

# The Post Office Workers v The State



# **The Post Office Workers v The State**

**The Great 1971 post office Strike**

By John Weal

*"The Post Office and the main State industries are cardinal to the infrastructure of the country"*—Ryland, acting-Chairman of the Post Office Corporation.

*"We want to make the conflict short and sharp and inconvenience the public least"*—Tom Jackson, Secretary of the Union of Post Office Workers.

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## INTRODUCTION

The working class is unique amongst all the existing social classes in that it owns and controls nothing but its ability to sell its own labour power. A worker owns no vast tracts of land from which he can derive an income from his tenants or from the sale of foodstuffs. He or she is not even like a small peasant who owns a few acres of soil. He is not like a capitalist who can invest his capital and can, by employing workers, extract surplus value (profit) from them and thereby increase his own capital. Now, as before, he is provided with only enough education and wages to enable him to be what he is, a producer of wealth for others and a producer of children who in their turn become the wealth producers of the future.

What the British workers have been able to do over a long period is to create their own organisations for the defence of their own living standards and conditions—the trade unions—and a party to carry that defence into the parliamentary area, where it was imagined by many that the main decisions affecting their lives would be made—the Labour Party.

However, both these organisations started out with two great defects. Firstly they were defensive organisations, pledged to be sure to defend the interests of the workers but only within the existing framework of production, that is the system of private ownership of the means of production and the production of goods for the sake of the profit derived from their sale rather than for the benefit of the users. At no time did the unions or the Labour Party envisage fighting to transform the way production was carried out so that the factories and services were owned collectively and were run by the workers who spent their lives in them.

The second defect was that instead of the mass of workers, whose dues kept the unions and the party going, controlling these organisations, a layer of full-timers who developed interests which were not the same as those of the members, kept the control in their grasp. Moreover, this layer, or bureaucracy as it is called, was able to perpetuate itself.

So the mass of the working class found itself with very little control over its work conditions and not much more control over the organisations which it had itself created. Of course under capitalism the workers have no control over the mass media, the radio, television, and the newspapers. But even the Labour Party and the unions do not supply them with the information they need so desperately if they are *really* to defend their interests.

For the interests of the working class are irreconcilably opposed to the capitalist class and its state. The present crisis in British society has shown the complete bankruptcy of all those who say they strive for the interests of the working class by merely tinkering with the

existing state of affairs, trying, in fact, to make capitalism, the very expropriator of the wealth produced by the workers, run more efficiently.

At a time when the Tories are doing everything to stabilise nose-diving British capitalism by attacking the living standards of the working class, humiliating sections of it (the P.O. strike) and hamstringing such rank and file power on the shop floor as has been won by introducing their Industrial Relations Bill, at such a time, the working class needs three things which it will not find either in the TUC tops or in the Labour Party or its supposedly left wing.

First it needs facts. Not doctored, as say from the BBC, not facile or outright concoctions as in the mass dailies, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mirror* or *The Daily Express*, but the real facts and figures relevant to their struggle.

Secondly it needs answers. What do the Tories hope to achieve by their Bill? Why, if the TUC is against the Bill, did it not utilise the might of the organised working class to smash it? Why did the Labour government itself try to impose such a Bill in 1969 (*In Place of Strife*)? Why do these same Tories bring in the Immigration Bill?

Lastly, it needs an effective leadership. If the Labour Party puts up only a parliamentary fight against the Bill, if the trade unions cannot unite in action to defend a section of the working class in struggle and if neither of them will tell the workers the truth, then where will the workers turn?

This pamphlet will discuss the great Post Office strike, for from it many lessons can be learnt, of importance to all workers at this time. For the fact is, that only the left groups, mocked and derided by the bosses' press, try, with the small resources at their disposal, to tell the truth to the workers, to warn the working class against its leadership, to spell out plans for action, which both defend the workers' existing conditions and pose the way forward.

The International Marxist Group (IMG) is one of these groups. This pamphlet is one of a series (see back page). We also produce a fortnightly paper, *The Red Mole*, which provides thorough and regular articles on the class struggle both in Britain and in other parts of the world.

We hope that this pamphlet will supply workers with information on and an analysis of the Post Office Strike which they would not have got elsewhere. We hope that the ideas it puts forward, especially those concerning the way forward, will be taken up, discussed and elaborated by all those committed to the workers' struggle. Lastly, we hope that these ideas will not simply be kicked around and argued over but that militants in the working class will fight to put these ideas into action.

## The Post Office Corporation—Halfway House

Before October 1969, the Post Office was part of the civil service, with a government ministry in complete control. Her Majesty's Ministry for Posts and Telegraph ran the Post Office in an openly paternalist way and on semi-military lines. This did indeed attract many ex-army men into the service. Wage rises were negotiated once a year on an across the board basis which scarcely kept up with the rising cost of living and certainly did nothing to re-divide the cake even marginally in favour of the workers. Post Office workers were paid extremely low wages. This situation was regarded as fixed and not to be questioned. It was merely understood that they wouldn't fall much lower. In return, post office workers had the dubious benefit of qualifying for a pension at 60 and of getting themselves into one of the higher grades if they stayed on the job long enough.

While the Post Office was run by the Government, there was a consistent policy of undermanning in all sections. With only 85% staff a lot of overtime was necessary. But overtime is heavily taxed and the Post Office was a government department funded by the state. They therefore paid out more each week to individuals than they need have done if they'd have had 100% staffing but then a whole lump of it came right back through another door via taxation.

Meanwhile, the profit-makers were busy making plans. For a sizeable section of the Post Office was making a profit—the Telecommunications section! For capitalists it is all very fine and proper that the state should finance, out of taxation mainly from the vast mass of the working class, such industries as Coal, steel, electricity and railways. These industries are essential for the smooth running of secondary industries which do make a profit but they require far too much initial investment for private capital to finance them (in Britain anyway), and even then none of these sectors makes a profit. At least if they were to do so, they would have to charge such high prices that the other capitalists who use them very heavily would probably go out of business. The answer then is to 'nationalise' them and subsidise the prices. The postal side of the Post Office already subsidises large users by up to 20% and even sorts and franks their mail for them. (Incidentally, this subsidy is more than equal in money terms to the increased cost that would have been incurred if the 15% wage increase had been won). But here was a section of nationalised industry making a vast profit with even bigger possibilities for the future and none of this surplus going into the pockets of the scrounging class.<sup>1</sup>

Instead, under the guise of Wilson's "white heat of technological revolution", they made plans for the setting up of the *Post Office Corporation*. The Post Office was now supposed to run itself in the same way as any private corporation. Profitability was key. The way was open for the introduction of productivity deals, measured day work and the attendant redundancies, already becoming generalised in other sectors of industry. But the status of Corporation can only be a half-way house to the denationalisation of the profitable parts—the telecommunications and data processing sectors—while gracefully permitting the state, via taxation from us, to hump the load of the labour intensive and therefore unprofitable letter and parcel delivery services<sup>2</sup> (Fixed in the public's mind is the notion that the telecommunications side is rather small compared to the letter and parcels side. What is true is that there are well over twice as many workers in the postal side than there are on the telephones and telegraph. But when it comes to turn over, it's a different story. See the following figures:-

	67/68	68/69	69/70
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(Amounts in £millions).

Mail Services, <i>turnover</i>	£292.6*	£306*	£319.4*
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Telecommunications: <i>turnover.</i>	£485.1	£568.2	£652.2
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\* These increases are due almost entirely to increased charges for stamps rather than an increase in the number of letters and parcels handled.

In other words by 1970 the telephones and other related services were handling over twice as much work, in money terms, as the postal side. And of course, it was profitable work.)

It must be said here that all nationalised industries are to some degree or another in a limbo between two basic alternatives. If one nationalises an industry with the idea that it is a service and is not meant to make a profit then the logic is to produce things (or provide a service) not as commodities to be produced *only* if they are likely to yield a profit, but for their use value—because they are needed. And that sort of production, if generalised is completely incompatible with the capitalist mode of production. Along this road people would start asking questions as "who should decide what is to be produced and in how much quantity?". But there is another road which also has its own logic unless the workers put up a fight. Nationalise the key industries but not at the service and in the interests of the masses but in order to serve big capital. This road leads to the market place, to the rooting

out of unprofitable parts (such as branch lines on the railways with increased and more "realistic" fares into the bargain, or the closing of scores of mines) and ultimately to denationalisation. Of course the Labour Party leaders never nationalised with the intention of proceeding along the first road; their nationalisations were much more a holding operation for an impoverished bourgeoisie incapable of financing its own essential primary sector of industry. It was progressive more for its potential in the case of the working class developing the situation in its own interests than for anything else. And now the Tories are looking for openings to bring back to private ownership those parts of the nationalised industries which they consider rightfully belong to them— the parts where they can make a profit. Mr. Chataway, Minister of Posts and Telecommunications said at last year's Conservative Party Conference, "...the possibility of enabling private enterprise to play a larger part at the subscribers' end of the system is one that is very much in mind. When we look for opportunities to expand areas of competition we shall be looking particularly at aspects of the telecommunications service".

One of the first things that happened when the P.O. became a Corporation was that they tried to increase retirement age from 60— the Civil Service norm— to 65. This ruse has not been put into practice yet partly because of the intense hostility to it from the rank and file. They would save millions of pounds a year if this proposal was accepted as well as condemning hundreds of thousands of people to five years' toil late in life which would itself be sure to cut down their life expectancy— whoever says the system we live under isn't a violent one needs his head examined.

With the brand new Corporation in October 1969 came a brand new Chairman—Lord Hall. He played the part of the pig-in-the-middle. He made sure he worked very closely with the various unions in the P.O. but at the same time saw to it that the P.O. was 'modernised' which is a cosier word for putting people out of a job and making the ones who are still left work alot harder for only a little bit more. At the same time, administrators and supervisors increased in numbers by some 20% and in the Telecommunications (TC) sector the ratio of workers to each supervisor was 7:1. Also, by 1969 there were 51 plump directors commanding at least £6,600 a year each. Three years before there had been 31—31 too many, to be sure—but the increase was pretty staggering.<sup>3</sup> In passing it is a small but indicative coincidence that the combined annual incomes of those 51 directors from this source alone— and certainly they held other directorships—comes to £330,000 which was almost exactly the size of the publicised strike fund of the UPW with a membership of 200,000! Hall authorised a huge investment pro-



gramme for the TC service of £2,700 million to be spread over 5 years but made no move to see that the companies who would get these juicy contracts would be nationalised. However in two respects he was bound to displease the Tories when they came to power a) he was not in favour of denationalising the profitable parts of the P.O. even though as we have said the whole logic of the creation of the Corporation pointed in that direction and b) he was in favour of a 12% wage rise in order mainly to avoid a showdown with the workers (though how hard he would have fought is a matter for conjecture). We will meet Lord Hall briefly again when we look at the trade unions.

### The Trade Unions—Complacent and Weak

The biggest is the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) with a pre-strike membership just topping 200,000. If it had been the only union in the P.O. or if it had operated a closed shop then the strike might have been successful. Instead, there was the 110,000 strong Post Office Engineering Union headed by a Lord Delacourt-Smith. There had been a National Guild of Telephonists but this had been replaced by the National Telecommunications Staff Association which had around 2,500 members and which issued a call to its members *not* to come out on strike on Jan. 15th. This institution is so right wing it doesn't even call itself a union and its leadership works very closely with Conservative Central Office (see addendum A.). Its long term aim is to be recognised as the only 'union' on the telephones side, willing to stamp on the first signs of militancy from its members in that sector. There was also the Telecommunications Workers Union which was set up by the best militants in that field disgusted both by the TSA and by the way they had been handled by the UPW which had pushed through a productivity deal, a conversion of time to cash (meaning longer working hours), via a flagrant manipulation of voting procedures. Unfortunately this union was virtually taken over by extreme right-wingers including even a National Front shop-steward and went into liquidation when the strike started, its members being accepted back into the UPW. There are two other complicating factors: a) several other unions had a few hundred members each in various sectors of the P.O. such as the Telex side (ASTMS was one of these) and they didn't come out on strike; b) the telecommunications sector (T.S.) did not operate a closed shop so several thousand workers were in no union at all. This situation had arisen mainly because of the very high turnover of operators and this again was due to the miserable wages paid to young girls who were in on the basic rate of an appallingly low incremental wage scale.

The UPW is not a militant union. When it was founded in 1919 even the decision to establish a strike fund was passed by a minority vote, and in 1919 there was almost a pre-revolutionary situation in some parts of Britain! By 1921 even that decision was reversed, the militants, that is those who thought a union ought to protect the interests of its members— were soon hounded out and the UPW was to enter history as one of the biggest unions to scab on the General Strike.

In fact the union was downright respectable, and worst of all attracted people into its membership on that basis. The executive very quickly developed interests which were different from their members and fell into line with the Civil Service policy of not rocking the boat. As in many unions active unionists would be bought off by being offered full time positions and it was not uncommon for men on the UPW leadership to openly cross the class line into a directorship (Ron Smith took a £6,000 directorship in BOAC; Tom Jackson is even now on the Board of the BBC). Wage demands were never fought for in the Post Office; they were scarcely ever made; they were agreed upon around a green baize table in the Civil Service Pay Research Unit, men far removed from the day to day lives and needs of the men and women whom they supposedly represented.

Two important events however were to affect the thinking of the present leadership. They were several years apart but interrelated. In 1964, the postmen, infuriated by the way the Government (Tory at the time) had kept their wages down while in other sectors of industry, workers were actually getting a nibble at the pie in a boom period, began unofficial strike action and work to rule. Ron Smith had sat at the baize table for too long and now the members—'his' members— were deciding they could do without him. He called a quick one day strike in July to regain control as much as to press the wage claim and the Government conceded at once. The workers had tasted the success that only their own direct action can bring, and that was all to the good. But the executive learned a false lesson. They imagined that the Post Office and telephone service were so essential that they only had to threaten and the Government would give in—not that they were the threatening type!

The second event came a year before the great strike. Jackson was now secretary of the union and played a Bonapartist role between the left and right wings of his executive. Certainly he was to the left of Ron Smith but that did not prevent him from pushing through some harsh productivity agreements especially on the T.C. side nor from playing Lord Hall's and Harold Wilson's 'rationalisation' game. In a letter to *The Times* in January 1969 he could write a letter saying, 'We are one of those rare examples of a union which is prepared to

face a change, and has policies deliberately designed to reduce the labour intensive nature of the Post Office...It is the policy of our union so far as posts are concerned *to seek a gradual reduction in the number of staff employed* on the basis that those left in the service will be better paid as a result (sic)".

While Jackson and Hall were busy setting up joint committees at all levels of the P.O., firmly integrating the Union, or rather its officials into the Corporation's apparatus, the P.O. workers began to tire of the Labour Government's voluntary incomes policy which their executive seemed to respect so much. Their wages rose by next to nothing and Jackson had been elected with other expectations in mind.

However in February 1970, the UPW leadership secured from the Labour Government an agreement to their wage demand of 12%. Lord Hall also approved it so they all got the shock of their lives when the membership accepted it only by a small majority, and by a ballot vote at that.

And so they learnt their second 'lesson' —the UPW membership was changing. It was becoming bolder and more militant. With this on the one hand and a supposedly strong bargaining position against the Government on the other they would surely win any claim by merely threatening a confrontation. At most a strike would last only a few days and they would return the heroes of the hour.

What the UPW executive forgot, what in fact this 'leadership', which had never been involved in anything bigger than a one day strike, had probably never learnt, was the importance of making an assessment of the balance of forces at any particular time, not just within the P.O. but nationally; and then on the basis of that assessment preparing the members and the union and leading it decisively.

To make that assessment we must look at the problems facing the Tory Government, the way they sought to resolve them and the events leading up to the strike itself.

## The Tories—Their Problems and Remedies

Five years of a Labour Government working flat out for their masters had not solved the crisis of British capitalism. Certainly the Balance of Payments, being temporarily in credit no longer screamed from every newspaper, nor could it be used as an excuse to knock the wor-

kers. But that problem was got rid of only at the expense of 600,000 plus workers being put on the stones—workers of course do not count when the 'National Interest' is at stake, never mind if they make up the vast majority of the country's population.

But more seriously, the problem for the bosses was lack of investment capital on the one hand and a resurgent wage movement among very large sectors of the working class on the other. Super profits derived from investments in Latin America, Asia, and Africa were still considerable but were rapidly being eaten into by the more powerful imperialisms of the U.S. Japan and W. Germany. More profits to provide the capital to finance investments primarily into new techniques could come from only one source, the British working class itself. Basically they would try to make this profit in three ways, two of which had been tried under Labour. Firstly increase the productivity of each worker by putting in more modern machinery (and increasing unemployment) and then generalising shift work and increasing the speed of production. This usually goes hand in hand with a productivity deal, often in two stages, which looks as if it gives a lot away but in fact does two things. It hamstrings shop steward activity and bans locally agreed wage bargaining. By half way through the time of the agreement, inflation has eaten away what the workers have gained and their real income begins to fall.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, cut down on the proportion of the Gross National Product allocated to the Health Service, schools and housing (pensions are vote catching so don't touch those); thirdly, attack the actual level of wage settlements so that in a period of inflation, wage increases would not keep up with price rises. In other words profits on a national scale would increase relative to wages.

The second of these attacks is almost traditional for the Tories and they duly followed form with reductions coming into effect in April 1971. The first line of attack is more difficult. The bosses have had undeniable success with productivity deals, but firstly the rank and file organisations of the working class have not been broken with the workers still combative, and secondly the capital is just not there to carry out all the modernisation of plant necessary. The third line of attack, on direct wages was the hardest but also the most necessary.

The culmination and lynch pin of all these attacks is the Industrial Relations Bill. But the Tories have little faith in Parliamentary legality—unlike many so-called 'Lefts' in the Labour Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain. They can pass this Bill whenever they like but implementing it depends on many other factors, the most important of which is the strength and combativity of the working

class. To try to break that determination it was necessary to lower gradually the level of wage settlements and more importantly to inflict a real defeat on a section of the working class. The Dock strike was only a skirmish—the Tories were not ready for a real fight and certainly not with the dockers. The local government employees had won 15% and much public sympathy; the miners were sold out but still got 12%. But then the power workers suffered at the hands of a hysterical press campaign and an ignominious right wing 'leadership' which didn't even call them out on strike. Now it was the turn of the UPW.

### The Build-Up

In October 1970, the UPW lodged a pay claim amounting to £3 or 15% whichever was the greater. In fact the feeling in many branches of the UPW was for a £5 claim but the UPW tops said they wouldn't submit a figure which they didn't think they would get. "£5", they said, was "unrealistic" while £3 was "just"—whatever that may mean. A young girl telephonist's pre-strike take-home pay was under £8 and the £3 would give her an extra £2 plus which would certainly be welcomed but scarcely a "just" wage! In fact they knew Lord Hall would accept the £3 rise but nothing higher and that was the long and the short of it.

The Tories knew it too and sacked Hall in a hurry at the end of the year. Immediately all over the country but especially in London whole post offices came out in lightning unofficial strikes against the Tories' action. The men knew what the Tories were up to—it was the first step in the process of selling off the T.C. side to private industry; it was the first step before massive redundancies in the P.O. Corporation and it meant inevitably that the Tories would fight them on their wage claim *and that meant a strike.*

The militants in the UPW knew this was coming and had done their best to prepare the other workers for it. Ryland, the joint Deputy Chairman of the P.O. and acting Chairman had prepared for it as well as far back as the previous August, long before Hall's departure. One militant had this to say: "In the first week of the strike people were saying that Ryland called the strike, not Jackson, since the P.O. were going to have to fight the UPW on redundancies. The P.O. have been very quick to use the strike to solve their labour problems and streamline their service."<sup>5</sup> The Tories's whole strategy as we have seen was bound to bring them in collision course with one section of the working class. Ryland was holding firm except for a miserable increase of 1% on his original offer of 7% with the additional churlish proposal that if the UPW were so concerned about incremental scales, that is

wage differences according to age, then *they* could decide how this 8% was to be split up amongst the membership. Jackson rejected this kind thought and the offer too.<sup>6</sup> On January 19th. the UPW executive called on its members to take strike action.

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Social democratic politics as practiced by the Labour Party and Trade Union bureaucrats rests on the assumption that capitalism is strong enough to grant reasonable increases to the workers, enough anyway for a layer of labour politicians and bureaucrats to justify their existence to the working class while enabling them to head off any really powerful anti-capitalist movement which would incidentally sweep them away as well. What this layer either doesn't or is too frightened to realise is that capitalism, especially British capitalism no longer has this leeway. The battle to divide the surplus value created by the working class is reaching a deadly pitch; open not veiled class conflict is the order of the day.

This lesson had certainly not permeated the skulls of the UPW executives with the exception of J.R. Lawlor.<sup>7</sup> Its failure to do so had important repercussions on the way they prepared for and carried on the strike. For instance, Jackson was able to say repeatedly that the strike was not against the Government at all but only against the P.O. Corporation. On January 19th. he was even able to pay "tribute to Mr. Carr for his peace efforts. It was not his fault they had failed."<sup>8</sup> His position did not change even after Mr. Chataway announced in the Commons, 'We must not encourage the belief on the part of any unions that it pays to use its powers to disrupt the nation rather than submit its case to agreed arbitration procedures.'<sup>9</sup> Jackson did show a glimmer of recognition that the Government might be biased when he said on the day before the strike, "We would like conciliation", not arbitration. "We feel we would be unlikely to get a chairman who is *neutral*". But of course the very idea that there are people perched somewhere between the capitalist class and the proletariat who are "neutral" in a struggle between them is a hoary old social-democratic fallacy. He and his executive are amazingly slow to react to the situation. They cling desperately to their idea of a fair society or at least a society where employers repay trade-union bureaucrats with decent pats on the back for years of craven collaboration instead of pushing them into a corner. Consider this—"The Post Office was displaying a stubbornness of an order *which I believe no employer is entitled to display.*"<sup>10</sup>

And all the time the UPW executive was desperately looking over its shoulder to see if there was any chance of a new offer from Ryland.

"Only a firm offer that *is worth looking at*" would get the strike called off said Jackson three days before the strike. And Fred Moss UPW Treasurer really let the cat out of the bag at a meeting in Plymouth two days *before* the strike when he spoke openly of accepting 12%. Of course there was a tactical element in all this— they were trying to steal the middle ground, trying to appear reasonable men far removed from the picture of callous militants willing to let hospital patients die and old-age pensioners freeze, painted by the Government and the press to describe the power workers a month before. In this they were successful but these tactics would have only been permissible if *at the same time* they had made energetic preparations for the strike and real explanations to their membership. *The facts were sadly different.*

Nowhere did the members themselves get the chance to vote at mass meeting to go on strike. Thousands were not even informed and only heard about it through the newspapers. Naturally the right-wing elements in the UPW used this against the leadership but what it shows is the weakness of the UPW's organisation, the failure of many shop-stewards to play a leading role and the lack of communication between the leadership and the rank and file.

### Who Struck; Who Felt It?

What was the balance of forces at the beginning of the strike? To answer that we must see just how much the strike would disrupt the normal workings of the economy to see how long not just the strikers but the Government and the employers could last out. One clue is given by Jackson two days before the strike when he said we will "make the conflict short, sharp and inconvenience the public least." This was living in a dream world; it was having his cake and eating it too. How can a strike be short if it doesn't "inconvenience" people much. On the contrary *it will only be short and sharp if in this particular case it threatens a social and political crisis and shows the Tories and the bosses who really keeps the country running.*

The Post Office comprises many different services. By looking at each one seeing whom they affected and whether they came out on strike we can get a very good idea as to how much this strike really did bite.

#### *The Letter and Parcel Post*

The percentage of strikers may have varied between 98 and 99.7%. But it was solid. Only voluntary work was done and in main post offices where a few scabs did report for work, the voluntary duties were suspended. It is impossible to do justice to those 170,000 odd postmen sorters and counter clerks who earned the respect and sympathy of the

entire working class in their 44 days battle without strike pay and for thousands without even National Insurance benefit because they were not married. Their London demonstrations each Thursday growing in size and militancy each week are unparalleled in the post-war history of the British working class. Moreover that experience catapulted a once backward section of the class into the temporary leadership of the whole labour movement's fight against the Tory Government, their wage policy and their Bill.

This section of strikers did not lose millions for the P.O. Corporation because it was a loss making part anyway. They certainly saved the P.O. a great deal of money wages.<sup>11</sup> Private communication by mail disappeared. Small businesses, mail order companies and the Football Pools found the going very hard. British Leyland was forced to postpone its Annual Report and there was some concern by the Banks that the National Giro would break down.

But the Banks had all had time to prepare their own systems of communications – in the case of Barclays and Lloyds by using Securicor, that notorious firm whose directors included Carr himself and include Ray Gunther, ex Labour minister. Many other large firms developed their own services while the banks bent over backwards to extend credit facilities to small firms.

The rash of privately owned postal services, including a vicar amongst them quite rightly earned the loathing of postal workers while they were coddled and feted as latter day adventurers embodying "British ingenuity and good humour" by papers like *The Daily Express* and *the Daily Mail*. But they were none of them able to play a major scabbing role. Anyway, capitalists don't scab, they merely follow their profit-making instincts.

But scabs there were; and to be found in the highest places of the labour movement, Sid Green of the NUR, Jack Jones of the T&GWU and the TUC no less. We will look at the question of money later. During the strike the goods traffic on British Rail rose dramatically and the same thing went for road transport though here it was even more flexible with drivers working for particular companies acting as couriers between different branches of the company. The Local Government departments and nationalised industries carried on their business as well, as anyone who received a bill for electricity, gas, or rates during the strike would know. What are the unions whose members work in these fields? They are the NUR (Railways), the T&G (lorry drivers), NALGO (local government) and the GMWU.

Certainly local arrangements were made, sometimes with some success,



as at Wren House and Faraday House International Telephone Exchanges where no oil got in to heat the place up (necessary to keep the delicate and sophisticated machinery running properly) as lorry after lorry was stopped and union card carrying drivers refused to go further. Finally a scab driver escorted by 60 police managed to break through the picket lines. But at the national level we didn't hear anything but platitudes! "The road transport, rail and local government unions *agreed to attempt* to prevent government and local authorities from circumventing the strike." 12. A day earlier the TUC had announced that it "backs the strikers". Now solidarity strike action is perhaps too much to expect of the TUC as it is presently constituted; but *elementary* class solidarity such as the blacking of any nationalised or privately owned organisation or company which handled goods normally dealt with by the P.O., that the strikers could expect *and they didn't get it*.

One very important lesson to be drawn from the strike is the key role that sometimes very small groups of workers play in the economy and the *relative* unimportance of other groups many times their number. Numbers went to the heads of the UPW executive who remembered the 1964 one day strike and may have thought this strike would also be only a matter of days. Certainly *if* alternative services had not been created by the Banks etc, *if* private delivery had not been legitimised by Chataway and *if* other unions had not scabbed with such irresponsibility then the effect on the running of the economy of a withdrawal of labour by this section of the P.O. would have been far greater. But the working class in struggle doesn't live by 'ifs' but by the real balance of forces at the time.

#### *Pensions and Family Allowances*

These were looked after by voluntary labour and were hardly affected. If they were at all it was the operation of scab labour (forcing the closing down even of this service by the volunteers) which was to blame. Insurance stamps were not bought during the strike and this actually provided company structures with millions of pounds of liquid assets for one ninth of the year and would have saved them a hefty slice of bank interest payments for that period, or enabled them alternatively to get rid of some of their overdrafts.

#### *Automatic Telephone calls including 75% of trunk calls.*

Despite panic signals being raised by the P.O. before the strike about overloading and breakdowns, as every striker knows only too well the automatic system lasted out. Again we see a wanton lack of planning and coordination by the UPW executive. In the 1964 strike there was no STD. But anyone can see that unless it is put out of action the strike would at the very least be a long one. What is the obvious solution? Make a firm agreement to get the Post Office Engineers out at

the same time. They were having an agreement coming up soon. What is the point of two unions in the same industry fighting their wage demands separately when by coming out together they could win them both. In passing, there was exactly the same situation with the P.O. Management Staff Association. Both unions sent messages of support the POEU members collected quite a lot of money and the noble Lord Delacourt Smith even brought his members out on a one day solidarity strike when it was too late. At a strike meeting in Oxford the question was put to Mr. Meaney from the UPW executive, "Why don't you ask the Supervisory Staff's Union to call their members out because many of them would come if asked?" But it seems that bureaucrats exercise their own closed shop agreements. Whether the staff came out was not the affair of the UPW executive even if it would help them win a strike. In fact let's tell the whole truth; why are there such strict rules preventing branches of even the same union from communicating with other branches unless they go up to the top first? Why cannot branches from different unions work openly together? It is precisely the bureaucrats' *fear* of the workers smashing through the artificially created but carefully fostered differences between craft and job to unite as workers in common struggle which prevents them from taking the sort of elementary decisions such as common strike action x between, in this case, the UPW and the POEU. As it was, the telephones hummed, the engineers repaired them, the postmen and women were isolated and the bosses and the government rubbed their hands with glee.

*Calls depending on operators and the various telephone services.*

The structure of the telephone service makes it one of the most difficult parts of industry to organise and unionise effectively. Firstly the telephone grade is neglected within the UPW. Jackson certainly had his rank and file strength from the postmen. There was very little shop floor movement in the telephone service. With most people working in small exchanges there was little union feeling. Added to this was the problem of a split membership, men doing night work and women working in the day so it was very difficult to hold branch meetings. Also in many areas shop-stewards were not active, even to the extent of unionising the workers and this is reflected by the very low proportion of telephonists actually in the UPW—probably only a little more than a third. Lastly there was the problem of very high turnover. The Post Office paid such miserable wages and girls had to wait such a long time before getting a living wage that they simply quit after they had been trained and went off to work in a private company. The P.O. relied on this turnover to retain a permanent army of underpaid, un-unionised labour.

It should have been pretty obvious to the UPW executive that the success or failure of the strike would depend to a very large degree (money apart) on whether the exchanges were closed down or not. The press realised the importance of the exchanges perfectly. The 'Hello Girls' campaign tried to turn those who went to work into heroines. The UPW's response was ostrich like. Jackson tried to claim that the problem didn't exist. By quoting only the number of UPW members at work they masked the real situation. Instead of mounting really massive pickets outside the exchanges, using the solid postmen, they had issued strict orders against any abusive language or physical prevention by the pickets and had said that only four pickets should be allowed at any one gate. Very respectable and proper to be sure but not exactly calculated to win a strike. Throughout the strike in fact the UPW executive acted as perfect representatives of a layer which again and again not only in Britain but the world over has led the workers out to do battle with a petition in one hand and the other tied behind their backs. After a few days the 'Hello Girls' campaign died down, not because they couldn't find any scabs but because they didn't need to. The exchanges were working.

#### *Emergency Services.*

These worked throughout, indeed the UPW sanctioned the continued working of some very small manual exchanges in the country just for this purpose. In truth the executive could not really issue an order stopping these services, not because it's in any way wrong to use every position of strength one has but simply because there were enough non-unionised telephonists to man them whether they gave the order or no, and they knew it. Also, even if they had given the order and it had been carried out, the government would without doubt have sent the troops in and the UPW executive were not prepared for that sort of confrontation.

#### *Automatic International Calls.*

Obviously these worked and again, without the support of the engineers they would continue to work. Just one thing, the P.O. used the strike to open a whole series of subscriber-dialling services to the States without any reference to the Union who in non-strike conditions might have fought for more overtime staff to cope with this extra work. (They also used the strike to cut the labour force—at Mount Pleasant sorting office it is cut by a third. The men had left during the strike so the P.O. didn't even have to fork out redundancy pay).

#### *Non-Automatic International Calls.*

The exchanges dealing with these calls experienced the most scabbing in the entire P.O. The strike committees were correspondingly the best organised and the most in touch with the strikers. The mood of

those on strike was also the most militant just because they were well led in the sharpest struggle. On the second day of the strike four pickets were arrested, three of them postmen come to help their hard pressed brothers and sisters, but at the trial the law couldn't pin anything on them. Two days later the police—the strikers' friends—arrested one of the four legal pickets—a black brother—for shouting 'scabs out'. Often there were over a hundred pickets outside Wren House. Almost every evening there were meetings organised by the strike committee on the green where the latest stage of the strike was explained to the men and women, plans were laid and encouragement given. At one of these meetings early on, over £40 was collected amongst the strikers themselves to help out the young girl telephonists who were living on air. Speeches and fund-raising was also carried on in the London colleges with a lot of success.

These international exchanges are of great importance to international big business. All investment decisions depend on up to the minute knowledge of the markets and political situations in the various countries of the world. The exchanges are a hub of world imperialism. To have succeeded in closing them would have been a blow struck not just at British but also at American, German, French and Japanese imperialism. But alas there were scabs aplenty. And not the young girls who lived on a pittance. The management tried a dirty trick on them to get them to go back to work. On the day their last pre-strike wages were due, they were all lined up and told to go in to the exchange one by one. There they were handed their pay packets containing miserable sums of £8; Then, before their eyes, the women in charge of this sordid business—themselves scabs—took out £5 from each pay packet and told them they couldn't have it till after the strike unless of course they wanted to resume work now! The girls rushed outside, many of them weeping. But they had learned a thing or two. Before this incident many hadn't really understood what was going on and were thinking of going back the following Monday. After it, not a single girl went back.

#### *Ship to Shore Radio Operators—The Weakest Link*

There are only 300 of these men but their job is absolutely key for controlling sea traffic round Britain and regulating the entry and exit of ships into and out of the ports. We have already seen how the workers in the Corporation are split up into different unions and how the P.O. has prevented the emergence of a closed shop. But another trump card they use is to see that different sectors enter into the wage negotiations at different times of the year. The radio operators had already concluded a settlement in December 1970, (in other sectors not in the UPW, the Engineers and the Staff Association both have wage claims coming up). Come the strike and many of them wished to join in as

members of the UPW even though they wouldn't get a rise as a result—in solidarity in fact. *But the UPW Executive did not call them out.* In fact they were ordered to continue work. What imbecility or worse, what treachery is this? These men were a small but indispensable link in that complicated and interlocking chain which constitutes modern industrial society. By luck more than judgement they came under the constituency of the UPW. As it happens, bosses can make agreements between themselves so that they can survive even if they don't receive or send out letters for a time. But anyone who remembers the hysteria which greets any threatened action by dockers knows how they cannot stand any messing around with the regular flow of imports and exports. For one particular moment in history, those 300 men had more bargaining power than 170,000 postmen and the real possibility of helping them, not to 'hold the country to ransom' whatever that may mean, but to win a moderate wage claim as quickly as possible and just as important to show the Tories that though at the moment they may own the means of production, they are powerless to run them if the workers say otherwise.

If the UPW executive, and that includes the members of the Communist Party such as Stiles on it, had had any tactical initiative at all, if they really had wanted a "short and sharp confrontation", if above all they wanted to *win*, then they should have thrown all their troops into the battle. Instead they played the "we are such reasonable people" tactic. Oh No! They didn't want to inconvenience anyone. Volunteers for pensions and allowances, keep the manual exchanges open for emergency calls, keep from striking the UPW members contracted out to look after certain aspects of the TV and radio services, and now prevent the ship to shore men from leading the strike to success.

Of course it can be objected that if these men had come out the army or navy would have been in there like a flash. Probably true. But then isn't that what strikes are about. From when the state's police arrest pickets to when the state's army goes in and scabs on strikers; isn't that a natural progression? Doesn't it show clearly on whose side the state deploys its troops?—Whose state is it in fact? Doesn't this raise the struggle to a higher level, imbuing the mass of strikers with a greater class consciousness, enabling them to forge bonds of militant solidarity with wider spheres of the working class? But bureaucrats are terrified by such things as class solidarity, increased class consciousness and mass solidarity. These things are alien to their view of the world. Not that we suggest it's a good thing for troops to go in. We merely say that the working class must be warned of the nature of the class enemy. If he can defeat a strike by previously educating the workers' representatives to be 'responsible' 'reasonable' people then he will use that method; if this ingrained strength of ruling class ideology fails then he

has resource to the state machine including the use of troops. Our job is to ensure that a well led, united and determined working class can defeat anything deployed against it by that tiny group of oligarchs, businessmen and functionaries which at present constitutes the ruling class.

*P.O. Telegrams, Automatic Telex and P.O. Operated Telex.*

No telegrams were sent throughout the strike. Unfortunately though, telex is a cheaper and quicker service used extensively by business. All automated telex functioned normally. In the P.O. about half the telex services were manned with massive overtime being worked by the scabs.

### **The Money—Where Was It?**

There is no clearer indication of the type of union the UPW was than the size of its strike fund on January 16th—£330,000. It was not a fighting union. It was meant to have started a fund ten years before but it obviously wasn't taken seriously. Where all the union dues went each week is anyone's guess; the vast bulk of it would have gone to sustaining the bureaucracy.

At the outset the executive announced the setting up of a hardship fund which involved a would be recipient in London travelling all the way to the Clapham head office and undergoing a kind of means test before he or she could collect a few pounds. In the International Telephone Exchanges at Wren House at least, the strike committee insisted that any money collected should go straight to them because they knew who needed it and who could get along without. And, for instance they insured that there would be adequate picketing arrangements by paying the pickets their return fares and the cost of a meal.

With money such an overriding factor in the strike it seemed an elementary duty for other Trade Unions to give and for the UPW to accept as much as the movement could muster. Yet on the third day of the strike, the London area committee refused to stamp with a UPW seal collection sheets which non-UPW trade-unionists wanted to use to collect money from rank and filers in other unions. On the same day we also learnt that the UPW had turned down an offer of money from the NUR who had their own claim coming up soon. This bizarre behaviour was explained as follows by one committee member standing at the time beneath a banner of the Leningrad Postal Workers, "We turned it down out of principle(!). We are going to fight this strike on our own two feet to show that the postal workers can do it; if we win it will be our victory, if we lose, it is our own look out."

The idea that the outcome of the strike was not of mere academic interest to other workers but that they had a high stake in who won; the idea also that this strike was merely part of a generalised struggle called the class struggle and therefore that the UPW had a duty to the whole working class and vice-versa; these ideas had not occurred to him at all. Here we see a striking example of how the Trade Union leadership thinks in bourgeois terms. Instead of ideas of working class solidarity, of unity and collective action against a common enemy—ideas which are alien to a society whose economy is one of incessant competition between private owners of capital, instead of this, we see those very ideas of competition, of exclusiveness, of separateness—the very hall-marks of the bourgeoisie—being expressed.

But it wasn't only the UPW leadership who were coy about money. It was not till the ninth day of the strike that the POEU (the P.O. engineers) coughed up £10,000 conscience money. To be sure, two days before the TUC had "invited" other unions to make cash donations to a special fund." 13 But it seems that this polite and delicately phrased suggestion was just as politely declined. Jack Jones kept the T&GWU's massive coffers firmly closed till day 21 when he handed over just enough money to give 1% of the strikers £3-50 a week for two weeks—£7,500. Great stuff Jack, we always knew you had a generous heart.

The head offices of the big unions have literally millions of pounds in investments. Even £100,000 is a mere drop in the ocean for them. Instead it was up to individual branches of many unions and often individual workers at that who sent in what money they could spare. Left wing students too organised collections in many colleges and universities as well as supplying platforms for UPW militants to state their case. In Oxford for example almost 20% of the city's collection came from the university.

At the end of the strike the *Financial Times* reported on the state of the UPW's bank balance. It reported that the union's reserves had been half a million pounds and not the £330,000 which the executive had always said it was. Anyway it was still far too small. It had an overdraft of £340,000 and had received loans from other unions totalling £203,700. These three amounts come to £1,043,700. The total amount paid out in hardship fund amounted to about £1.2 million so that gifts from the rank and file trade unionists and others totalled nearly £180,000 which is not far short of the amount advanced as a loan by trade unions themselves. Over the six week period, the amount needed to give £4 each to just over 200,000 strikers would have been £5 million... That £4 million gap speaks volumes about the UPW's inadequate preparations for the strike and about the stinginess and downright betrayal of the TUC and the unions, especially the two big ones with supposedly left leaders, affiliated to it. When one remembers all the high-

flown sentiment spouted at the big February 21st demonstration in Trafalgar Square and the Embankment; all the promises of support and solidarity given it is positively sickening to remember also that the TUC wretched on its promise, made that day, not to allow a defeat for the postmen, just three days later. To be sure they spoke of their support for work-shop collections but then they did nothing to see that those collections were made. They gave their verbal support but when the crunch came all they could offer was a loan and they knew that the UPW was in the red and its bank wouldn't accept anything but gifts.

### *No Need to Pay*

Only the unions with their vast investments could put up the £4 million needed to see through the strike without too much hardship to the strikers. That is certainly a large sum which they may have well wanted to think twice about giving. But there was a way out for them and a way moreover which would have finished the strike early and with resounding success—industrial action. We have already seen how the UPW leadership failed to even think of making serious overtures to other unions involving them in joint strike action, even unions within the P.O. Corporation. But it has never been part of the myth of the united trade union movement to let a large section of brothers and sisters fight it out alone against heavy odds, even if the reality is very different. There was nothing at all in the rule book which prevented other unions from spontaneously suggesting positive aid, selective strike action, nothing that is except for bureaucratic routinism, fear of initiating out-of-the-normal actions, fear of the working class itself in united activity. Where for instance was Sid Green of the NUR with a pay claim being discussed at that very time? If the railway men had come out in strike action in support *even of their own pay claim* the main communications net-work apart from the Post Office itself, for letters and parcels would have been closed to the bosses. But the only intervention Sid Green made apart from a demagogic speech on February 21st. was to crawl along to see Carr, the Minister for Employment, with Feather. No, there was no need for the trade unions to fork out £4 millions or anything approaching that amount. All they needed to do was to assert just a small fraction of the united strength of the working class, and this they refused to do. For to do so would have been to deny their own role in this society as the ultimate watch-dogs of the ruling class over the workers *within the workers organisations themselves*. The fear felt by the bosses in the face of a union with a record for militancy, and the consequent limitations on their actions is well illustrated by the example of the big publishers. They were hit quite hard by the strike and couldn't send out books to thousands of retailers. *The Financial Times* reported



that "A common reaction in publishing appears to have been to avoid upsetting the printing unions by anything which might be called blatant strike breaking." There was no such fear of the TUC.

On February 23rd. Jackson positively leapt on an offer by Carr to use his departments' conciliation services. By this time the UPW had reduced its demand to 13% but the P.O. was only offering 8% with no strings and a productivity deal above that figure. They refused also to consider shortening the age-related scales till next year. On Thursday 25th. the weekly march to Hyde Park was the largest and most militant yet swelled by engineers from the POEU and many representatives from the P.O. Management Staff Association (POMSA) and the Association of P.O. Executives. But despite this rank and file turn-out and the first, last and sad to say only token support from another union, Carr was ominously calm in the Commons the next day. *"...over the previous two days there had been some change in attitude by the two sides but asked them (other M.P.s) not to press him further at this stage."* *The Financial Times*, Feb 26th.).

Indeed there had. For it was just during those two days that the TUC had refused the money promised a few days earlier.

Readers of this pamphlet may be thinking that we knock the TUC and the T.U. leaders too hard. We do so with good reason. They have shown themselves as unwilling to carry through a genuine struggle against the employers' offensive (productivity deals), against the Tory offensive first against individual sections of the working class such as the miners, the power workers, the council workers or the postmen, secondly against the whole working class with their increased health charges and their proposed Industrial Relations Bill. Now, if an understanding of the real role these bureaucrats play and have played in the class struggle was widespread throughout the working class and not just amongst a small section of the militants, then of course we could discuss much more positive plans for action against the class enemy, actions which would bypass this clique and consign them to the dust-bin of history where they belong.

But instead, even while they can agree to sell out a six week national strike by 200,000 workers in cold blood, even while Scanlon and Jones no less can agree to an American style productivity deal for the Fords workers which prevents them from striking for two years, even while the special recall T.U. Congress finds itself incapable of calling for industrial action to fight a Bill aimed precisely at weakening the T.U. movement and especially its rank and file organisation, even while all this, what do we find? We find that though a politicisation

has definitely taken place amongst certain sections of workers and amongst shop floor militants, still the great mass of the working class has not comprehended the nature of the attack being made against it, still puts its trust in this treacherous leadership, still has not begun to search for alternative methods with which to organise its defence or even better, to look for political solutions by which they can themselves take the offensive. No wonder then that we attack the TUC.

### The End

The end was quick. On March 3rd the UPW presented a 'peace' plan to the P.O. after previously having it vetted by Uncle Carr. There would be a three man committee of enquiry (how this differs from a committee of arbitration is not at all clear) composed of a representative from the UPW and the P.O. and a chairman to be "mutually agreeable to both sides". This would suggest that the UPW made a bargain that in exchange for an improved pay offer they would cooperate in an enquiry into all aspects of the P.O., the use of labour (redundancies and more part-time labour) and the use of outside experts (time and motion, measured day work etc...). Certainly the terms of reference of the enquiry are very wide, including a consideration of the pay claim, "the finance of the P.O., the use of manpower, relations between the UPW and the P.O. and between the UPW and its membership". Moreover, the recommendation will be binding on both sides. Lastly, the enquiry was dependant on a return to work.

On the Thursday demonstration the Jackson charisma no longer worked its magic. No more the shouts of 'J-A-C-K-S-O-N, JACKSON'. Instead fierce opposition from many branches and apathy in others. The UPW executive recommended its members to accept the terms of the agreement and to return to work. Immediate steps were taken to conduct a ballot to get them back. And what quick steps they were. In most branches there was no discussion before voting. In many cases the militants, the ones who for six weeks had through the strike committees provided the backbone of the struggle were not given a hearing. In others, even more devious steps were taken. For instance in London it is customary to hold branch meetings on the Sunday. Yet in some branches people turned up to vote on Sunday to find that the meeting had been held on the Saturday without the lay officers telling them. This was certainly true at the St. Edwards building and at Mount Pleasant. And at Electra House there was a simple vote for or against with no discussion as to *why* they had lost. The opposition was certainly far more numerous than the 60 odd branches who voted against, because the ballot was conducted on the basis of branches, so that a branch showing a bare majority for a return to work, registered all its votes in favour of a return and none in opposition to it.

*What Can We Learn? And What Is To Be Done?*

After the initial shock there was a tendency on the part of many UPW members to lay all the blame onto the shoulders of the TUC and to excuse Jackson and the executive who, it was felt, had done all they could, given the lack of support from other unions. One of the principal aims of this pamphlet has been to show that the outcome of the strike, notwithstanding the TUC's role, must be laid fairly and squarely at the feet of the UPW executive. They must not be allowed to get away at the next conference with the plea that they did their best. The British working class (the working class the world over for that matter) has undergone too many heroic defeats in the past. These defeats can, however, be transformed into springboards for future victory provided that some basic lessons are learnt and remembered.

*Replace the Leadership*

The first lesson of this strike has been that the UPW leadership is rotten. It must be changed. This will not be done overnight. No bureaucracy, any more than the capitalist class itself, will hand over its position and power voluntarily. They must be fought. Already many amendments have been tabled for the 1971 national conference of the UPW, especially concerning rules on voting procedures and union positions which are held for life. If the postmen, the largest section, vote for these proposals then Jackson and others will have to seek re-election after three years. If the militants in the union can be persuaded not to leave the P.O. altogether then there is a real basis for a national rank and file movement. The long term aim of such a movement must be a thorough purge of the existing leadership and the institution of basic democratic norms through out the union with real rank and file participation in decisions. This task is not separate from the class struggle against capitalism. The strike showed one thing very clearly, something which has been true ever since the phenomenon of a bureaucratic layer developed inside and dominated the working class organisations: that the struggle against capitalism goes hand in hand with, and must in fact be preceded by a fight within the workers' organisations for rank and file control. Any idea of workers' self-management in industry when the latter do not even control their own organisations is meaningless.

The second conclusion is that in times of economic crisis strikes conducted by one union alone are insufficient even to win economic demands, This is certainly not true in every case —where the union is a militant one or at least has very militant and experienced members involved in the dispute, nor is it true where the workers find themselves in a very strong bargaining position. But the trend is certainly there. The answer should be for concerted action on the part of several unions.

But the very posing of such an idea begs the question. For it implies that the union leaders want above all else to fight the bosses, to challenge the status quo even if it is only on the wages front. But the whole point about the vast majority of union leaderships is precisely that when the chips are down, they are more afraid of concerted action by their rank and file than they are of the bosses or the Government. Secondly these union leaders are simply not equipped politically to cope with the new problem they face, namely a capitalist class and a Tory Government which is incapable of conceding even crumbs. The deep-going crisis of British capitalism rules it out. Far from concessions they are compelled to wage an offensive against the working class. (As explained in the beginning of this pamphlet.)

The outcome of the P.O. strike in terms of the final offer to be made and the productivity deal and redundancy agreement to be imposed is not known at the time this pamphlet goes to press. But we have seen the complete inability of the trade union movement to come to the aid of a section of the working class under attack, its willingness to see that section defeated rather than propose meaningful solidarity action, provide meaningful monetary aid or even carry out such elementary class duty as blacking the carriage of goods normally handled by the P.O. The trade union movement in Britain is certainly the oldest and probably the strongest in the world. Yet that strength and tradition has proved hollow in the face of even a relatively minor confrontation. Why?

Of course there are many reasons for this and much time could be spent (and should be) discussing it. But the most important is a persistent refusal to recognise that politics, and class politics at that, have any relevance at all in the trade union movement. For the T.U. leaders and many of the members, the Unions are concerned solely with wages and conditions.

Most union leaders believe politics is for politicians. It is somehow not regarded as a *political* act when the bosses attack the living standards of the working class. It is not *political* when they impose productivity deals which tie the workers' hands maybe for years (T.U. leaders usually agree to productivity deals anyway). It is not *political* when the Labour Party in power proposes 'In Place of Strife' or when the Tories try to push through parliament a harsher Bill of the same type in Carr's Industrial Relations Bill. And even if they do recognise that maybe there is a *political* element in the Tory Bill, they cannot imagine that it is up to them to propose political alternatives to it.

Apolitical and even anti-political trade-unionism at a time like this is like

an engine with no petrol. At a time when hundreds of thousands of workers are looking to the trade-union leaders for a lead, for a political lead, this is just the time when precisely those leaders have ducked the question, have run away from the real problem, namely, how to harness the might of the working class into a political counter-offensive against the present attacks being made by the capitalist class and the Tory Party. There is no sense of urgency, no realisation that we are right in the middle of a turning point in the class struggle in Britain. For the class struggle does not stand still. The bosses will not call a tea break till the workers have found a leadership willing to fight, till they have ranged themselves in battle order. Yet unless a fighting leadership emerges, unless a process of politicisation takes place among broad sections of the working class then the British working class faces a defeat and demoralisation of serious proportions.

The P.O. strike and its defeat was a necessary pre-condition to the implementation of the Tory's Industrial Relations Bill. <sup>14</sup> But the passing of the Bill will be the prelude to much sharper struggles. We know already that the TUC has shown no stomach for a fight. True enough nearly four million votes were cast at the Croydon conference in favour of industrial action against the Bill. But let's not kid ourselves; it was the *representatives* of four million workers who voted that way, not the workers themselves and even those representatives said they would abide by the majority decision of the TUC. Now people like Jack Jones are saying that if NALGO registers with the Government registrar the T&GWU will probably have to follow. To imagine, as does the Communist Party leadership, that if somehow we could get a majority of 'Lefts' onto the TUC general council then all our problems would be solved is wishful thinking. They forget, or maybe they remember very well, what the predecessors of the 'Lefts' did during the 1926 General Strike under the cover provided by the Anglo-Soviet Committee. Worse, it deceives the working class and channels their aspirations into electoral politics. On the contrary, the workers must be encouraged always to rely on their own capacity for organisation, on their own activity and militancy instead of sitting back and being told that 'now we've got a militant TUC all we have to do is sit back and watch'.

On April 24th, 1971, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of the Trade Unions held what amounted to a winding up conference where they refused even to consider an amendment which called for working towards a one day national stoppage on the day the Bill was passed. That conference showed a serious demoralisation on the part of the Communist Party industrial militants. Their perspective of the CP now amounts to little more than a blind refusal to criticise Scanlon and Jones even after the Fords affair, <sup>15</sup> and continuous pressure on the gutless shell of the TUC. This is no perspective at all.

### *Action Committees and once again Action Committees.*

Certainly pressure should be put on the TUC but we must not think that anything much will come of it. Certainly, militants must continue to work in the Trade Unions; to do anything else would be to cut themselves off from the rank and file. But the really urgent task is to create *Action Committees* at the base. Already in the Post Office strike we can see how useful such bodies would have been. Instead of one union fighting it out alone, the different UPW branches could have found ready support in their locality from other groups of workers. Action committees could have collected money for them, arranged meetings for them, could even have organised local solidarity action in the face of a passive leadership from their own unions. Action committees should be open to all workers who want to fight the Bill, the Tories and the capitalist class. Far from separating the militants from their base, they can enlarge that base, and above all prepare the rank and file for action. Action committees can cut across the narrow divisions of craft and sectional interests; avoid the paralysing effects of dependance on bureaucratic leaders and organise both employed and unemployed workers. They can work and fight for policies and *action* both *inside and outside* the official movement. They can make contact with local student militants to help with duplicating and distributing of leaflets; they can become known as the centre in their area for the spreading of propaganda, the centre for discussion and education on political problems facing the working class, including schools on productivity deals, measured day work, etc. Action Committees can coordinate industrial struggles with other struggles against such things as lack of housing, unemployment, high rents, racial discrimination. How many British workers know for instance that the Italian workers had a one day general strike to back up their demands for higher pensions! The present union leadership wouldn't think of doing such a thing. Yet we must somehow break down the walls and compartments which divide one part of a worker's life, say his work situation, from another part, say his lousy housing. The possibilities open to a lively and politically aware action committee are endless. The challenge they could pose to the bosses and to the union bureaucrats could be immense. They could completely transform the political climate in Britain and arm the working class for the struggles they are about to face.

Lastly, may we say this: it is a measure of the low political climate and awareness in Britain that many people when they read this will say, "Well, it's all very fine maybe, but what's it got to do with the Post Office strike?" We say it has *everything* to do with the failure of the Post Office strike. The lessons of that strike are not restricted to a simple account of that strike and the apportioning of praise and blame to the various participants of whatever class. It is through

posing a way forward for the working class, a way forward which will involve them directly in action, that the lessons can be most thoroughly learnt. It is in this way that the masses of the working class will learn first to distrust, then to reject the sophistries and procrastinations of the union and Labour Party leaderships. It is in this way that they will forge a real leadership from within themselves, fashioned and steeled in the heat of the struggle itself. And it is in this way that they will come, sometimes suddenly, sometimes slowly, to the realisation of their historic task—to overthrow this callous system once and for all and to build a new society with their own hands, with their own brains and *under their own control*.

## NOTES

	Net surplus before interest:	After interest
'67-68	£101.2	£35.4
'68-69	£130.4	£49.9
'69-70	£158.8	£61.2

Labour Research, Vol. LX, no. 2.

2 There are an estimated 30 million letters and half a million parcels delivered every day. Wages make up 72% of costs on the post and parcels side. See *The Financial Times*, Jan. 15th 1971.

3 "In 1969 the same number of letters had been handled as in 1966 . . . but in 1966 there had only been 9889 administrators. In 1969 that figure had grown to 12,300. Supervisors had also grown from 9974 in 1966 to 11,295 in 1969." UPW Strike Bulletin, Day 2, Thursday Jan. 21st.

4 The Docks is a classical example of this; see article in *International* no. 3 by Terry Barrett, available from Red Books, 182 Pentonville Road, London N.1. (18p inc. postage).

5 *The Red Mole*, 23rd March 1971. Interview p. 10.

6 As is well known, the cost of living index increased by over 8% in 1970. In April of this year it took another leap upwards for workers anyway as Barber's mini-Budget went into effect. A 15% wage increase is only equivalent to a 10-12% increase in take-home pay which would not have kept in line with the new prices despite all the talk in the newspapers. An increase of only 8% would mean not more than 5p in the £ extra to take home *and that is an outright deterioration in living standards*.

7 Lawlor was the only member of the executive to say from the beginning that the strike was also against the government. His warning compares very favourably with the miserably economist performance of Stiles, Chairman of the UPW and a member of the Communist Party. It is worth digging up a late January issue of *The Morning Star* where Stiles had a full-page article to get an idea of how far the C.P. is removed from being anything resembling a vanguard party.

8 *The Financial Times*, January 20th.

9 *The Financial Times*, January 23rd.

10 Speech by Jackson reported in *The Financial Times*, January 26th.

11 After the strike the Post Office announced a loss in revenue of £24.8m. and a saving in wages of £26m.—*The Daily Telegraph*, March 5th 1971. Of this amount about £17 million would have been paid to postmen.

12 *The Financial Times*, Wednesday 27th January.

13 *The Financial Times*, January 26th.

14 Cf. *The Industrial Relations Bill: A Declaration of War*, IMG Publications, 8p, for an analysis of this Bill.

15 Cf. *The Red Mole*, 24th April-14th May 1971.

## Appendix A

A representative Policy Committee of the Telecommunications Staff Association convened today at the Conservative Central Office, at the invitation of the industrial relations dept. head.

The branch is authorised to issue the following statement concerning that meeting.

"The Conservative Party Industrial relations advisory department has sympathy for the aims of the T.S.A., and shares its optimism of a probable restoration of recognition under the forthcoming industrial relations legislation.

It also foresees the T.S.A. as the sole negotiating body competent to represent the Post Office telephonist grade as a whole in the near future. The Government would not expect unregistered trade unions (e.g. the UPW) to obtain registration within a period of 18 months to 2 years from enactment of the Bill.

The outlook for the T.S.A. appears especially promising under the new legislation."

A further conference has been arranged between T.S.A. Policy Committee and the Conservative Employment Committee under H. J. Page, M.P., govt. spokesman for industrial relations.

—G. M. BROOKS (Editor). For the T.S.A. Faraday

*[Reprinted from Sennet, 2nd February]*

## Appendix B

*Also on the subject of the Telecommunication Staff Association . . .*

26th January 1971

### IMPORTANT

We have heard with surprise that members of this Association have been taking strike action in some places.

We wish to emphasise that the advice given to all members not to join in strike action but to work their normal duties is still in force. We ask all our members to abide loyally by this advice. Those who decide to take independent action should understand clearly that it is not done with our approval; it is not covered by any union agreement with the Post Office; and that they are on their own to face any consequences of such action.

We cannot, if we are to remain loyal to the policy agreed by our members, support the right to take independent action in this dispute. If we cannot stand by the principles we have made public we shall never win the confidence of anyone in future.

JOHN BUTT,  
GENERAL SECRETARY

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