close the factory, an offer of the carrot of a substantial wage rise, and a vocal minority who opposed the strike from the start.

But after six weeks the Trade Union officials secured a return to work, against the unanimous recommendation of the Senior Stewards, on a "temporary" formula. This involved working for a fixed hourly rate while negotiations took place on MDW. The company then took the unions through the formal negotiating procedure in order to do away with the old piecework agreement. The unions opposed the abolition of piecework and "failure to agree" was recorded at every stage of procedure. Following the final "York" conference, laid down in the old Engineering Industry disputes procedure, the company was in a position to "constitutionally" impose whatever method of payment they chose.

On January 13th the management read a letter of all Marina assembly workers spelling out the MDW system under which they were to work. It gave them the ultimatum that if they clocked on for work on the following shift this would be taken as acceptance of the new system, but if they refused they would be transferred to the Labour Pool on reduced pay, which carried the threat of the sack.

In the event only about a dozen workers stood out and were put in the pool, and rather than expose these men to victimization the Senior Stewards advised them to return to the tracks. This set the seal on the defeat of the six-week strike.

In their recent pamphlet, the WRP clearly recognise that the defeat of the six-week strike spelt the end of the struggle to prevent the introduction of MDW: that the six-week strike was the decisive test of strength over MDW in Cowley:

"Everyone knew that piecework would be won or lost in this battle. Once the fixed rate was conceded in the QT section where the Marina was to be produced, MDW was as good as in." (Victimization at Cowley-p.29)

And even before the management's ultimatum to the Marina workers the Senior Stewards recognised that the workers were not prepared to continue the fight against MDW as such. In the Branch News of December 1970 they wrote:

"the mood on the plant as we see it at the present time is to let the company do as they like."

It is clear that after the defeat of the six-week strike the leadership should have clearly told their members that the fight over the principle of MDW had been lost, and that the fight for the best possible compromise terms under the fixed-rate payments system was on, including the fight to extract the highest possible rate of pay, to secure full pay for holidays, to get overtime payments based on the full hourly rate, to get security of earnings during lay-offs, to demand mutual agreement with shop stewards on all changes in work methods and manning levels and on the use and implementation of work studies, and so on.

Yet the SLL at the time refused to take this course, refused to negotiate any compromise terms and continued to hold out an illusory perspective of resisting the introduction of the fixed-rate system and retaining piece-work. They viewed the negotiations leading up to the "York" conference as a stalling operation, ruling out any compromise. In the same December Branch News in which the Senior Stewards had assessed the mood of their members after the six-week strike, they could still say:

"You the members are the only people who will decide whether MDW is accepted or piece work is retained." (our emphasis)

The result was that when the vast majority of the workers accepted the management's ultimatum and started work under MDW the wage rates were well below what the company could have been forced to concede in negotiations. Even before the final "York" conference the 5/55 Branch had issued the following statement:

"We understand that the Industrial Consultants (Urwick, Orr and Co.) who are advising Leyland on MDW calculated, after studying the strength of the plant etc., that if they could get MDW in it would cost 24/6d per hour." (pre decimalization)

As it was, MDW went in at £1 an hour, and premium payments for overtime and nightshift working and holiday pay were still calculated on a notional "Consolidated Time Rate" (CTR) well below the basic rate. The workforce was not protected by any agreement providing for mutual agreement with stewards on the implementation of work-study techniques or even on matters such as relief breaks. And, even more importantly, the authority of the shop stewards' leadership had been further undermined.

The IMG had no intervention in Cowley at this time, but in retrospect we can see that the entire battle against MDW was seen in the wrong terms. The SLL counterposed a fight for the old conditions of employment to the company's new payments plan- the issue was seen as piecework versus MDW. A correct leadership, understanding the nature of the crisis that not only BL but also the whole capitalist world was entering, and understanding the consequences of this crisis in terms of inflation and recession, would have sought to cut across the 'piecework v. MDW' issue and raised demands which provided a long term solution to the problems of the workforce. For although piecework gave rise to a strong shop stewards leadership and regular increases in earnings in the conditions of the 1950's and 60's, the tying of wages to effort could only result in redundancies and attacks on the labour force in conditions of cut-back and recession.

The kind of demands we are thinking of which would have cut across the essentially Trade Unionist approach of the SLL are demands which provide a solution to the problem of inflation, and which cut across this relationship of wages to effort (which still exists under MDW in as much as workers have to reach a pre-determined effort level as the condition for their hourly rate of pay). Demands which break this relationship open the way for real security of employment, as production cut-backs would not necessarily entail labour losses. The two cornerstones of these demands would have been for wages which rise automatically with the cost of living- a SLIDING SCALE OF WAGES- and for work sharing with no loss of pay in the event of production cut-backs. We will develop these policies later on. For now we note that, as we have seen, even within the terms in which the SLL saw the battle against MDW, they still failed to judge the correct time to retreat and to fight for the best possible terms, with serious consequences for the membership and the shop stewards organisation.

Three main reasons explain why the SLL failed to judge this time. Firstly, their view that the fight against MDW was a question of principle led many of their members and supporters to believe that any compromise was ruled out in any circumstances.

Secondly, they completely misunderstood the reasons for the acceptance of MDW by the factory membership against their recommendation. And thirdly, they greatly overestimated the speed with which British Leyland would attempt to get the full benefits of MDW out of the workforce.

1. The SLL quite correctly argued against those who thought MDW should be used as a bargaining counter and hence should be resisted only in order to extract favourable terms. The adoption of this policy by the Communist Party was one of the main factors which prevented the development of combine-wide resistance to MDW through the Shop Stewards Combine Committee, which was the best chance of resisting the company's plans. Dick Etheridge, CP convener at Longbridge, put it: "Any system will be controlled by the shop stewards and the shop floor once they get the hang of it." What the CP ignores is that even the best worded agreement on mutuality over working conditions, manning levels and so on is only as strong as the shop stewards who have to enforce it in the workers' interests. And it is precisely the function of MDW to undermine the position of the shop stewards, as has been shown only too clearly over the last four years at Cowley. This is of course why the company was prepared to make initially high wage offers and sign mutuality agreements to get MDW established.

But the SLL, in correctly rejecting compromise as a pretext for not fighting MDW, led many of their supporters to think that as opposition to MDW was a matter of principle there could be no compromise, even after that fight had been lost. So although the SLL was eventually forced to negotiate, as we shall see, this was too late, after the most favourable time had been missed and after the workforce had in effect been at the company's mercy for a year.

2. Although after the defeat of the MDW strike, the SLL realised that the majority on the shop floor were against further resistance to MDW as such, they put this down to the fact that the workers believed the company's assurances about the aim of MDW rather than their own warnings. On January 30th, 1971, a week after the workers' submission to the management's ultimatum, in an open letter to members working MDW they wrote:

"We have published in the past year in the Branch News masses of information about MDW...

"What has been the result of all this explanation? No one believed us!

"Everyone thinks we are exaggerating, but as soon as Mr Showan (the managing director) puts a letter out, everyone believes it..."

"The tragedy of the situation is that, as our brothers in Pressed Steel Fisher have shown, to stand firm is to be in a powerful position to bargain for the piecework system. We are sure of one thing - the battle is not yet over ... We can retrieve the situation providing unity is restored."

This was nonsense. If the workers had believed the company and not the senior stewards, why would they have held out against MDW for six weeks under the SLL's leadership? The SLL just could not face up to the fact that the workers had accepted MDW, not because they wanted it, nor because they believed the company's promises of jam tomorrow, but because having been defeated in the six-week strike, **THEY COULD SEE NO CREDIBLE PERSPECTIVE OF DEFEATING THE COMPANY ON THIS ISSUE.**

By explaining the lack of support for continued "principled opposition" to MDW by the fact that their warnings had not been heeded, the SLL tried to justify their policy of refusing to concede the principle and negotiate a compromise. They hoped that if they waited until the company put the boot in, the workers might realise what a bad thing MDW was, that the SLL had been right after all, and once again fight to get back piecework.

3. This policy was backed up by a grossly exaggerated estimation of the speed with which BL would attempt to get the full results from MDW at Cowley. In June 1971 they wrote in the Branch News:

"It is becoming clearer every day that the central part of Tory industrial policy is to smash British Leyland as an example to the rest of industry to get rid of a leader in the wages field and to continue their policy of massive unemployment."

The SLL thought the immediate crisis facing BL was so severe that there was no way the company could avoid an all-out attack for speed-up and wage cutting there and then. But in fact BL was prepared to continue their "carrot" policy for a considerable time in order to get MDW established at Cowley. Demand for Marinas soon outstripped production, and this was aggravated by a July mini-budget which relaxed hire-purchase restrictions for car sales and sharply increased demand, before manufacturers like BL could gear up production to meet it. This meant that to maintain its share of the market in face of a flood of imported cars BL was forced to make concessions in order to ensure maximum production.

The company had got MDW on the Marina lines on the South Side, but it was not yet established in the entire Assembly Plant. In May 1971 the management moved against the workers on the Maxi lines, on the North Side. The SLL hoped that if the acceptance of MDW by the Maxi workers could be delayed, by then the Marina workers would have come to their senses as a result of the company's anticipated drive for speed-up, and the fight against MDW could be reopened. But by August MDW had been imposed on the North Side without either a fight or a negotiated agreement. All the SLL could say was that the North Side workers "were wrong" because they were "not prepared to enter a protracted strike against MDW".

September's Branch News, following Nixon's floating of the dollar reported:

"World trade now takes place on the basis of paper money no longer backed by gold, the only thing which gives it real value. Without

gold, paper money is just a form of credit, a promise to pay. This was O.K. in the days when the dollar was regarded 'as good as gold'. But once confidence goes, paper money becomes worth only the paper it is written on.

"But if this is so, someone may say, why are goods still circulating to the extent they are? (After all, production is going up at Morris Motors.) Well, I would say we are in the days of the fool's paradise. When gold went it left world trade like the rooster with his head chopped off - he can run twice round the yard on his nerves."

The workforce at BMC could almost be forgiven for thinking that the T&GWU leadership wanted a catastrophe to bail out their bankrupt perspectives, and to give them a way out of the impossible corner that "principled" opposition to MDW had put them in.

In November's Branch News Alan Thornett tried to confront reality ... and failed. He wrote:

"We have written in recent editions of Branch News about the international currency crisis and the effect this is having on the economic situation in Britain and therefore on the motor industry.

"Since the summer there has been an upturn in trade in the industry which appeared to contradict the situation we had described ..."
He ascribed this upturn to short term budgetary measures now exhausted and reaffirmed:

"The decision of Nixon on August 15th to devalue the dollar and end its connection with gold has thrown the whole world system into chaos, paralysed international trade and started a protectionist and trade war the like of which has not been seen since 1929."
(our emphasis)

He concluded:

"This is the real picture. No one should be deluded into a false sense of security, which has no basis in reality. The problem with the sort of sales stimulated by the July measures and based only on credit and not on an increase in real spending power is that they could exhaust the market and cause a sharper reverse in the situation than would otherwise have been the case."

The July measures were indeed based on an extension of credit, and the effect of these measures was certain to be temporary and to be followed by a deeper recession. But the upturn in car sales and in the economy as a whole stimulated by the July mini-budget lasted for about two years - up to the Autumn of 1973 - which was the crucial period for the establishment of the new payment system at Cowley. The SLL claimed when the boom did come to an end that they had been right all along. This is like the clock that stopped in 1938 - it is still right twice a day!

The effect of the non-fulfilment of the SLL's dire predictions was not to prepare the workers for the eventual end of the boom and the company's resulting sharp move on to the offensive, but instead to contribute to a false sense of security amongst the workers which the SLL desired to combat. Like the boy who cried: "Wolf" - they were left without support when the wolf really did come! We shall see very much the same errors made in the winter of 1973-4, with the WRP's response to the Tory three-day week.

In practice, throughout 1971 the SLL were forced to make an unhappy compromise with reality in spite of their "principled" opposition to MDW, in spite of their belief that the workers could be

persuaded to take up the fight for piecework again, and in spite of their 'catastrophist' economic analyses. They were forced to abandon the perspective of continued total opposition to MDW, and to negotiate an agreement.

In March 1971 the management introduced Industrial Engineers (work study experts) onto the Marina lines in order to carry out work studies. The management claimed that the workers' acceptance of their MDW ultimatum in January had involved the acceptance of the Industrial Engineers (IEs), whereas in fact their use was covered by no formal agreement. The members stopped work. The company agreed to withdraw the IEs on condition that the unions start negotiations on a procedure for their use. Faced with the reality that the membership was not prepared to take up the cudgels again in defence of piecework at this time, the SLL had to negotiate. But they did everything to prolong these negotiations waiting for the company's anticipated offensive to bring the membership round to rejection of MDW.

The crunch came in December 1971 when, impatient with the slow progress in negotiations, the management again introduced the IEs, without agreement, on to the shop floor. Although there were stoppages of work again, it was clear that the majority of workers had no stomach for a prolonged struggle. The SLL's bluff had been called. They were forced to sign a MDW deal, known as the Industrial Engineering agreement, and signed in January 1972 - almost exactly a year after the introduction of MDW.

Chapter Four

GROWING ISOLATION

"The power of the Shop Stewards Movement had become intimately bound up with the piece work system. A steward's strength depended on his direct control over the rate of each individual member - a strong steward had good rates, and a weak steward had bad rates in his section. In breaking this relationship, MDW undermines the basis of the stewards movement." (Victimization at Cowley, p 27)

The WRP quite correctly describe the way MDW is meant to work. The question then is: if a company does succeed in imposing MDW, how then do you fight this erosion of shop-floor strength? This is the most vital question that had to be answered in Cowley and the leadership never confronted it, far less answered it.

For a year after the introduction of MDW on to the shop-floor the 5/55 branch refused to recognise it and formally retained its position of "total opposition", whilst the same senior stewards who moved and supported such resolutions negotiated the MDW agreement.

The result was to reinforce to a much greater extent than previously the gap between the branch, as the policy making body, the senior stewards who were obliged to try and carry out its policies, and the mass of the membership: a gap which has only widened since.

In this year BL recruited thousands of 'green' labour to man the Marina lines for full scale production. These workers were drawn from all over surrounding counties and even further afield; many had no experience of work in large factories or of Trade Unionism; none knew the history and issues surrounding the introduction of the MDW system.

The 'green' labour was concentrated on the assembly lines, where they soon outnumbered the old hands, which had an obvious impact on the level of organisation and traditions of militancy. The new labour had no experience of the old piece work. Instead they walked in to £42 a week, relatively relaxed work efforts, and, for the first 18 months, almost continuous earnings. Most in no way appreciated the battles needed to get such conditions, nor the even harder battles ahead to hang on to them.

This situation clearly held grave dangers for the future. Before the battles recommenced against the full implementation of MDW, which could only be a matter of time, it was necessary to educate this new membership on MDW, and to integrate them into the unions.

the legacy of piece work

One result of the struggles in the car factories since the war under the piece work system during the 'boom' period of the 50's and early 60's was to deeply embed in the Shop Stewards Movement a minority approach to shop-floor action. While demand for products

remained high and unemployment was relatively low, workers were in a strong bargaining position. And initially high rates of profit gave the employers some room for manoeuvre and inclined them to buy off militancy.

Piecework was used to boost wage rates in an essentially sectional way. One militant section, faced with any change in its work would demand re-rating, and force up its rates. Everytime its work changed, it repeated the process giving rise to repeated wage rises- a process the employers rightly feared and called "wage drift". If they wanted to get new models or modifications into the showrooms they had little option but to concede.

Other lower paid sections would then demand parity. Yet other sections demanded a restoration of differentials. The increases of the highest paid sections worked their way throughout the whole of the workforce- a process the employers equally feared and called "leap-frogging".

The hallmark of these actions is that they are minority and sectional actions. Piecework was intimately associated with hundreds of short, small scale actions.

As long as these actions by militant sections produced results, they were tacitly supported by the mass of the workers, as is evidenced by the fact that they acquiesced in being sent home, time and time again by the management as a result of minority stoppages of work. So long as the mass of the workers was not prepared to scab on a 'blacked' job, minority action retained its effectiveness. MDW is specifically designed to transform this situation. All workers are on the same rates, registered annually. This immediately cuts out 'wage drift' and 'leap-frogging'.

the impact of MDW

Once MDW is in, victories have to be won in set-piece battles, for which the management often has time to prepare. These must involve the overwhelming majority of the workers if they are to be effective. At the same time the sharpening economic crisis forces the employers to take a much tougher line. It becomes that much harder to win, and therefore requires an even greater degree of unity and determination from the workforce.

It is clear, that to carry over the practice of minority and sectional actions into MDW conditions, is to fall directly into the trap that MDW sets for the militants.

The possibility of a rift between the militants and the mass of the workers is opened up. New methods of struggle become necessary to ensure the continued support of the mass of the workers for the militants, and to draw the masses into action.

It is necessary to formulate demands which cut across sections and unite the mass of the workers. The shop stewards must act as a collective unit, tirelessly explaining these demands to the whole workforce, and fighting for their acceptance. A firm leadership must have the courage to prevent relatively unimportant sectional disputes, which cannot be the basis for uniting the workforce. In the event of

mass actions breaking out, the mass of workers must be drawn into direct involvement through democratic decision making, elected strike committees, and such tactics as sit-ins and factory occupations.

This is not to say that there is no longer any place for minority action. It would be wrong to conclude that the only element required to ensure mass support for correct policies is to submit all questions directly to mass meetings. The minority of militants in a factory often understand what is at stake and are prepared to take the necessary action before the majority of their fellow workers. On occasion, a decisive minority action can serve as an example and draw in wider active support, when a formal vote before such a lead in action has been given would reject the necessary measures.

But this only holds in so far as the minority takes up demands which can clearly be seen by the majority to be in the interests of all. Decisive minority action is only justified as a means to mass participation in the struggle, and not as a substitute for it. And it is always a sign of weakness- an indication that the majority of workers have not been sufficiently prepared to see what is at stake and vote, from the start, for the necessary action.

The SLL completely failed to respond to the new situation under MDW with methods of leadership to ensure mass participation in the struggle. Instead, they developed a theory of "decisive leadership" their fetishism being minority action, ignored the need for workers' democracy, and led them in practice to back any section that proved it was prepared to fight, regardless of whether its demands provided the basis for uniting the workforce or not.

Chapter Five

THE THORNEYCROFT AFFAIR

In 1962, BL bought Thorneycrofts of Basingstoke, manufacturers of gear boxes, for £500,000. 10 years later BL sold the land to property speculators for £2,500,000 and the business to competitors for a further £2,500,000. The intention of the American purchasers was to close the factory down, in order to eliminate competition.

On the 15th of August, 1972, the workforce occupied the plant to fight the redundancies. They approached the BL Shop Stewards' Combine Committee for support, and it was decided to make collections for the strike fund throughout the combine, and to call on all BL factories to come out on a one day protest strike on the 28th of August.

The 5/55 Branch supported this decision of the Combine Committee, and it was decided to hold a combined mass meeting of the day and night shifts before the 28th to fight for support for the strike. Following considerable unrest on the night shift, who wanted their own meeting, rather than wait behind in the morning to join the day shift, the senior steward on nights (an SLL member) went ahead and conducted a meeting at 12:30 a.m. When the vote was taken it was overwhelmingly against joining the one day strike.

That same morning the leadership went ahead with the so-called 'combined' meeting of both shifts at 7:30a.m. The overwhelming majority of the night shift did not attend. They had already had a meeting and a vote. The leadership promptly declared the night shift meeting to be unconstitutional, and the vote to be invalid, as the decision had been to hold a joint day and night shift meeting, and the senior steward on nights had no authority to conduct a meeting! Whilst perhaps formally correct this decision was correctly interpreted by the membership as a bureaucratic manoeuvre to discount the feelings of the night shift. To compound the error, when the day shift vote was taken, and was narrowly against support for the strike, the platform declared it as carried. Had the night shift been present the vote would have been overwhelmingly against action.

Although the plant was effectively closed for the one-day strike, so it could be claimed the Combine Committee's decision had been carried out, the issue of solidarity with the Thorneycrofts workers on the key issue of redundancies had been completely submerged by mass resentment at the way the strike had been brought about. This prevented the Cowley workers from learning anything from the Thorneycrofts struggle and ruled out further support from the Assembly Plant for the continuing occupation in Basingstoke.

The SLL learnt nothing from this debacle. There has never been a hint of apology or explanation to the membership over the way the issue was handled. Indeed, the SLL subsequently claimed that their decisive leadership in the Thorneycrofts strike had been completely vindicated when they were able to close the plant for a one-day strike in support of the AUEW, fined by the NIRC over the Goad case, without a riot from the membership.

The events leading up to the Thorneycrofts strike gave rise to a deep cynicism about mass meetings and the conduct of union affairs, even among many hitherto loyal supporters on the union. The very word

"Thornycrofts" became a byword for manipulation and undemocratic practice. The SLL's neglect of even the most elementary aspects of workers democracy has enabled right wing demagogues to exploit demands for a more democratic conduct of union affairs for their own ends, whereas the struggle for trade union democracy should be one of the key planks on which a left-wing shop stewards leadership must challenge the trade union bureaucracy.

The issues raised by the Thornycrofts strike have never been far below the surface. And when this year Alan Thornett was responsible for the manipulation of a mass meeting, as we shall see later, the old passions were again inflamed. When the management victimized Thornett and when the T&GWU bureaucracy carved up the 5/55 Branch, a substantial section of the workers saw the company and the bureaucracy as allies in overcoming the manipulation of their union.

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Chapter Six

WHAT IS THE SLL'S STRATEGY?

In 1973, the assembly workers at BMC lost at least 6 weeks pay, through their own, and other peoples disputes. At the end of the day they had nothing to show for it. This loss of earnings, which many workers blamed the leadership for was another major factor in the membership's abandonment of Alan Thornett this year.

We must be clear that the company embarked on a course of provocation precisely in order to create this mood among the membership. Responsibility for the disputes rests squarely with BL. The assembly workers were especially selected for provocation.

Nevertheless, the leadership allowed itself to be manoeuvred into numerous fruitless disputes, because of its lack of any clear perspectives or strategy.

the IE agreement

We have already seen the leadership's failure to face up to the reality of MDW for a whole, vital year after its introduction. The same lack of strategic grasp is shown over the question of manning levels, and work study-Industrial Engineering. This is a key question under MDW, for once money is taken out of the bargaining arena at shop floor level, work effort becomes the central issue on the shop floor.

The combined weight of the 1971 'boom' in the car market and Alan Thornett's negotiating skills, (as chief negotiator) ensured that the agreement covering the use of Industrial Engineering, signed in January 1972, was a good one, in spite of the weakness of the shop floor.

For this reason, until the shop floor increased its strength considerably, and was in a position to impose better terms on the company, the agreement was definitely worth enforcing by the unions. A leadership with a clear strategic grasp and an understanding of the relationship of forces in the factory would have been at pains to explain this agreement to the membership, and to ensure the preparedness of the members to fight for its enforcement and retention. It was clear that as long as the agreement was enforced it would be possible to negate the work effort side of MDW, and prevent its full implementation.

This was illustrated in July, 1972. The IE's had now studied the shop floor in accordance with the agreement, and their results called for an overall reduction of labour of 25% and increase in work efforts of 33%. Simultaneously, the company needed to step up production to meet soaring demand.

Using a mutuality clause in the agreement and the company's desperation for cars the shop stewards were able to secure a pro rata increase in labour for the increase in output.

So far so good. In 1973, BL introduced a van and estate version of the Marina, and decided to move the IE's onto the shop floor to time work on these models in March, 1973. This was to be done in accordance with the conditions laid down in the agreement. But when the IE's moved onto the shop floor the leadership called on the members to take action against them, in breach of the agreement. The resulting action was doomed from the start and lost in a week.

This action coincided with the second annual wage review under MDW. It was important to establish with the membership the need to fight for annual reviews which kept pace with inflation, and to secure other improvements such as increased lay-off pay, less restrictive guarantees, and so on. Furthermore, Phase 2 had just been introduced and the first major struggles were developing against it (gasmen and hospital workers in particular). The March 5th special TUC Congress, under extreme pressure from the base, had just voted support for workers challenging Phase 2.

The opportunity was there for raising in Cowley the key political issues of a united fight against the Tory Pay Laws. Instead the 5/55 Branch took on a losing battle against the IE agreement and the annual review passed by more or less by default!

This futile gesture served to discredit the IE agreement in the eyes of the membership; an agreement which would have to be defended tooth and nail as soon as demand for Marinas lessened.

In late 1973, the car market slumped and the company needed production cuts. They immediately moved to break the IE agreement and secure an increase in work efforts. They challenged all the clauses in the agreement which provide the workers with any security against arbitrary imposition of work study findings and speed up.

It was at this point that it was necessary to call for the most resolute defence of the agreement. But the confusion resulting from the leadership's call first to break the agreement, then to defend it, meant that the workforce was far from prepared when the crunch came, and the resulting action was defeated in two weeks.

the plant attendants strike

In June, 1973, the leadership backed a strike by a small section of the workforce—the plant attendants—for a long-standing claim for re-grading. The company sat it out and the entire workforce lost another three weeks pay. The point at issue here is that to claim re-grading for any section was a MANOEUVRE to achieve higher rates of pay which would not benefit the rest of the workforce. Quite the reverse: they all suffered as a consequence. The leadership should have been concentrating on the task of building a mass movement in the plant with which to confront the company over the wage review to force up the rates for all sections of workers.

Re-grading is no answer to the problems MDW faces workers with. The SLL said that since the plant attendants were prepared to fight on the issue they deserved backing. But this was giving in to the old piecework sectionalism. (Indeed, under piecework re-grading disputes were part and parcel of the whole process of "leapfrogging!") A clear

sighted leadership would have held them back and integrated their claim into a set of demands which could pull the whole workforce behind them, and prepared for a plant-wide confrontation with the company.

the Gilbert sacking

In 1973, a worker named Gilbert was sacked on a trumped up disciplinary charge. A section of the supervision was trying to establish tighter discipline on the shop floor and higher management backed them up. The management's action was accompanied by a systematic slander campaign organised by the foremen against the victimized worker. A section of Gilbert's fellow workers took strike action in his defence, and despite failure to get broader support, the senior stewards had no alternative but to back the strikers and called on members of the 5/55 Branch to come out in support. It was an indication of the diminished authority of the leadership that only a handful of members answered the call. The management seized on this weakness and organised systematic scabbing on those who had taken action. Scores of workers, including shop stewards queued up to replace the strikers, despite the senior stewards' instructions to black the jobs, and near riots were stirred up by the foremen against the strikers. Trade unionism had never reached a lower ebb in the Assembly Plant.

The situation was partly recovered when the management flagrantly broke the agreement on lay-off arrangements, with the intention of further provoking the majority against the strikers. In fact this move back-fired and only succeeded in uniting the workers to demand payment due under the agreement. A mass meeting agreed to return to work on the understanding that the claim for payment would be ~~pushed~~ rushed through procedure. Eventually, the claim was side-tracked by the District official and never heard of again, but in the meantime, Gilbert was offered a job at another BL factory, bringing the strike to an end.

the Tyre Bay incident

October, and a dispute blew up in the Tyre Bay in which twelve workers, following a series of accidents, demanded free safety boots. The company refused, so the Tyre Bay came out, with the full backing from the senior stewards.

By now the assembly workers were getting very angry at loss of earnings and on the settlement of the dispute the night shift spontaneously refused to work and sat-in, demanding payment for the time they had lost (on the grounds that it was a safety issue and therefore the company was solely responsible for the dispute.)

Lay-off pay during disputes IS a factory-wide issue, and one of the key issues under MDW to fight on. At that time major actions were taking place on this very same issue at Vauxhall's, Ellesmere Port, and Ford's, Dagenham.

The senior stewards attempted to get the night shift back to work and when the day shift, with encouragement from the IMG, took action in support of the night shift, the SLL spent four hours sabotaging it. They then accused the IMG of action as management

agents and agent provocateurs.

At the same time the SLL floated the idea of an interim cost-of-living claim which clearly would have been a demand worth fighting on- a demand that cut across the entire workforce and answered a deeply felt need of the membership. However, following the constant loss of earnings it was clear it would take a major campaign to mobilize the mass of the membership on any issue, and so the SLL let it die without making any serious attempts to canvas it.

It is clear that the leadership totally failed to impart any kind of strategic conceptions to the shop floor, or to integrate the mass of the workers behind the militants on the key issues posed by MDW. Instead, they backed small sectional disputes on relatively minor issues, which could gain neither the active nor even the passive support of the majority. When important issues blew up, such as the Gilbert victimization, the backing was not there.

Chapter Seven

THE "OIL CRISIS"

Economic catastrophism has always been a feature of SLL/WRP politics. This catastrophism provided the grounds for thinking that BL would immediately mount an all-out offensive for the full implementation of MDW in 1971. The SLL pinned their hopes for a renewal of the struggle to return to piece work on this predicted company offensive. In Chapter Three we saw the consequences of this mistaken analysis for the membership. But the SLL proved unable to either face up to, or learn from, its mistakes.

WRP predictions

On December 20th, 1973, the 5/55 Branch issued the following leaflet to all its members in the BMC Assembly Plant, titled, "The crisis we face":

"We face the danger of catastrophe in this plant. The government has imposed a three day week by legal enforcement. This will create nationally within the first week 6 million unemployed and then double that figure. No one will buy cars under these conditions and the imposition in the budget of $\frac{1}{3}$ deposit and two years to run on HP must be the final nail in the coffin of car sales. Oil supplies to Britain are cut by 25% and will be cut by an additional 5% in January, 1974. Steel production is cut by 50% and huge cuts are being made in plastics and other oil derivatives. Anyone can see under these conditions a three day week can rapidly be transformed into mass redundancy or the complete closure of the plant.. Redundancy could only be seen as a step towards closure.. We would therefore recommend in such a situation that we remain in the plant and hold it under our control.. The policy of the company will be to do all in their power to stop us holding the plant. They may therefore close down while we are out of it on shut down" (i.e. over Christmas).

Every single fact is a gross exaggeration of the actual situation; the predictions consequently bear no relation to reality. The error is compounded in the 5/55 Branch News issued on January 2nd, 1974 (after the company hadn't shut up shop over Christmas):

"TUC general secretary Len Murray has said in an interview with the Daily Mirror that he suspects the three day week is simply a political move by the government to win a victory over the miners.

"We disagree with him completely. His argument is designed to disarm the working class by convincing them that the three day week is only a short term measure- that things would return to normal if the miners go back to weekend working. This is absolute nonsense. The Tories are forced to this position by a world-wide crisis (their emphasis) far bigger than the miners could ever have created. It is very true that the Tory government is blaming the miners in the press and on TV, but to blame the miners for the three day week is one thing; to impose the three day week in order to defeat them is another. The three day week starts from the oil crisis. Heath has cut back the economy to gear to reduced oil supply (using the electrical power supply

to do it). This action has triggered off the enormous economic crisis that existed before the oil crisis. All the processes of the economic crisis have now been accelerated. To argue that the Tories are going to bankrupt large sections of industry (with Europe, America and Japan in the same boat) in order to defeat a miner's overtime ban is a ludicrous suggestion."

"UNEMPLOYMENT ON A SCALE NEVER SEEN IN HISTORY WILL ARISE IMMEDIATELY OUT OF THIS SITUATION WHATEVER THE MINERS DO." (their emphasis)

The WRP had got it all wrong. As WRP members later acknowledged, the three day week was primarily an attempt to isolate the miners and it was ended with the settlement of the miners' strike. And the short-fall in oil supplies (though not the increase in oil price) could not be sustained for more than a few months, given the economic plight of the weaker Arab oil states. Barber's December budget and the massive jump in the price of oil did indeed signal the onset of a recession which would lead to bankruptcies and unemployment, but not "immediately" or "on a scale never seen in history".

But even these distortions of the situation pale alongside the view put forward by Alan Thornett and fellow WRP leader Kate Blakeney at a WRP rally in Oxford on December 6th, 1973. They concluded that a short term resolution of the oil crisis, and therefore of the three day week, was absolutely ruled out. They therefore repeated the predictions of 6 million unemployed immediately after Christmas rising rapidly to 12 million, and a TOTAL collapse of the car market as a consequence.

Massive bankruptcies up and down the country would follow, and the rally was informed that the next two pay packets in Cowley would be the last. But Thornett and Blakeney stated that the working class would not accept the destruction of their jobs peacefully. Factory occupations against redundancy and closure would occur up and down the country, leading, in a short space of time, to "de facto dual power in the factories". Thornett went so far as to say that in his opinion the question of power would be resolved in 1974- in other words, we were rapidly entering a revolutionary situation. Naturally, he saw the key to the situation facing the working class as being the building of the WRP!

In all WRP publications these fantastic predictions were accompanied by dire predictions of a Chile style coup in Britain.

With such perspectives no one could correctly lead a factory through the three day week and its aftermath.

BL attacks

After the announcement of the three day week BL went on the offensive in Cowley. The first move was to refuse to honour a long standing lay-off agreement for all non-line workers on the plant. Known as the Indirect workers' "four day retention agreement" it obliged the company to keep all non-line workers at BMC on full pay for four days after production ceased for any reason external to the plant.

If at any time during those four days production restarted, but then stopped the four days began all over again. In other words, throughout the period of the three day week, with three days production and two days of non-production, the indirect workers would have been

continuously retained on the plant at full pay indefinitely. This was undoubtedly one of the very best lay-off agreements in the car industry and a continual sore to the company for some time past. The company seized the opportunity of the three day week to break this agreement and told the Indirect workers to go on the dole for the two non-production days.

The obvious context in which to fight for the four day retention agreement was that of lay-off pay in general. Agitation on this issue would have found a ready response from many sections of Direct (assembly line) workers, leading to a common determination to force the company to honour the Indirects' agreement and to give improved guarantees against lay-offs all round.

The equally obvious way in which to develop this issue to ensure maximum fighting unity of the whole workforce was in a campaign building up to the annual wage review for all Direct and Indirect workers, due on February 1st.

But not for the WRP. For them the depth of the crisis ruled out the possibility of there being an annual review at all. By February we would be in "a completely new situation" leading mass factory occupations against redundancies and closures, and the annual review would be an irrelevance.

The WRP wrenched the fight for the four day retention agreement out of the only context which was meaningful and imposed on it their catastrophist perspectives with disastrous effect.

They imagined they would be tying in to, and to a certain extent leading in an exemplary fashion from Cowley, a national wave of factory occupations leading to a situation of "de facto dual power in the factories".

The Indirect workers were called upon to sit-in on the days the plant was closed during the three day week, and to demand payment. Later, the action was stepped up to include an overtime ban during the three days of working. The ground was being prepared for a complete factory occupation after Christmas using the Indirect workers sit-in as a spearhead for this action. But this was as far as they got.

January saw the collapse of their predictions and perspectives. Paralysed, the WRP was unable to see its way through the situation. They continued to preach doom to come but made no moves. The indecision at the level of the leadership rapidly communicated itself to the **members** who began to get jittery and lose their nerve. The company moved in with letters attacking "extremists using the Indirects for political ends".

The leadership did nothing to win the support or even to head off the hostility of the Direct workers, who, because their three day week involved a great deal of overtime, were losing a considerable proportion of their earnings as a result of the Indirect workers overtime ban.

The right-wing moved into the vacuum. With facilities provided by the company they held meetings in working hours at which demagogues like Reg Parsons, a former deputy senior steward and ex-member of the SLL attacked the political motives of the senior stewards, accused them of trying to provoke the closure of the plant and called for their resignation.

Finally, the senior stewards called another mass meeting of the Indirect workers and offered them four choices for action: not surprisingly, confused and bewildered, they called off their action and capitulated to the company. So ended the four day retention agreement - one of the best in the motor industry.

Then followed the annual review. The WRP had been so certain that it would not ever occur that they made no preparations whatsoever. When it did after all come around, it was a fiasco. No claim was ever canvassed amongst the membership. The negotiating committee was elected only days before negotiations were due to commence. The committee went to the company not to fight for a previously agreed set of demands but to ask the company what was the highest offer it was prepared to make. This offer - less than Phase Three and without a Threshold clause - was then taken straight back to a totally unprepared mass meeting of the membership. The senior stewards merely went through the motions of recommending rejection of the offer which was, not surprisingly, overwhelmingly accepted.

On the eve of the miners' strike and the defeat of the Tories, BMC accepted less than Phase Three. Even the Threshold clause in Phase Three was dismissed from the platform of the mass meeting as 'not worth having' by the AUEW, with no objections from the SLD.

Chapter Eight

BL STEPS UP THE ATTACK

The simultaneous jump in oil prices, the restrictions of HP credit in Barber's budget and the drop in worker's incomes during the three day week brought the two year boom in car sales to an abrupt end. The market contracted sharply by about 30%.

All those factors which had led BL to make concessions to the unions came to an end. And those factors which had been leading to the alienation of the leadership from the membership came to a head. The chickens came home to roost.

The company launched an all-out attack on agreements it had freely negotiated, and on trade union organisation in Cowley. It was no accident that they selected this plant as the spearhead of their attack throughout the combine: the WRP leadership had long been a thorn in their flesh, and they appreciated its alienation from the shop floor and vulnerability to attack.

First, as we have seen, exploiting the three day week, they wrote off the Indirect workers four day retention agreement.

Next, they imposed a reduction in real wages through a less than Phase Three wage rise in the annual review.

Then they moved in to repudiate all the key clauses in the IE agreement which protect the membership from arbitrary work study and speed-up. They used the falling demand, necessitating a cut in line speeds, as the pretext for this attack. It was the battle around this issue that lead directly to the victimization of Alan Thornett. In many ways it crystallizes in sharp form all the factors in the situation we have outlined so far. We therefore deal with it in some detail.

end of 'mutuality'

The company first announced impending line speed cuts on the Marina lines at the end of January- an obvious move to raise fears of redundancy just before the annual review as a further dampener on militancy.

Under the IE agreement they are required to discuss forthcoming line changes with the stewards first, and "any problems raised at this juncture will be examined and dealt with in consultation with the stewards". As problems raised by the stewards must be "dealt with" before proceeding, and as "final implementation of work allocations will take place only after mutual agreement has been reached with the stewards of the section concerned" the shop stewards potentially have a stranglehold on manning levels and line changes at this point.

The company has two get-outs to break deadlock: the first (constitutional) way is covered by the most bitterly fought out clause in the whole agreement. This allows foremen "in order that

operational change should not be delayed" to agree "a temporary arrangement under which the work allocations could be implemented. This may mean the company giving additional assistance...". And while the boom continued, every time the company wanted to increase production, the stewards refused to agree to the IE's proposed manning levels and the company was forced to agree "temporary arrangements" which consistently ran 25%-33% above their desired manning levels.

The second way to break the deadlock caused by the need to mutually agree manning levels was simply to break the agreement: on March 11th, 1974, the company issued new man assignment sheets to all the operators on one of the two Marina circuits and announced that the line speeds would drop in five days time and the operators would be expected to hold their new jobs!

No prior consultation with stewards; no problems "dealt with"; and no mutual agreement on either the final man assignments or "temporary arrangements"- an absolutely flagrant breach of the most essential clauses in the agreement. The company assured the operators that any problems they might have would be dealt with in the procedures laid down in the agreement!

Just to reinforce this new "interpretation" of the agreement, the company reallocated to other jobs all the labour that would be made surplus by the proposed changes. This in turn breached a further very important agreement- the Movement of Labour agreement. There would now be no labour available for providing "additional assistance" and "temporary arrangements" in any event.

On March 18th, Marina circuit 1 dropped from 35 to 25 cars an hour, with a planned increase to 27 an hour the following week, and the new 'final' speed of 30 an hour the week after, as operators familiarized themselves with their new jobs.

For this 14% drop in production the company had planned a 17% drop in labour, but at the same time where previously 6 out of 35 cars had been for export to North America, now 18 out of 30 were to be North American models- a 200% increase in this model which carries considerable extra work on safety modifications. In other words, the extent of the planned increase in work efforts was nearer 10-15% than 3%, and more than this for some.

Finally, the agreement states that no work studies will be carried out unless "all conditions are normal and the study will reflect normal operating conditions". The company announced that any operator complaining about his new work assignment would be immediately retimed at 25 cars per hour or 27, whereas the normal conditions would eventually be 30 cars an hour. This works out to the disadvantage of the workers once again.

trade unions paralysed

What was the response of the unions? As early as January 31st the T&GWU Branch Committee issued a leaflet warning of impending production cuts. But given the bankruptcy of their own perspectives the Branch Committee could arrive at no policies to prepare for the situation. They consoled themselves by empty repeating in veiled terms the call for factory occupations against redundancy and closure which they had issued before and after Christmas: "As a branch

committee we take a very serious view of the situation and we wish to remind all members that branch policy is total opposition to all redundancy and that every measure necessary to protect jobs will be taken in consultation with you, the members."

-No reference whatsoever to the front line of any defence against redundancy- the IE agreement which could prevent the proposed drastic manning cuts.

-No appreciation that the situation- partial cuts and redundancies- differed radically from the one they had envisaged- factory closure and wholesale redundancy. No concrete steps or proposals at all to prepare for the coming battles.

Later the senior stewards called a meeting of Marina circuit 1 stewards; the night shift stewards were not prepared to stay behind in the morning for the meeting and it was aborted. At the next branch meeting the senior stewards announced their intention of giving up with the assembly workers and of leaving them to be taught a lesson by the company! IMG members argued against this, resulting in a further stewards meeting and a leaflet to the membership calling on them to put pressure on their stewards. But still no policies or preparations appropriate to the situation.

When the new man assignment sheets were issued to operators, an attempt was made to get the shop stewards to collect them up and return them to supervision. The company reissued them and this fizzled out. A mass meeting was then planned and cancelled because the senior stewards could not agree on what to put to it.

A 5/55 Branch resolution was distributed to the membership on Friday, March 15th, with the line changes due on the following Monday. We quote in full to illustrate the total bankruptcy of the branch so far as concrete measures to oppose the company were concerned:

"BL have embarked on a policy of using the present crisis to systematically break all agreements which have been established by trade union action over recent years.

"The first major move in this was to destroy the four day retention agreement for day workers. Now they have detailed policies which break the agreement providing mutual agreement on effort. They do this in order to impose substantial speed up throughout the South Side and later the North Side.

"When informing the trade unions of this, John Symonds paraphrased Heath by saying 'our policy is firm and fair'.

"This was not a chance remark. The hard line of the company comes out of the policies of Heath. The powerful Labour vote in the General Election was a vote against all Tory policies right down the line. It was against redundancy, speed-up and wage cutting, against Phase 1,2, and 3, against the refusal to give the miners a decent wage, against soaring prices and attacks on unions.

"Therefore any attempt by the company to impose any on these policies in the factory must be equally rejected."

Yes, quite so; but HOW?

Finally, Alan Thornett, as the architect of the IE agreement, drew up a personal statement in which he outlined a policy to be adopted: essentially to hold the lines down to the 'familiarization' speed of 25 an hour until all outstanding problems were settled by the company, and only then to allow them to rise to the new 'final' speed of 30 an hour. This statement was circulated with the branch

resolution quoted above, the Friday before the cuts were implemented. Thornett's policy was a correct fall back position, given the failure to force management to negotiate before cutting the line speed.

The proposals were later endorsed by the Joint Shop Stewards and the 5/55 Branch, but only after the line cuts had already taken place, and nothing was done to put them into practice! The truth of the matter was that the 5/55 Branch was bankrupt politically, and so isolated from the membership, that it was frightened to make concrete preparations or issue calls to action to its members for fear of being overwhelmingly rejected.

But rapidly the situation was transformed by the membership. Small disputes developed arising out of the line changes, essentially around three issues: the company's flagrant breaches of the Movement of Labour agreement in reallocating jobs and workers; excessive new work levels; and difficult working conditions due to congestion arising out of lay-out changes.

These disputes snowballed in the course of a week into the biggest and most united strike on the assembly lines since the six week strike. The second circuit of Marina production, unaffected by the changes at that stage though due to suffer the same changes in a few weeks (an obvious move to split the two circuits) came out in solidarity with circuit 1; the night shift in solidarity with the Assembly workers. In this process, in contrast with the leadership the IMG factory bulletin and IMG members played a leading role. How did this come about?

IMG preparations

The IMG factory bulletin, the "ORGANISER", distributed regularly on the factory gates to around 1,000 out of the 6,000 workers on the Marina lines, waged a constant battle to alert the workforce to the threat of partial redundancies and speed-up, and to educate the membership on both the detailed clauses in the IE agreement it was necessary to defend, and the need to defend this agreement in particular to combat redundancy and speed-up. We consistently called for specific measures of defence appropriate to the situation.

"ORGANISER" No. 6, January 3rd, a general statement on "The crisis we face in Cowley" following the hysterical branch committee leaflets said:

"We cannot rule out that the drop in sales may force the company to cut their losses and close factories in Cowley. In that case, the policy that the T&GWU 5/55 Branch has proposed; to call a mass meeting and recommend the occupation of the factory would be the only way to defend our jobs. More likely, the company will keep some production in Cowley, but declare a large redundancy. This brings other problems: closure would unite the workforce - even the supervision and staff would be in the same boat. A selective redundancy tends to divide the workforce, and the company will use every trick to try to prevent united resistance."

We outlined general policies for dealing with the situation. The company's intention to implement line speed cuts by breaking the IE agreement became clear. Defence of this agreement would be central to defence of jobs and living standards. It was equally clear that we were in no position to defend it. "ORGANISER" No.12, February 21st, after attacking the plant leadership for lack of

adequate preparation for the defence of the four day retention agreement and for a decent annual review rise, said:

"We now face the coming programme cuts almost equally unprepared. The management's aim is to reduce the manning levels by more than the cut in production, which will prepare the way for redundancies when the company has assessed the likely size of the car market. The agreement on the use of the Industrial Engineers says that no proposals can be implemented before there is mutual agreement. We must insist that no more labour is removed than work from the track and that nobody leaves any shop or department until all the assignments are settled."

"ORGANISER" No. 14, March 6th, then made its central thrust explaining to the whole membership precisely those key clauses in the agreement the company was intending to break, and outlining specific steps to enforce them.

A week and a half later the changes in the Marina circuit had been forced through by the company as we have seen. "ORGANISER" No. 15 faced up to the ground that had been conceded and why, and then outlined in detail a series of measures to fight back in defence of the key clauses in the agreement, essentially the policies put forward by Alan Thornett.

The IMG quite clearly appreciated that we were entering the most crucial battle since the introduction of MDW, but with a demoralized and confused membership who neither fully understood the issues involved nor the agreements to be defended.

the dispute escalates

Small stoppages broke out at several points on circuit 1 by Thursday, March 21st. The circuit consists of four parallel tracks, and on the Thursday one or two workers on one of the tracks, in dispute over the Movement of Labour dispute, secured a track meeting to discuss their problem.

This meeting unanimously voted support for the workers in dispute and called a meeting for the whole of circuit 1 (where there were by now about three other small disputes). This meeting took place the following day, endorsed the Joint Shop Stewards and the 5/55 Branch policy, and called for a mass meeting of all assembly workers, both circuits, the following Monday.

The IMG recognised the potential in the situation and stepped up the production of the "ORGANISER" to twice daily - a new updated issue for every shift with reports on events of the previous shift, hammering home over and over again the key clauses to be defended and how to defend them.

Monday's mass meeting of both circuits voted unanimously to support the Joint Shop Stewards policy of holding down the line speeds to the familiarisation speed of 25 an hour, until all problems were resolved, and of allowing no work studies until normal operating conditions applied. The company, in line with its plans, stepped up the line speed to 27 an hour and sent IE's onto the tracks to time disputed jobs. The shift walked out and went home.

Tuesday's Day Shift Edition of the "ORGANISER" aimed at drawing more workers directly into struggle with the company on their own jobs, as opposed to acting out of solidarity with other workers. This would broaden the base of the action and increase its determination, and lessen the risk of isolation of the (as yet) small groups directly confronting the company. Tuesday's mass meeting once again voted unanimously for the same policies, and following the same company provocations as the day before, walked out but reassembled.

Frustrated at the deadlock that had been reached, several hundred workers decided to adjourn to the complex director's office and they marched off shouting "keep our agreements- we want work!" Within minutes the managing director conceded talks he had been refusing for some days, and the demonstration dispersed.

witch-hunt & union weakness

The company was very, very rattled. They'd imagined they were going to get an easy ride with their speed-up plans, but instead were faced with the prospect of a bitter dispute, with the workforce more united than at any time since the Marina lines were opened. The demonstration especially had clearly shaken them. The result was that the night shift was greeted with the following red-baiting letter:

"The present dispute in QT has been the subject of unauthorised leaflets issued recently on behalf of an extremist organisation.

"Such groups aim to wreck British industry. They will oppose any measures designed to promote harmony. That is why they have always wanted to tear up the Industrial Engineering agreement and get back to the Dutch Auction system of bargaining, with all the disruption it causes."

(Ironically, of course, we were the most resolute defenders of the IE agreement at this point!)

"The company does not intend to allow extremists to run the plant. We did not abandon the IE agreement last year. We will not abandon it now..."

Although the night shift was the weaker shift, "as it was acting solely out of solidarity, the membership was unimpressed by this letter. It was obvious to all that it was the company that was breaking the agreement and the demonstration on the day shift (reported in the "ORGANISER" Night Shift Edition) had made a big impact. But the WRP it seems was frightened out of its wits: Alan Thornett addressed the night shift meeting and engineered a return to work by giving a totally dishonest impression as regards the outcome of the talks held that day with the management (following the demonstration).

In his opening remarks Thornett said that the company had conceded two out of three points of grievance and it was up to the membership to decide whether this was a sufficient basis for a return to work; Thornett knew these remarks would secure a return to work; once they were made, whatever else he might say the result of the meeting was a foregone conclusion.

But Thornett was lying: all that the company had conceded was to delay the full implementation of its plans until the following Monday, and in the meantime to return the tracks to 25 an hour. But they refused to ~~accept~~ to ~~hand~~ the ~~responsibility~~ aspects of the IE agreement- the core of the agreement- and insisted both on going ahead with their plans the following Monday regardless of agreement and of using IE's in the meantime at less than normal speeds!

Thornett has never seen fit to explain this episode, in breach of even his own policy. With the shifts split he had almost certainly dealt a mortal blow at the dispute. At the very least the company was certain to harden out for the rest of that week, as the following Monday the night shift was due to go onto day shift and the company would wait to see if it continued to work when directly in the firing line.

shifts divided - company waits

Wednesday's day shift voted to return to work at 25 an hour to test the company's offer to settle problems, but reaffirmed that they would not accept the IE's at this speed. So the company immediately sent the IE's onto the lines, and when a stoppage occurred, gave five minutes notice of shut-out.

Once again a further mass meeting decided to demonstrate outside the director's office, but found all the gates to that section of the plant locked, with transport lorries waiting to go in and out. The demonstration, hundreds strong, marched around the plant chanting "IE's out- we want work!" and gained entrance through a tunnel to the canteen.

The doors of the offices were also locked, so the demonstration surrounded the front of the block chanting and banging on the walls, terrifying the life out of some of those inside. When the senior stewards arrived they were let in by a back door, but one of the demonstrators sneaked in and threw open the main doors. A section of the demonstration surged in, chanting louder than ever and the company immediately conceded talks at the highest level in Cowley. Even so, the senior stewards took some time to disperse the demonstrators.

The night shift worked once again, despite genuine efforts by the senior stewards, especially Bob Fryer, to get them to support the day shift- the first indications that they were beginning to take the dispute seriously and to give it some leadership: much too late of course. The company then engaged in the unheard of provocation of sending one solitary IE on to the lines at 3a.m. as a test. A stoppage occurred, and the circuit was sent home, but was not backed by the other circuit: the weakness was clear for all to see.

The new negotiations produced no movement; the day shift remained solid; the company continued its provocations, and the dispute dragged on for the rest of the week. Both sides were waiting to see how the night shift would respond when it changed to the day shift on Monday morning. The night shift "ORGANISER" for the rest of the week hammered home the issues, the agreement, how the company was breaking it and why, and the policies needed to fight back.

At Friday's day shift meeting Alan Thornett had made a further half-hearted attempt to end the dispute by saying to the meeting; 'I get the impression you want to go back to work', but he was howled down. If this shift continued to take action the next week when on nights but the night shift, then on days, worked, then clearly a dangerous situation would open up in the plant. The leadership must have seen this. In any event, Monday saw a sharp change in their attitude, with a firm lead being given for the first time.

leadership fights - too late

At the mass meeting the senior stewards fought for, and carried, the Joint Shop Stewards policy of not working at more than 25 cars an hour until all problems were resolved. But although this represented a reversal of this shift's attitude from the previous week, indicating what a little leadership, even at this late stage, could do, the vote was by no means unanimous as had been the case on the other shift. The company then stepped up the line speeds to 30 an hour, as they had told Thornett they would on the previous Tuesday, and the shift went home.

Negotiations continued with the company all day, involving the District Officials of the unions who backed the stand that had been taken. Thornett offered the company the use of the IE's at less than normal speeds if only they would hold down the line speeds until mutual agreement was reached on manning levels. A supervisory brief of April 2nd said: the company "could not agree however to concede that the line speed remained at 27 per hour until total mutual agreement was reached... The line speed must increase all on 30 an hour on Monday next." In other words, no movement at all on the crucial issue.

Thornett has explained this concession as a negotiating gambit, but the night shift was considerably annoyed. After all, the specific issue that had prompted all the walk-outs to date had been precisely the use of IE's at less than normal speeds! They reaffirmed policy by a substantial majority, and when the company started the lines up, now at 27 an hour, in an attempt to create divisions, they went home. But there can be no doubt that the irresolution of the unions was feeding the company's determination and sowing confusion amongst sections of the membership, just when it was necessary to consider stepping up the action to increase the pressure on the company.

Tuesday's day shift meeting was told that the National Officials were being brought in, and were persuaded of the need to take strike action to force the company to concede. With a strong lead from the platform, particularly Bob Fryer, they voted to strike until Thursday morning and meet the night shift to consider further action. But the mood was turning in the plant, the militants were beginning to lose their grip, and the right-wing was beginning to find its voice again. The night shift too voted to go out until Thursday, and the fight for the vote at Thursday's meeting was on.

The company moved in with another letter to all employees homes, the first time they had dared to make a direct intervention in a mass meeting called by the unions.

And at last the trade unions issued a full, clear, and detailed statement of the position to all the members, outlining the importance of the IE agreement, the clauses being broken by the company, and the need to defend these clauses.

the tide turns

But it was all too late. The militants had lost the initiative and the mood was swiftly changing. The membership was being gripped by the conviction that once again they had been conned and manipulated into action on a trivial issue. As hard as Bob Fryer fought to bring

home the seriousness of the issue, he still could not sway the centre ground. What was going wrong?

Firstly, the members were still being asked to go out until the National Officials had had time to meet the company, which was the same line that had been taken on Tuesday, and they clearly felt not enough had been done in the intervening two days, and suspected (probably correctly) that the National Officials would do no more in the next few days.

Secondly, the right-wing had not failed to notice that this issue was now posed as one essential to the future of the plant- another do or die issue- whereas the leadership had taken no clear position throughout the whole of the first week. If the issue was of such decisive importance how come this hadn't been pointed out from the first?

Thirdly, this suspicion that a manoeuvre was being executed just to keep them out was reinforced by all the previous occasions on which the leadership had cried 'wolf', the most recent being all the alarmist, and catastrophist statements over the Christmas period. The leadership, over a period of years, had destroyed the membership's real awareness of the crisis by extreme exaggeration. Today as the crisis is rapidly sharpening, and reaching some of the proportions ascribed to it months and years ago by the SLL/WRP, much of the membership is gripped by a dangerous complacency. The WRP had cried 'wolf' just once too often.

Fourthly, Thornett himself had already introduced a very deep element of confusion and irresolution into the body of the workers on two counts: by getting the night shift back to work in the first week of the dispute when nothing had been won (which itself reinforced the feeling that they were now being conned); and then by offering to bargain away the right to use IE's at any time, which had been the focal point of the dispute for many of the militants.

thornett manoeuvres: BL strikes

A motion was put to continue the strike until the following Tuesday 'to give the National Officials a chance' and was defeated. Obviously the members wished to call off the strike, and return to work. However, Thornett now began fighting for the continuation of the stoppage...by manipulation. Instead of accepting the vote for what it represented, he specifically put a resolution to the meeting to 'go back on the company's terms'. The voting was extremely close. He declared it lost, without a count.

Many members considered that the resolution had been carried. The right-wing set up a chant of 'we are the union', and the meeting began to break down with still no official policy. Thornett, after some confused dithering, executed another manoeuvre: claiming that the meeting was being attended by workers not entitled to vote, he engaged a prolonged card check.

A further vote was then taken to 'go out till Monday' (although the meeting had already rejected continuing the strike till Tuesday). Once again the voting was close, but Thornett hastily declared the motion as carried, again without a count. The meeting dispersed noisily.

Thornett had kept the dispute going for two more days, but at the cost of decisively losing the issue with the overwhelming mass of the membership. In the process he had completely isolated himself, and set himself up as a sitting target for the company. Without hesitation, they moved in for the kill.

Thornett's own department, Transport, was immediately shut out in breach of a longstanding verbal lay-off agreement that the company had always honoured. The department met, and voted to strike until the agreement was honoured. Thornett, sensing what what was coming, took no part in the meeting but the supervision, and the right-wing, had a story flying round Oxford in no time that Thornett had realized he would lose the vote at Monday's mass meeting of the assembly workers, and so he had engineered a fictitious dispute in his own department to keep the plant closed down regardless. Bob Fryer walked straight into the trap, because the very first thing he said to Monday's meeting was; "It's no good you voting to go back today, because in any case, you will be shut out by the Transport department." From then on he was howled down by the membership.

In the meantime the company got off a savage letter to all the assembly workers in time for Monday's meeting. Symonds wrote:

"I understand you will be meeting again on Monday at 10:30a.m.

"Please turn up and vote for an immediate resumption of work."

"When you report for work, tell your foreman you will give your assignment a fair effort, at a line speed of 30 per hour. To those who refuse, I must ask the question-Do you wish to remain in our employment? If you won't work, we must assume you wish to leave us and we will respond accordingly.

"The choice lies with you."

And the membership overwhelmingly chose- TO RETURN ON THE COMPANY'S TERMS. Nothing the leadership could say or do could stem the tide. The company provoked a dispute in Transport, immediately shut the members out again, and the company moved in on the full flood tide of the members' anger against Thornett, who they were convinced had engineered this dispute, and withdrew recognition from him as a shop steward.

Chapter Nine

THE CHICKENS ROOST

The charges laid against Thornett had no substance to them whatsoever. The union had no problem in dismissing every one of them. From within his own department—Transport—he received strong support. They voted to stay out until he was reinstated as their shop steward. Thornett received an overwhelming vote of support from a meeting of T&GWU shop stewards, but there was no possibility of getting any wider support for a fight to get the company to recognise Thornett as deputy senior steward, and that issue was shelved indefinitely.

As BL's case collapsed, every weapon was brought to bear on Thornett, and the unions, to break the back of the resistance in the Transport department to his victimization. In Oxford, 12,000 car workers were immediately laid off without pay, creating a huge reservoir of labour, potentially hostile to the trade unions' pursuing the issue. A systematic campaign of lies, and distortions as to the reasons for victimizing Thornett was initiated by BL.

But undoubtedly, the two main weapons in the company's attack were the national press, radio, and TV witch hunt of Alan Thornett, using Mrs. Miller's so called "wives army" as a focus; and the role played by the right-wing within the plant, and the full time trade union officials.

Mrs Miller's mob

Mrs. Miller in herself was of little importance. With a massive national and local press and radio coverage her first "sack Thornett and get our men back to work" demonstration attracted nearly 300 angry wives and children, but the very next day her support was down to 100, and from then on, despite front page coverage nationally for another week, and prime slots on the TV, she was unable to do more than hold a hard core of 20-30.

What she did do was to provide the press and TV with a focus for the massive witch hunt of Alan Thornett on a scale not seen for years. This witch hunt was designed to obscure all the real issues behind the victimization of Thornett— the company's plans for speed up and redundancy to meet the crisis— and to reinforce the hostility of the mass of the workers to him.

The facts never received a look-in, but every dirty little trick was brought to play, including attempting to use Thornett's wife and kids against him. The Daily Mail as ever excelled, managing to scoop the lot when it first broke the story of Thornett, "the Mole!" The photograph above the story (this is Alan Thornett) was NOT Alan Thornett, and no one at Cowley calls him the "Mole". But not to be deterred, the Express carried the story the next day, and thereafter it went into every national daily, and into Fleet Street legend.

The use Mrs. Miller was put to by the ruling class holds important lessons for the workers' movement. For although the press and TV failed in its attempts to build a mass anti-strike movement of workers wives behind Mrs. Miller, this is certainly not the last

we have seen or heard of such moves. Similar attempts have been made since the Miller incident, on a less dramatic scale, in other disputes but also failed.

The Daily Telegraph had this to say:

"Trade unionism as it is practised in this country denies to an ever growing extent one of the elementary needs of nearly all wives-regular housekeeping money."

Under the pressure of the sharpening economic crisis disputes will become increasingly prolonged and bitter. Tensions will rise, and every weakness in the workers' movement will come to the surface. If the movement fails to fully integrate women, both women workers and the non-working wives of workers, into the struggles of the working class then there will be a tendency for these women to become demoralized by the need for constant struggle, and alienated from the trade unions. This tendency the Daily Telegraph and the ruling class are attempting to exploit; it is the task of militants to see that they never get the opportunity.

women workers & TUs

Women trade unionists are in nine cases out of ten, treated patronisingly by their fellow male trade unionists. Often female sections of the workforce have a male shop steward and the branch, its officers, and its conduct all become the province of the men. In one typical example the canteen women at BMC Cowley were involved in a pay dispute. A number put in a rare appearance at a 5/55 Branch meeting. The chairman then put the item of business affecting them at the top of the agenda so that they could leave early and get on with the cooking!

If women trade unionists are to be fully integrated into the activities of the unions such male prejudices must be fought. Efforts need to be made to secure the election of women as shop stewards in female sections; to ensure that women are represented on branch committees and amongst the branch officers; and to make sure the branch deals with items of business of special interest to women (for example, equal pay) just as seriously as it deals with all other business.

But more than this is required, for women do have special problems. Many are expected to look after the kids and cook the dinner as soon as they get out of work. The unions need to discuss holding meetings at times which make it easier for women workers to attend, and the laying-on of creche facilities to look after the kids during branch meetings. Measures such as these will frequently run up against male hostility. For this reason it is necessary for women workers to organize within the trade unions to fight for demands which meet their needs. We are opposed to any tendency of women workers to respond to male chauvinism in the trade unions by walking out and forming their own female unions; but we are in favour of women workers, where necessary, holding discussions and forming their own committees to lead the fight on these issues within the trade unions.

families & strikes

Strikers develop a collective sense of purpose and strength through mass meetings and taking part in the organisation of the struggle. The more democratic the conduct of a strike, and the greater the number of workers drawn into its organisation, the stronger the strike will be.

Wives and families, on the other hand, have to suffer the same hardships, but in an isolated way, and often with no clear idea of what it is all about. They experience struggles as individuals at home, and not in a united body at the factory. So they are especially exposed to ruling class propaganda against the trade unions.

The danger in long and bitter disputes is that strikers' wives and families will lose heart first and put pressure on the husbands to go back to work. There will always be scabs like Mrs. Miller around, and the ruling class wants to use them to increase these tensions and weaken strikes.

This danger can only be overcome by taking conscious steps to get the families of workers actively involved in the factory struggles. Such things as the unions laying on meetings to explain the issues to the striker families, involving the families on picket lines, and demonstrations, encouraging them to carry the issues into working class estates and into shopping centres in search of wider support, and so on. These steps will ensure that not only do the Mrs. Miller's of the world have very little support now, but also that they will get none in the future, however much the class struggle heats up.

Mrs Miller & the WRP

The 5/55 Branch failed to respond to Mrs. Miller's activities at all. They chose to ignore her, hoping she would go away.

The IMG, on the other hand, assisted a section of the Oxford Womens' Liberation group in organising to combat Mrs. Miller and co. They approached women workers from Cowley, on the local Trades Council, and others, to draw in support to defend Thornett and the trade unions against victimization, and to counter-mobilize to Mrs. Miller

As a result, when Mrs. Miller held a meeting in Oxford Town Hall on April 30th she was outnumbered by women workers mobilized for the occasion by the "Women in defence of the union" group. The meeting was effectively taken over and, in the end Mrs. Miller was forced to abandon it. From this point on she was no longer of any use to the press and TV, and they dropped her like a hot brick.

The WRP were nowhere to be seen at this meeting. Instead, they characterized the "Women in defense of the union" group as a "bogus and reactionary campaign to answer the housewives' demonstration by counter marches by women workers". (Workers Press editorial May 13)

They falsely slandered this group claiming that women trade unionists from Cowley "were also disregarded by the women's liberation groups who saw the emergence of the housewives as an opportunity to plead 'the case of women in industrial disputes' and to attack the WRP." They then have the nerve to conclude in "Victimization at

Cowley": "In the end the so-called Cowley wives (Mrs. Miller and co) were silenced by women. But women trade unionists from the Cowley trim shop needed no prompting from the middle class ladies of womens' liberation" (p.85). This is just plainly false.

We can refute all these slanders quite simply by reprinting the leaflet handed out to Cowley workers by the "Women in defence of the union" for the April 30th meeting:

"To Members of the 5/55 Branch"

"This leaflet has been written by women- women workers at British Leyland, wives of workers, trade unionists, and women who are simply concerned about the recent antics of Carol Miller and her crowd.

"As we saw during the 1972 miners' strike, women can play a very important part in a trade union struggle- even when they are not themselves union members. It is not the involvement of women in a struggle which is wrong, but the way in which Mrs. Miller and her friends have taken it up- taking the side of the management against the union.

"We want to make it clear that her group does not represent Cowley women as a whole. We support the unions' fight to defend the basic rights of trade unions. This is a fight not over an individual, but to decide whether or not the union shall continue to elect its own representatives without the interference of management.

"Mrs. Miller has called a meeting of her supporters for 8 o'clock in the Town Hall tonight. We intend to be in that meeting to put our point of view and we ask as many of you as possible to stay behind and join us."

"Women In Defence of the Union"

The WRP resorts to slanders to disguise their own bankruptcy. For their 'solution' is to ignore the special problems women face both as trade unionists and especially as wives of workers. Their response is to call for trade union business as usual, leaving the wives of striking workers exposed to ruling class propaganda against the unions. This is why the WRP were not at Mrs. Miller's meeting on April 30th.

union sabotage

The attack from within the trade unions on Alan Thornett came from two (complementary) quarters. Within the plant the right-wing were the most avid creators and purveyors of lies and slanders, seeing an opportunity to undermine and break the back of the existing leadership; from outside the plant the Region 5 office of the T&GWU was swift to put the knife into any resistance to the victimization and settle old scores with Thornett whom they hated for his revolutionary politics.

Instead of recommending the dispute for official backing, they set up an enquiry, officially to investigate the charges against Thornett, but in fact to play for time and as a pretext to rake up every little bit of dirt they could find on the leadership of the T&GWU in the plant.

The actual resolution of the Region 5 Committee setting up the enquiry read as follows:

"That the National Organiser and the National Secretary of the Automotive Group seek early discussions with the company to

act upon a resolution from the Oxford District Committee that an enquiry be conducted into the allegations concerning Brother Thornett, and in the meantime, the status quo provisions of the procedural agreement with the company be observed to enable work to be resumed without delay, the enquiry to be conducted by the Region 5 Committee."

The company flatly refused to reinstate Thornett according to "the status quo provisions of the procedural agreement", so the enquiry team rewrote the resolution, to give them more scope for their scabbing activities! The enquiry now gave itself the following terms of reference:

"To enquire into all the circumstances (NOT 'allegations', note) arising from which BLMC withdrew shop stewards facilities from Brother A. Thornett, a shop steward at the BLMC Assembly Plant, Cowley."

The company was encouraged by the publicity surrounding Mrs. Miller's actions, and the sabotaging role of the Regional Office to step up its attacks. On April 24th, in the face of a continuing strike in Transport department they reopened the plant calling for scab labour to man up the Transport jobs.

With the aid of a handful of scabs from Transport and other departments, limited production was restarted, but never exceeded 50%. The move in any case was mainly intended to exacerbate tensions and isolate the striking Transport drivers. Without fresh supplies coming on the plant, which only Transport could bring, the company could do no more than use up existing stocks of materials.

The Transport department met again and reaffirmed its decision to strike until Thornett was reinstated as their steward. But there was a vocal minority for a return to work, including the scabs. They approached the company for a guarantee of protection against future disciplinary action from the union, which the company, in another strong attempt to break the strike, promptly gave: "Supervisory Brief" April 26, 1974.

"While the company cannot emphasize too strongly that it is in no way anti-union it also wishes to make it clear that it will not countenance any victimization against any employee who has worked during the last few days, or who wishes to work on Monday in order to keep the plant running and thousands of people in employment."

Transport retreats

Transport is a small department of 150. With pressure mounting from all sides the company was obviously moving to a position where it could victimize the whole department if there was no return to work. At this point official backing from the union would be essential, as the shop stewards on the plant no longer had the strength to guarantee the department against wholesale victimization. The Regional office chose this moment to delay a decision on official backing. First, they ordered a special meeting of the T&GWU's 6,000 members to vote on whether to support Thornett or not, and secondly they went ahead with the enquiry, despite the refusal of the company to accept status quo.

Reluctantly, Thornett recommended Transport to call off their action pending the outcome of the special branch meeting but with the explicit determination to take action again if official backing could be won.

a deal emerges

The special branch meeting failed to take place. The District Office of the T&GWU booked the Town Hall, which seats 1,200, but the company promised to make good any wages lost if the meeting ran on over-time and also sent the day shift home early with no loss of pay to make sure they went, and 2,000 members turned up! However, Moss Evans, number three in the T&GWU hierarchy, came to Oxford for the meeting and after the debacle was obliged to stay behind for a meeting of the Transport department alone.

Moss Evans was nailed by the drivers. He was forced to recognize it as a Transport issue alone, and was committed to make the strike official if the company continued to refuse to reinstate Thornett as Transport department steward. The company and the T&GWU bureaucracy were obliged to conduct negotiations at national level; the company finally offered to allow Thornett back in the Transport department as a shop steward after six months 'probation', an offer which was rejected by Moss Evans.

But the makings of a deal were clearly present. Neither the company nor the union bureaucracy wanted Thornett back as a deputy senior steward; neither cared too much about his Transport steward's credentials; and both wanted to avoid an official dispute which would in all probability be long and damaging, given the determination of the Transport department. The answer was for the unions to effectively castrate Thornett as a deputy senior steward through the Regional Committee enquiry, thus allowing the company to reinstate him in Transport department with impunity.

the deal is sealed

Moss Evans played for time so the enquiry could do its job. He put off a decision to back the strike until the next full meeting of the T&GWU Executive on June 3rd. Meanwhile the company gave full facilities to the enquiry to get on with its work, and all witnesses who wished to see the enquiry panel were given time off on full pay.

The Regional Committee moved with devastating speed. The report was complete within a week. Thornett was exonerated, but the enquiry concluded that the senior and deputy senior stewards should immediately seek re-election through a factory ballot in order "to restore confidence" Secondly, the Regional Committee decided to split the powerful T&GWU 5/55 Branch as it was out of touch with the members!

Time was short. The Regional Committee could not afford the luxury of dealing with these issues through the proper channels. Instead of allowing the senior stewards and 5/55 Branch the right of reply to the report, they issued it to the press and the membership not via the branch, but via the Oxford Mail. Bob Fryer, the senior steward was charged, in the report, with undemocratic practices at mass meetings. He was found guilty, and publicly condemned before he was even told he would be accused, far less given the chance to defend his actions.

The report was out Tuesday. Nominations for the ballot for the senior and deputy senior stewards opened that Thursday and closed the following Monday morning. The date: June 3rd- the opening day of the T&GWU National Executive Committee meeting. The item on the Cowley situation was deferred for a day or two. Tuesday morning the ballot forms were rushed out to the membership. Tuesday night the ballot closed. By 3a.m. Wednesday it was known that Thornett had lost his challenge for the senior stewards post, the company recognised him in Transport department, and the T&GWU National Executive Committee didn't even have to discuss the issue. Since then the carve up of the 5/55 Branch has continued with the same breath-taking speed.

senior stewards election

The senior stewards elections marked yet another stage in the degeneration of the SLL/WRP in Cowley. Alan Thornett, who prior to his victimization was a deputy senior steward, stood against Bob Fryer (the sitting senior) and Reg Parsons (candidate of the right-wing and the Regional Office). The previous elections had only taken place last December, and the line of the 5/55 Branch in its defence of Thornett was to stand by the results of those elections. By standing against Fryer, Thornett broke with the policy of the branch, but much more importantly he split the militants' vote and guaranteed that Parsons would win. Given the obvious importance of these elections for the future of the workforce, this must rank as the most irresponsible of all the acts of the SLL/WRP in Cowley.

In order to try to justify this move, the WRP engaged in a whispering campaign to the effect that Fryer was involved in a deal with Parsons, for which no evidence was ever produced.

Just before the ballot the WRP even tried to line up Mrs. Miller behind Thornett, hoping perhaps that a token of her support would neutralize the right-wing. In-behind-the-scenes negotiations, in return for a meeting with Thornett, Mrs. Miller was persuaded to write to the Oxford Mail on May 30th:

"I would like to know why the management of British Leyland will not accept the outcome of the enquiry against Alan Thornett for six months when he has been cleared by the enquiry. My reason for asking this is that the aim of our association is to see justice served."

This set the final ironic seal on the WRP's role in the Mrs. Miller episode. Rather than an open intervention against Mrs. Miller the WRP chose this back-stage manoeuvre which certainly won Thornett no support and merely helped to bolster Miller's pretensions to "fairness".

All this was in vain. According to the published figures Reg Parsons got 1,800 votes, Fryer got 1,200 and Thornett-400. Although there is little doubt that Parsons won, the figures are suspect since members of the Regional Committee counted the votes overnight in Birmingham and refused the candidates the chance to observe the count, in violation of the union rules. Moreover, it is clear that the Regional Office was determined to make sure they got the desired outcome, since while other candidates were told they could not stand for both offices, Parsons was allowed to stand for both senior and deputy senior steward.

Although the right-wing candidates did not make a clean sweep of the poll for deputy senior stewards, of the seven previous deputies, four left-wingers were replaced.

5/55 branch carved up

With the senior and deputy senior stewards elections tied up, the Regional Office turned its hand to carving up the 5/55 Branch. This branch consisted of approximately 5,000 assembly plant members, and 1,000 BL Service Division and Export Packing Factory (CKD) members. The decision was to split off these latter members. But here the Regional Committee had a problem. Under T&GWU rules branch officers are elected for up to two years, and the 5/55 Branch elections had only just taken place. So in any carve-up Thornett would remain chairman of the 5/55 Branch, and the WRP would continue to dominate the branch committee.

The solution adopted by the Regional Committee was to retain the minority Service and CKD members as the 5/55 Branch and to transfer the majority assembly plant members to the new branch (the 5/293), thus necessitating new branch elections. This then raised a further problem; it was precisely the apathetic and demoralized majority in the assembly plant that had enabled the Regional Office to secure the victory of the right-wing in the senior stewards ballots. But these were also the members who could least be expected to make the effort to transfer to a new branch.

The Regional Committee installed one of its own non-elected members, Harry Cook, full-time in an office provided by the company on the plant to supervise the transfer of members. The Regional Office issued a notice more or less instructing assembly plant members to join the new branch. Reg Parsons and Cook issued a leaflet to all assembly plant members entitled: "Loyalty to the Union". This stated that unless they joined the new branch they would be more or less completely disenfranchised from all decision-making processes.

Then the assembly plant shop stewards were told to collect up all their members' cards, take them to Cook, who would transfer them to the 5/293 branch and then they would return the cards. The company laid on full facilities. Members were transferred irrespective of whether they were paid up, contrary to T&GWU rules.

A few stewards, loyal to the 5/55 Branch, refused to take part in the round-up, and encouraged their members to stay in the 5/55 Branch. The company laid on paid mass meetings of these members which Parsons then addressed to dragoon them all in. Within three weeks the process was more or less complete with a claimed 4,500 members in the new branch and only pockets of resistance left.

So the Regional Committee came to the final nut to crack- the election of the 5/293 Branch chairman, secretary, and committee. They decided to elect the chairman and secretary by a further shop floor ballot.

Nominations were opened and closed without many members even knowing. The ballot took place with such little publicity that only 1,000 members got to vote and thousands didn't know it had taken place. Cy Blake, who had unsuccessfully nominated Reg Parsons as 5/55 Branch chairman in the last branch elections, was elected chairman. Jim Barsons, a faithful servant of the Regional bureaucrats was elected branch secretary.

The branch committee was to be elected at the first branch meeting of the new 5/293 branch. The T&GWU District secretary,

Dave Buckle (who has never had anything to do with the assembly plant) was appointed introductory chairman, and stewards brought in from the neighboring Body Plant to keep order.

The company laid on the branch meeting in the canteen in paid company time to guarantee all the right-wing turning up, and the foremen went round informing all the members. Even so, with a branch committee of 18 (the former 5/55 Branch size) many militants would have slipped in at the bottom of the poll, so the Regional Committee cut the new branch committee to eight.

Dave Buckle then announced to the Oxford Mail that if any attempt was made to open a post-mortem on recent events he would close the meeting. In the event, right-wing candidates only secured half of the places on the Branch Committee although they did get the highest votes. Thornett was not elected.

Chapter Ten

EFFECTS OF DEFEAT

The result of the defeat of the assembly workers' strike against the breach of the Industrial Engineering agreement was a 10% speed up for assembly workers, combined with the shedding of another 17% of the workers through the production cut from 35 to 30 cars an hour on each of the two Marina circuits. Immediately after the victimization of Thornett, the company cut Maxi production from 42 to 27 cars an hour and announced its intention to carry out IE studies on that line. At the same time production of the 1100/1300 was phased out. The combined labour loss was 1,200 workers, who were transferred to a temporary labour 'pool' at a lower rate of pay.

Up to now this labour has been absorbed by the manning up of a new model and above all, by the very high rate at which workers are leaving the factory, due mainly to the decline in car workers' wages compared with other jobs. This "natural wastage" has already reduced the workforce by 20% since Christmas, and is the sole reason why the company has been able to avoid redundancies.

As soon as the T&GWU bureaucrats had completed the carve-up of the 5/55 Branch, the company moved in with a letter to employees proposing a further 7% speed up all round, and a 10% cut in staff, combined with proposed cut in the relief breaks from 50 minutes to 40 minutes per 8 hour shift.

BL has refused to concede any Threshold payments (which have not even been claimed by the Cowley factories.) Now, as a result of pressure mainly from white collar unions, and in order to head off shop floor militancy building up for large wage claims in the coming year, BL has offered a paltry interim increase of £1.50 per week, across the board, not consolidated into the basic rate, in lieu of the Threshold, and on condition of agreement from union officials to prevent strikes before the expiry of current wage agreement.

The new senior steward, Reg Parsons has already shown an incapacity to prepare to meet the problems facing the Cowley workers. He was elected not so much on the basis of mass support which could give him strength, but more as a vote against the existing leadership. He leans for support on the open intervention of the T&GWU full-time officials and the good offices of the management, eager to demonstrate the 'industrial peace' resulting from the new regime.

Soon the honeymoon with BL must come to an end, for, much as the company wishes to raise Parsons' stock with the membership it can only delay its attacks on the workers for so long. The trade union bureaucracy in seeking the road of class collaboration and compromise, will call for the work force to accept further job loss and speed-up. They will only disagree with BL over how much is necessary. Parsons will be increasingly driven out into the open, in full view of the membership as a "company man". Even now he is driven to deny the existence of a

crisis for BL, or the need for speed-up and redundancy, in order to cover his total lack of policies or preparation for the battles ahead.

The only way to be able to defeat the company in the coming months will be to heal the gap between the militants and the mass of the workforce, and to build a mass movement on clear-cut policies that answer the needs of the workers. This means building a new leadership for the WRP is too discredited in the eyes of the mass of the membership ever to win its confidence again. Unless this new leadership is constructed, the militants will be driven into isolated and minority actions. The company will be able to engage, over a period of time, in a policy of provocation and victimisation, as at Fords in 1962. The result could be the destruction of effective trade union organisation on the plant, resulting in the full implementation of the aims of MDW.

This is why it is of such central importance that the militants learn the lesson of the recent defeats, and of the last four years, as they confront the task of rebuilding a fighting leadership.

WRP's analysis

The assessment by the WRP of the victimisation of Alan Thornett in 'Victimisation at Cowley', concludes that Thornett's fight against victimisation was "successful":

"Without a completely flexible and principled approach to the fight at Cowley based on a socialist understanding of the class struggle and its contradictory development, an ability to transformations and, above all, an understanding that the working class must take up the issues posed by the crisis, the struggle could not possibly have been won."(pl. -our emphasis)

'The Workers Press' stated on August 10th:

"The successful fight to resist the victimisation of British Leyland shop steward Alan Thornett marks a turning point in the history of the Trotskyist movements' work inside the trade unions (p3.-their emphasis)

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL FROM THE WRP'S BOOK THAT THORNETT LOST HIS DEPUTY SENIOR STEWARDS CARD, THAT HE LOST HIS CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE TRADE UNION BRANCH? THAT HE LOST HIS CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE JOINT SHOP STEWARDS' COMMITTEE, AND THAT HE LOST HIS DELEGACY TO THE LOCAL T&GWU DISTRICT AUTOMOTIVE GROUP.

The WRP have come to the conclusion that all that is needed in the present situation is to bide their time, wait for Parsons to discredit himself, and then they will be swept back into the leadership. This position has deep roots. In 1970/71, when the company was forcing in MDW there had been a common mood amongst the SLL that the company would only have to put the boot into the members and they would come running back to the leadership.

Certain SLL members (especially Reg Parsons who had played a leading part in the fight against MDW) carried this position to its logical conclusion. He called for the unions to leave the membership wide open to attack from the company, so that they would rapidly get taught the error of their ways. Parsons to this day sees the fact that the company didn't move in and hammer the membership as the prime reason for the gap which developed between the stewards and their members, and the central cause of the present day loss of confidence.

Other SLL members carried the same logic to less extreme conclusions. They rationalized the growing gap between the union leadership and its members as a result of the fact that the leadership protected the membership against the full implementation of MDW too well and gave rise to a false sense of security, and a failure to heed or follow the dire warnings of the leadership.

Throughout the first year of MDW the leadership waited for BL to drive the masses back into the fold with massive speed up. Now, much more correctly, they anticipate the membership are about to receive a hammering, from which Parsons will not be able to protect them. But incorrectly, they conclude that the membership will realise that the old leadership was right all along, and they will emerge once again in the leadership, stronger than ever before.

This self-deceiving analysis leads them to the conclusion that "the WRP emerged from the bitter, two-month struggle immeasurably stronger than before it." (Workers Press, August 10-our emphasis) In point of fact, several local leading members have left the organisation.

The WRP's policy for the future is: more of the same that has brought the union to its present dangerous position. In other words they have learnt nothing, and are engaged in blocking the militants from drawing the lessons of the last four years.

The right wing attendance at meetings of the new 5/293 Branch **has** fallen off, as everyone knew it would. The militants command a majority once again. "Victimization at Cowley" concludes:

"there is every indication that the policies of the 5/293 Branch will be just as progressive as those of the 5/55 Branch..

"it is now emerging as a powerful instrument for the working class'.

Thornett, addressing a local WRP rally recently, has reaffirmed that the matter of majority and minority votes is meaningless-only a conscious minority will determine things. The stage is set for a further orgy of posturing and manoeuvrings behind the backs of the mass of the membership, using the new 5/293 Branch as the launching pad for minority actions with no mass support.

The branch meeting, which all members are entitled to attend, has the constitutional right to make policy for the members. But in practice, because the union has been able to organise directly through the shop stewards' structure on the shop floor and has won the right for stewards to meet and report to their members in working hours, attendance at branch meetings is limited for most of the time to a very small minority of activists.

Branch meetings have to continue to serve as an extremely important forum for discussion of policy on factory issues and on many political issues of importance for the trade union movement that extend beyond the factory. But for the minority of activists to insist on their formal right to determine the policy of the union is to substitute manoeuvre for real leadership. It was anger at this practice as much as anything else which fueled the backlash from the shop floor against the WRP.

The correct way to proceed is to discuss and decide in the branch meetings the policies that the activists are to fight for among the mass of the membership, through the Shop Stewards' Movement, through report-backs and leaflets and through mass meetings. It is a delusion to think that the right-wing leadership of Parsons and the union bureaucrats can be defeated by out-arguing and out-voting Parsons and Co. in branch meetings. They will only be defeated when the majority of the workers in the factory are convinced by their experience and the intervention of the militants in the shop stewards committees and on the shop floor that Parsons' politics are useless and alternative policies and a leadership prepared to carry them out are required.

Chapter Eleven

TU OFFICIALS IN CRISIS

The role of the T&GWU Officials in the Thornett victimisation dispute, the senior stewards elections and the carve-up in the 5/55 branch must give every Trade Unionist grounds for concern. We see here a developing trend in the behaviour of the Trade Union bureaucracy

During the period since the war the strength of the Trade Union movement has grown immensely, as reflected for example in the growth of the shop stewards movement and the unionisation of white collar workers. Increasingly it becomes difficult for individual employers to carry out the necessary attacks on workers organisations that the present crisis dictates. The ruling class turns towards open use of the state to centralise attacks on the Trade Union movement: the Industrial Relations Act was conceived to deal with the shop-stewards movement; the Pay Laws were introduced to hold down wages; special police squads have been formed to deal with picket lines; the courts applied conspiracy laws to deal with the Shrewsbury building workers; and so on.

The ruling class makes every attempt to enlist the aid of the leaders of the workers' movement in these attacks. They aim to make the Trade Union bureaucracies police their own members. The present Trade Union leaders, whether they are open defenders of the capitalist system like Chappell of the EEPTU, or so-called "lefts" like Scanlon and Jones, are all reformists, who base their positions on extracting reforms and concessions from the ruling class. But in times of crisis there are no concessions on offer and the only alternative way of advancing the interests of the working class is to challenge the basic rules of capitalism. Since the reformists cannot contemplate that, they end up more or less openly on the side of the employers in getting their members to cooperate in the cutting of their living standards and the weakening of their organisations. This, at root, is why the TUC "acquiesced" in Phases 1, 2 & 3 of the Pay Laws. It is why they are now campaigning for a voluntary cut in living standards under Labour's Social Contract. At a local level it is why the T&GWU bureaucrats were ready to permit the victimisation of Alan Thornett.

At the Cowley Assembly Plant many workers have regarded the Regional bureaucrats as allies in getting rid of Thornett and the WRP. The Regional Office has been able to dress its manoeuvres up with talk of greater democracy. But rapidly many of those who backed Parsons and the bureaucrats against Fryer and Thornett are coming to realise that the result is the very opposite of greater democracy. The shop-stewards and membership are increasingly ignored, and Union affairs are run by dictates from the Regional Committee.

It is this realization which will provide the basis for creating a deeper awareness amongst large numbers of workers of the nature of the Trade Union bureaucracy in times of crisis- of its role as an employers friend rather than a defender of the interests of the working class. If built upon, the bitter experiences and lessons of the Thornett victimization will lay the foundations for mounting a stronger-than-ever before challenge to the rule of the bureaucracy.

bureaucracy losing grip

The working class entered the last major capitalist crisis- the slump of the 1930's- already defeated and demoralized after the TUC had sold out the General Strike in 1926. The result was that the bureaucracy led the working class into the slump like lambs to the slaughter, with results we all know only too well.

But this time, as we move into another major recession and threat of a slump, the working class has suffered no major defeats and the rank and file and its leadership, especially the Shop Stewards Movement, is as strong and as self-confident as it has ever been. The bureaucracy is unable to do as it pleases. The whole time it is wheeling and dealing with the employers and the government, it has to constantly glance over its shoulder for fear of being overtaken and elbowed aside by the masses it is supposed to represent.

Unless the ruling class can inflict a truly major defeat on the working class, as was done in 1926, the bureaucracy will be unable to do as it pleases. It will be constantly forced to half-fight for the interests of the members, whilst secretly preparing the grounds for future defeats. On the backs of these defeats it will aim to re-establish its authority. It was in this manner that the TUC was unable to accept Phase 2 of the Pay Laws until it had ensured the defeat of the gas and hospital workers in their fight against the Pay Laws by failing to implement the decision of the special TUC congress of March 5th 1973 - a decision to fight the Pay Laws. In similar fashion the TUC had to conduct its discussions with Heath about Phase 3 of the Pay Laws in secret for some time, as pressure from the rank and file had officially committed the TUC to opposition. It was only when the movements against Phase 3 had fizzled out that the TUC dared to come out in the open.

The Tories tried on several occasions to inflict the major defeats on the working class to bring it to heel, notably in their attacks on the miners in 1972 and 74. On each occasion, pressure from the base of the trade union forced the bureaucracy to fight and the Tories were defeated, culminating in their removal from office in the spring General Election.

It is this combativity and self confidence of the working class that provides the possibilities and opportunities for breaking the grip of the bureaucracy on the rank and file. It is this basic strength of the Trade Union Movement at a national level which provides the very best conditions for the workers at Cowley to recover from the setbacks fostered by the trade union officials and to move forward once again. It is the task of revolutionaries and militants to develop and fight for policies and forms of organization which will truly protect the interests of the workers, break the back of bureaucratic sabotage and lead the working class forward under a new revolutionary leadership.

Chapter Twelve

POLICIES for the FUTURE

The world car market has contracted by approximately 30% this year, and shows no signs or likelihood of reviving in the future. If anything, the winter will see a further contraction. As we saw in Chapter One, this strikes an immediate body blow at the profitability of all motor manufacturers, and in a capitalist world no one will continue to produce without the prospect of regular profits. Many of the shareholders have already written off BL- its shares, which once topped 90p each, now change hands at 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ p: this is just $\frac{1}{3}$ of the original issuing price!

The capitalists are driven by the logic of their own profit-motivated society to try and restore their profitability, even at one another's expense. They either succeed, or go under. Success, in a contracting market, depends upon seizing a larger share of the market. This in turn forces them into vicious competition with one another, until the weakest are forced to the wall, bankrupted, and eliminated from the market. Only the strongest of capitalist concerns survive a deep recession and slump, as the 1930's showed only too clearly.

Whether each individual company can compete and stay in business in such a market fundamentally rests upon each one's ability to cut its costs, and undercut its competitors. The biggest cost is always wages. In the final analysis cost-cutting reduces itself to declining wages for the workers, and speed up, leading to redundancies. The workers in every recession are presented in the starkest form with the twin evils of capitalism in crisis: declining living standards and unemployment, with speed up for those who remain in work.

The recession is hardly under way, and yet BL management is already constantly using the threat of bankruptcy to try and frighten its workers into accepting deteriorating living standards and working conditions. And if the workers do accept these, what then? For if BL is saved, it will only be at the expense of sharpening the crisis for some other motor manufacturer, for the present market is too small for all existing manufacturers to turn in regular profits.

So whichever firm is forced to the wall is then driven to try and save itself at its workers expense. It too will turn to its workforce and threaten bankruptcy in order to achieve speed up and declining wages.

So the logic of capitalist competition in times of crisis develops. Individual capitalists may go bust, but it is always the workers who suffer. The employers use the (very real) threat of bankruptcy to force their workers into competition- the competition of speed up and wage reductions. It is only forty years since workers desperate for work que~~d~~ at the gates of Morris Motors offering to work for less than those already employed. There are many employers who would be happy to see the same again. And at the end of the road, the market is still too small for all existing production, geared up to the boom conditions of the 1950's and 60's, and someone must go bust: no amount of declining living standards and speed up saves a single job!

Once the workers accept the logic of production for profit they can never win. Workers at BL plants are driven to compete with workers at Ford's and Chrysler's and only succeed in driving down each others living standards and working conditions, without guaranteeing the security of a single job.

The deepening crisis demands a break with all previous thinking and policies; it demands the first essential steps towards a planned, socialist organisation of vehicle production and of the economy, not for the private enrichment of the few, but for the needs of the community as a whole. The crisis demands the nationalisation of the car industry, without compensation to the shareholders who have already milked it of countless millions, and the running of this industry in such a manner as to guarantee the jobs and living standards of those employed in it- in other words, in the interests of the working class and not of the bosses.

for socialist nationalisation!

Only a minority of workers at present see the nationalization of their industry as a solution to the crisis. In Britain, the idea of nationalization is above all associated with the fate of the industries nationalized by the Labour government after the war- the mines, the railways and so on- industries which have made regular losses and experienced a decline in relative wages and conditions. But the sort of nationalization carried out by the 1945 Labour government is quite a different kettle of fish from the socialist programme we are proposing. Labour's 1945 programme was meant as a reform of capitalism. They took over industries which provided supplies and services essential to the running of the capitalist system, but which the capitalist owners found they were no longer able to run at a profit. The Labour government not only took over these loss makers, but also rewarded the previous owners with generous compensation, paid for by the working class in taxes, which in some cases is still being paid today. They then ran these industries at a loss in order to provide a hidden subsidy to the rest of industry- the private sector- and boost profits, once again at the expense of the working class, especially the workers of these industries.

This is why the nationalizations carried out after the war were accepted or even welcomed by the capitalist class. But now even the timid and very limited programme for extending public ownership proposed by the Labour Party provokes a massive propaganda assault from the spokesmen of capital: from the Tory and Liberal Party, from the entire capitalist press, and from special propaganda organizations financed by big industrialists such as 'Aims of Industry' and the 'Economic League'. Why this change?

The ruling class is not frightened by Labour's proposals in themselves, which hardly touch the major areas of profitable industry, and promise generous compensation to shareholders. But whereas before, all nationalizations took place in an expanding economy, now we are entering a period of contraction. Bankruptcies and unemployment flow from the recession. The ruling class fears that more and more workers in this situation of crisis will be stimulated by Labour's timid moves and will come to realise the need for a full programme of nationalization, without compensation, and in spite of Labour's refusal to challenge the rule of private profit. This would threaten the very foundations of capitalist wealth, and all the

powers and privileges of the ruling class. The ruling class anti-nationalization propaganda must be countered. There must be a systematic campaign at every level of the workers' movement, including white collar, technical and manual unions, to explain why nationalization of industry is necessary as the only long term solution to the coming recession in the interests of the working class, and how a socialist programme of nationalization differs from the reforms of capitalism carried out by the post-war Labour government.

BL frequently claims that to meet workers' demands for the maintenance and improvement of wages and conditions would lead to bankruptcy, redundancy and factory closure. This is the clearest case for demanding that the company open its books to inspection by workers' representatives, not to see if the company can afford to pay, but to expose the company's plans for the future of its workforce and provide the workers' organisations with the basis for drawing up their own plans for re-organising a nationalized industry in the interests of the working class.

While conducting a campaign for nationalization as a necessary step towards a long term solution of the crisis facing workers in the car industry, policies need to be developed to deal with the immediate attacks which BL will continue to make on the working conditions, job security and living standards of its workers.

By the end of the year BL will have destroyed 2,000 jobs, 20% of the jobs in BMC Cowley, through "natural wastage". To some this may seem unimportant at present, and even a blessing in disguise as it has saved the workforce from major enforced redundancies. But unemployment is already climbing rapidly. BL is not the only company drastically cutting its labour force.

The loss of these 2,000 jobs spells misery for many working class families in and around Oxford in the months to come. As unemployment begins to rise sharply, every job lost will increase the numbers on the dole, and strike a blow at the strength of the workers' movement as a whole. Job loss, whether through "natural wastage", voluntary redundancy or enforced redundancy, must be fought.

The main instrument for resisting speed up at BMC Cowley remains the Industrial Engineering agreement mutuality clauses, despite the defeat of the QT strike in March. The company has recently extended this agreement, with minor amendments, to cover not only the Direct (assembly line) workers, but also the Indirect workers (off line). It is clearly their intention to seek major reductions in manning levels in these areas- up to 35% according to a secret document drawn up by the BL Corporate Industrial Engineering Department.

The fight is once again on to bring home to the shop stewards and the mass of the membership the importance of holding the company to this agreement. Parsons and co. must be forced into a firm commitment to defend this agreement, or be exposed in the eyes of the mass of the members. A further feature of the company's drive for greater "efficiency" will almost certainly be an attack on the Movement of Labour agreement.

Increasing the mobility of labour is just the thin end of the wedge for greater attacks on the organised strength of the workforce. For with mobility the company can move militants and militant shop stewards from one section to another, break them from their 'base' and

set them up for victimization. This was exactly how Ford's completed its attack on the union at Dagenham in 1962. All attempts at increasing mobility of Labour must be resisted both as a defence of jobs, and as a defence of shop floor strength and organization.

The winter is likely to see a further drop in demand leading to further production cuts, and it is by no means certain that the new model at Cowley, the ADO71, will sell well as it has a big engine at a time when the market is shifting into smaller cars. Either situation poses a very real risk of further destruction of jobs in the future through direct redundancy.

There can only be one long term answer to redundancy. That is to insist on WORK SHARING WITH NO LOSS OF PAY! For example, if the working week was cut to 35 hours, hundreds of thousands of jobs would immediately be created. But this demand must be coupled to no loss of pay: the working class must not be made to pay for the employer's crisis.

There is, quite possibly, only a few months in which to prepare the workforce for redundancies. The demand of work sharing with no loss of pay would not be fought for at the present time by large numbers of workers. It is necessary to tirelessly explain the importance of this demand over the coming months, and to fight for its acceptance by the branch, the shop stewards, and the mass of the membership.

the fight against inflation

The basic wage of production workers at Cowley in February 1971, after MDW was forced in, was £42 a week. It is now £49.40p - an increase of 17%. In the same period the official retail price index has risen by 40%. The next wage review is not due until February 1975 by which time prices will have risen by a further 10%, bringing the total rise since February 1971 to 50%. This is a measure of the extent of the attack on real wages achieved by MDW combined with the Tory Pay Laws.

The most immediate task facing the new shop stewards leadership is obviously to fight for a combine-wide action to secure a full, back-dated threshold deal. This will not give anything like full protection against inflation, but will be an important first step towards holding the real value of wages. SO FAR PARSONS AND CO. HAVE NOT EVEN CLAIMED THE THRESHOLD!

Even a full threshold deal fails to keep pace with inflation, let alone make up for all the ground lost since 1971. The official cost of living index on which it is based is biased against working class families, who spend more than average on food and rent both of which are rising in price faster than most other items. The 40p per week increases in wages for every 1% rise in this official cost of living index are not enough to restore the full value of wages - 60p would be nearer the mark. Finally, the wage increases under the terms of a threshold deal cease at the end of October - beyond then there is no protection against inflation whatsoever!

Beyond an immediate fight for the full, back-dated threshold, it is necessary to begin preparations for the next annual review - due in February 1975 - now. A claim of at least 30% is required just to restore the real value of wages to the level of four years ago. Such

a claim needs full and careful preparation - four months is none too long. Any claim needs to take account of the fact that inflation in the coming year is most unlikely to subside, and may well increase - the principle of threshold rises will have to be retained and extended to remove any cut-off (as will happen this October); to give automatic rises for every rise in the cost of living, and not only after the first 7% as with the present system; and to give full compensation for these rises based on a cost of living index which accurately reflects working class living costs. In other words, any settlement with BL in the next annual review must embody the principle of the sliding scale of wages - FULL AND AUTOMATIC COMPENSATION FOR ALL INCREASES IN THE COST OF LIVING.

for a fighting organisation

Just as important as the content of the claim which will be formulated in the coming months is the way the fight for the claim is prepared. Faced by the drastic decline in standards of living suffered over the last few years, many Cowley workers are coming to see that a fight over this year's claim is essential. ON THIS ISSUE THE PRESENT BREACH BETWEEN THE MILITANTS AND THE MASS OF THE UNION MEMBERSHIP CAN BE HEALED. But this will not be done by electing a negotiating committee at the last minute, or by formulating a claim without consulting the membership, or by manouvering in the branch behind the backs of the members. For this unity to be achieved - and victory will be absolutely impossible without it - it is vital that the membership is fully informed and involved at all stages: in electing a negotiating committee; in formulating the claim; during the process of negotiations; in electing a strike committee; and in organising to win the claim.

In this way the negotiators can be confident that they have the backing of the membership, and the membership can be sure that their representatives are acting in their interests. Parsons and the bureaucracy will attempt to prevent the building of a fighting movement in the plant for it will spell the end of their bureaucratic domination, but the very process of building such a movement is in itself the best way to ensure victory over the company and defeat for the obstruction and sabotage of the union officials.

These, the most uncompromising policies of class confrontation, are what the IMG counterposes to the reformism and class collaboration of Parsons and the Trade Union leaderships, and to the manouuvres of the old leadership. The workforce in reality has no choice: as we have shown, BL is forced to fight for speed up and redundancy and even if successful would still be uncertain of survival. All who shy away from squarely facing these facts are consciously or unconsciously aiding the company in preparing to hammer the workforce.

There are enormous difficulties in winning acceptance for these policies from the mass of the workers at the present time. This is a measure of the difficulties facing militants in the plant at the present time. There is certainly no guarantee of success, in which case we may now be witnessing one of the most serious Trade Union defeats in post-war Britain.

But the very crisis which drives BL to mount ever sharper attacks on its workers opens up new possibilities for developing workers' understanding of the crisis every day. It is in their ability to learn

the mistakes of the past, and to seize the opportunities of the future, that the maturity of the militants and revolutionaries in Cowley will be tested, and on which, quite possibly, the future of the plant hangs. The IMG submits this pamphlet as a contribution to the essential debate that must take place. We shall be discussing the analysis and ideas in this pamphlet at our regular "ORGANISER" meetings: we urge all interested to contact us immediately.

COWLEY INTERNATIONAL MARXIST GROUP, 59, SOUTHFIELD ROAD, OXFORD.

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Appendix

WRP SLANDERS IMG

"It is vital that the working class should know the truth... Vital, because packed within less than four weeks of bitter confrontation at Cowley was the essence of the future struggles that face the British working class." (Victimization at Cowley p16.)

We have already seen how the WRP's account of recent events depicts defeats and setbacks as successes and victories.

The pamphlet, 'Victimization at Cowley' contains many examples of political dishonesty. For example, page 39 tells us:

"Stewards like Thornett, Fryer, the T&GWU convener and Hobbs, the AUEW convener (represent) an experienced and principled leadership."

No one would imagine from this that the WRP had for years attacked Hobbs as an unprincipled opportunist. Nor that when Thornett stood against Fryer in the senior steward's ballot, the WRP accused Fryer of doing deals with the right-wing- an episode that receives no explanation in their pamphlet.

But the bigger lies are reserved for the IMG. Page 81 thunders: "Before the victimization the IMG acted as provocateurs and facilitated the company's attacks on the trade unions. During the ~~witchhunt~~ they capitulated to the most backward elements in the working class. After the re-instatement of Thornett they joined up with the right-wing."

"The IMG as provocateurs:" "In October last year... they were responsible for an incident in the South Side assembly plant at Cowley that almost resulted in a serious victimization... they issued a leaflet which called on the workers to demand a mass meeting at 7:30a.m. The situation degenerated rapidly into chaos and confusion..."

In October, 1973, the senior stewards backed a strike by 12 Tyre Bay workers in support of a demand for free safety boots. Their stoppage of work was used by the management to shut out all the production workers. The majority of workers were hostile to the strikers, regarding the dispute as trivial. But consistent work over several days by IMG members and other stewards began to focus workers' anger on the company, raising the demand for lay-off pay since the dispute concerned a safety issue for which the management was responsible.

On each day of the dispute spontaneous meetings took place, starting with a handful of militants and then drawing about 200 workers, eager to take action to support the demand for payment. IMG members urged them not to take premature, isolated action. We then informed Alan Thornett that the membership was certain to demand a mass meeting soon, which might easily turn against the strikers and the senior stewards. But if the senior stewards took the initiative on the demand for lay-off pay, a meeting could be turned against the company and strengthen the strikers hand. The reply- "the members will just have to get used to losing money".

When, using a dressed-up formula the company conceded the Tyre Bay men's case, the night shift refused to start work. They walked out to a mass meeting, rejected the senior stewards recommendation to restart work and voted to sit-in, demanding payment for all time lost. Only at this point, after one shift had taken action, did the IMG issue a bulletin. It was clear a majority of the day shift would walk out to a meeting anyway, but to ensure unity, the IMG urged all workers to demand a meeting to back the night shift's stand. Several shop stewards marched their members out to a meeting at the start of the shift, and the entire shop followed.

Since Thornett and Fryer were away on union affairs, a deputy senior steward, Tom White, was in charge. The meeting was informed that the senior stewards were involved with the Tyre Bay and could not attend. The meeting agreed to return to the tracks, but not to start work until a meeting had been arranged.

The company then offered to pay the workforce from the start of the shift if there was an immediate resumption of work, and to lay on a mass meeting in the afternoon. The senior stewards pressed this on the stewards, who all tried to persuade their members to accept it. The members refused.

The senior stewards finally agreed to address a meeting. They reported that at the highest levels the management had ruled out any payment for time lost during the Tyre Bay dispute, and threatened a lock-out of the entire factory if work was not resumed by 1p.m. The senior stewards intended to recommend a return to work while the claim was put in procedure, despite the fact that, as they pointed out, the decision not to pay had been taken at a level which bypassed procedure. Any suggestion of a return to work was shouted down, and the debate was whether to meet again in two or four days. Eventually, the platform put a recommendation to return to work and meet again in two days. This was carried, but many workers thought they were voting to strike for two days.

At this point, and not before, it would be true to say, "the situation degenerated rapidly into chaos and confusion". A large body of workers, disgusted with the conduct of the mass meeting, refused to start work. Without giving the stewards the chance to persuade them to carry out the meeting's decision, the management implemented the threatened lock-out. The plant was reopened after two days, following a letter to all workers' homes setting out harsh terms for the return to work.

Ever since this meeting the WRP has tried to unload blame for this fiasco onto the IMG. It has served as the basis for the charge that IMG members were "agents of the management". The IMG accepted a criticism by the 5/55 Branch Committee for calling for specific action at a specific place and time in the leaflet. This has not been repeated. But the leadership had only itself to blame for the "chaos and confusion" which enabled the company to carry out a lock-out. They failed to take up the demand for lay-off pay until forced to by the membership and completely mishandled the meeting which they were eventually obliged to address.

'Victimization at Cowley' three times accuses the IMG of putting out leaflets expressing 5/55 Branch policy. During the QT dispute against speed-up the "ORGANISER" certainly did argue consistently for the policies that had been proposed by Alan Thornett and endorsed by the 5/55 Branch. This is because they were correct policies. But the "Organiser" did considerably more to argue and win support for

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these policies than the shop stewards' leadership, who only issued leaflets explaining the situation in the last two mass meetings, after the dispute was headed for defeat.

The charges that the IMG "capitulated to the most backward elements in the working class" during the dispute, and that after the "reinstatement" of Thornett we "joined up with the right-wing are equally dishonest and absurd.

Page 80 claims:

"The IMG use the smoke screen of 'democracy' to disguise their own open agreement with the right-wing in the Cowley plant.

This is perhaps the most sordid aspect of their behavior."

What was the basis for this charge?— the fact that the IMG criticized the WRP for creating a situation in which the right-wing could use the issue of union democracy as a smoke screen for their scabbing.

The "ORGANISER" of June 17th is supposed to have put the seal on this "open agreement with the right wing". 'Victimization at Cowley' page 88:

"In a familiar 'Dear Reg' style the 'ORGANISER' addressed these words to the once hated Parsons:

'Yes Reg, we want to win some victories. Let's start now with the measures necessary to do this.

"The IMG were exactly where they belong, openly in the camp of the right-wing, seeking the favours of the most vicious, witch-hunting, backward and anti-trade union elements in the working class."

Strong stuff! Now, what DID the "ORGANISER" say? We quote in full:

"Reg Parsons made a longish speech to the T&GWU 5/55 Branch last Monday. There was one thing he said we absolutely agreed with: he is concerned with winning victories.

"Unfortunately, he didn't have a word to say about the current situation we are faced with in the plant. Nor did he outline a single policy to deal with the threat of redundancy and the company's breaking of agreements. All this year on one issue after another the "ORGANISER" has called for adequate preparations to be made to enable us to resist company attacks...

"Yes, Reg, we want to win some victories. Lets start now with the measures necessary to do this."—followed by seven firm

proposals for action.

The article is of course sarcastic with regard to Reg Parsons. The intention, given his recent victory in a ballot of the membership is to put demands on him in front of all the members. He will not rise to the problems confronting the plant, but that is a bitter lesson the membership has to learn. When he fails he must be effectively exposed in the eyes of the workers: it is the task of revolutionaries to see that the masses learn the correct lessons, and are not left without a policy to defend their living standards and working conditions.

In the words of the "ORGANISER", also quoted as evidence of our "open agreement with the right-wing":

"We will work with anyone prepared... to fight in defence of our jobs and agreements..." including Reg Parsons in so far as he is forced to make a stand—"But whenever we feel that the policies of the leadership weaken this fight we shall say so clearly and fight for alternatives."

In reality the IMG was to the forefront in the defence of Alan Thornett. Over and over again the "ORGANISER" stressed the importance of defending him against victimization; emphasising that his victimization, if successful, would pave the way for speed up, redundancy, and further victimizations.

The only time we gave Thornett no support whatsoever was when he ran against Bob Fryer in the senior stewards ballot: we voted Fryer and advised all others to do the same.

The less the evidence to back up a charge, the stronger and more virulent the charge is made. We deal with just one more example from 'Victimization at Cowley', out of many:

"...the 'ORGANISER' stated on July 1st:

'We have no policies, no unity, and a leadership manoeuvring for advantage instead of fighting the redundancies and speed up we all know are coming.'

"This abject pessimism is a direct result of the IMG's method. Like all middle-class groups they exist on surface impressions (impressionism), are dominated by the apparent strength of the bourgeoisie and the trade union bureaucracy and always fail to grasp the transformation of the class struggle caused by the development of the crisis itself."(p10.)

Again to put the record straight it is necessary to give the context for the WRP's selective quote:

"The New T&GWU Branch

"The old 5/55 Branch had around 6,000 members-1,000 from Service Division and CKD, and 5,000 from the assembly plant. So when the Regional Committee of the T&GWU decided to split the branch the obvious thing was to take out the 1,000 members from Service Division and CKD and put them in the new 5/293 branch. Instead the Regional Committee took out the 5,000 assembly plant members. Why?

"The Regional Committee has joined a massive witch hunt of the old leadership:

*Instead of defending Alan Thornett when he was victimized they used the excuse of an enquiry to attack the leadership;

*Bob Fryer was accused, tried, and publicly found guilty in their report without even being given a chance to defend himself;

*New elections were forced on the plant in which Reg Parsons was allowed to stand for both senior steward and deputy senior but others were only allowed to stand for one or the other post;

*The ballot was counted in secret with all the candidates barred- we don't say it was rigged, but we don't say it wasn't either.

"This still left the old leadership in a majority on the 5/55 Branch Committee. So the Regional Committee bamboozled the assembly plant members into a NEW branch so that there could be a NEW branch committee, chairman and so on! This is why the MAJORITY HAD TO GO IN THE NEW BRANCH.

Our organization is in complete disarray. We have no policies, no unity, and a leadership manoeuvring for advantage instead of fighting the redundancies and speed up we all know are coming. ~~The power of the~~ Regional Committee must be checked and policies worked out: the coming 5/293 Branch elections provide a chance to stem the tide. WE MUST SEIZE THE CHANCE AND ELECT FIGHTING BRANCH OFFICERS AND A FIGHTING BRANCH COMMITTEE."

In other words, this article is an attack on the lack of policies and manoeuvrings of Parsons and the Regional Committee, and a call for the election of a fighting branch committee and officers. The lead article in this issue of the "ORGANISER" propogandized for the nationalisation of BL without compensation and under workers control in the event of bankruptcy: a typically "pessimistic", "impressionistic" and right wing policy!



international marxist group

The IMG is one of the younger and smaller organisations of the revolutionary left, but we believe that the correctness of our ideas will prove to be a more important asset in the coming struggles than the greater numbers that some other organisations possess.

The IMG now has members in every major trade union, has played an active role in many strikes, and has been an important force in bringing such struggles as the trial of the Shrewsbury 24 to the attention of the trade union movement as a whole.

We are part of an international organisation - the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 - which is increasingly able to play a major part in workers struggles throughout Europe. We are in the forefront of activities in solidarity with the fight of the Vietnamese and Irish peoples against imperialism, and with the workers and peasants of Chile.

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