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A  
SOCIALIST POLICY  
for the  
DEFENCE  
of  
TRADE UNIONS

This policy-statement was adopted by the  
Basingstoke Liaison Committee for the Defence  
of Trade Unions at a meeting held on Friday,  
May 12th 1972

S. J. Griffiths  
18, PARKFIELD RD  
STOURBRIDGE

# quote..

"IT HAS TAKEN YEARS of painstaking work to build the democracy of this union. Central to it is that MEMBERS decide the policies and the executive operates them.

"It is better to be held in contempt of the Court than to held in contempt by the men.

"We should NOT order the men back at Parsons, and we should NOT abide by the N.I.R.C. injunction. The policies we are pursuing at Parsons are the policies of our section of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, of the A.U.E.W. itself, and of the T.U.C.

"I now expect and demand that the T.U.C. be recalled to mobilize support for us.

"In the meantime, we should ignore the injunction, fight on, and all the best elements of the trade union movement support us".

MIKE COOLEY (President of the Technical and Supervisory Section of the A.U.E.W.) speaking against the Act.

TRADE UNIONS

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BACKGROUND

THE END OF THE LAST WAR saw the beginning of a long period of economic "boom" in which it was possible for the trade union movement to make considerable gains, both in terms of economic rewards wrested from employers whose primary concern was to keep production running at all costs, and in terms of the development of its organisations. For during the years of "reconstruction" the employers were genuinely interested in increasing production. That was the most profitable thing to do. Then came the beginning of the end of the boom in the early Sixties, when the world market began to be so "full" of commodities that trade began to fall off. It became more and more difficult for the employers to increase or even maintain their profits simply by increasing production. For they could no longer rely on being able to sell any extra goods so produced.

So they began to "rationalise", "modernise" and introduce all kinds of "Productivity Deals". The idea was no longer to try to increase the production of goods, but to increase profit per man (i.e. the return on capital invested in labour) at the expense of jobs.

At first this was not clear to many people who were confused by Wilson's demagogic chatter about "the white heat of technological revolution". But gradually unemployment began to rise. (There were over half a million registered as unemployed at the end of the Labour Government's term of office.)

By the late Sixties, however, it was clear that even all these measures were failing to preserve the bosses' "profit margins" in the face of increasing competition in the world market. In 1966 we saw the Seamen's Strike - and the first serious attempt by the Government (a Labour Government) to impose an incomes policy on a section of the working class. Then in 1969 came the "In place of Strife" proposals - the Labour Government's equivalent to the Tory Industrial Relations Act of 1971.

But the working class succeeded in forcing the Labour Government to retreat on both their anti-union proposals and their attempts at an incomes policy.

TORY POLICY

WHEN THE TORIES CAME TO POWER again in 1970, they decided on a tougher line. Their aims were (and are) almost the same as those of the Labour Government before them: to try to solve the basic problem of the capitalist class (the constantly falling rate of profit) by reducing the "wages bill". But their plans for achieving these aims involve a far more decisive attack on the organised strength and living standards of the working class than Labour was able or prepared to mount.

The British capitalist class as a whole are desperate to get into the Common Market. In a world of shrinking markets and strong competition, they need the comparative security of a larger "home" market and larger (international) units of production.

But they will be the only ones to benefit from entry into the EEC. Higher food prices and the losing of jobs due to increased competition forcing firms to "cut labour costs", would worsen the position of the working class. If the trade unions were still strong these effects might lead to a wage revolt and a tremendous increase in militancy. To prevent this the trade unions had first to be weakened by the Industrial Relations Act.

But this too posed problems for the Government and the employers. For in other countries where similar measures had been introduced, there had been a massive revolt of the working class against them. (In Australia, for example,

most of the unions simply refused to pay the fines imposed by the Government, and when a union leader was arrested over 500,000 struck, demonstrated and eventually forced the Government to back down. And similar events have occurred in this country too when governments have tried to fine, imprison or in other ways attack trade unionists. For example, in 1950 the Labour Government tried to imprison seven dockers' leaders. There were immediate mass strikes in the docks and huge demonstrations to the courts, and the Government was forced to back down and release the men it had charged.)

So the Tories set about deliberately increasing the already high level of unemployment - hoping to eventually reach a point where the unions would be forced into retreat, and so be softened up for the introduction of the Act. (The total number of unemployed now stands at about 1½ million. The Government has admitted that there are at least 400,000 unregistered unemployed workers over and above the official figures of just over 1,000,000 - though it does not publicise this fact very widely!)

But although this policy had a momentary success in the first six months of 1971 (when the number of strikes were only half the number for the same period in 1970 - resulting in a fall in the real income of workers of at least 3%), it was not long before a magnificent fight back began.

The work-in at UCS, and even more so, the sit-ins at Plessey's, at Mold and at Fisher-Bendix, all showed a new militant way of fighting redundancy. For factory occupations terrify the employers. They still remember the massive strikes of May 1968 in France where millions of workers occupied their factories, and it looked for a moment as if a workers' revolution was going to put an end to capitalism in France.

THE GREAT BLUFF SO NOT ONLY IS THE ENTIRE BRITISH ECONOMY, from the point of view of the employers, in a total mess, but the Tory policies for dealing with it are also not quite working out according to plan. For what is now happening is that the Tories are being forced to bluff their way through.

On the docks, for instance, far from having raised the level of unemployment to the point where they had broken the militancy of dockers and so could enforce the Industrial Relations Act, the Government has been forced to try to use the Act in an attempt to enforce unemployment on the docks!

But if the Tory policy is in such a shambles, and if they are just bluffing their way along, why did the TUC and the rail unions and the T&GWU back down?

The answer is simple. It is because the present TUC leaders DO NOT WANT TO PUT AN END TO CAPITALISM. Their only perspective is of working within the framework of capitalist property relations - not ending them. So they dare not seriously challenge "the rule of law" - even if it is such an obviously anti-working class law as the Industrial Relations Act - lest by so doing they should accidentally topple the Government and so precipitate a crisis.. for British capitalism like that of French capitalism in May 1968.

Yet it is clear that the TUC's alternative policy of passive non-cooperation - which can be summed up as "Pretend the Act isn't there and perhaps it will go away!" - has left the TUC with no defence against the Court's fines. That is to say that their policy was unable to defend the unions.

*But because their only perspective is one of working within the framework of capitalist property relations (expressed in such terms of political naivety as Victor Feather's "Yes we want to improve Industrial Relations too, but this is not the way to do it"!), these gentlemen are unable to correct their mistake and start leading a campaign of active opposition to the Act. So*

instead, they prattle on about it being "the law of the land" (ignoring the fact that the whole history of trade unionism in this country has been one in which the unions had to establish themselves despite the "law of the land" in the shape of the Combination Acts, etc), and then set about "redefining" the word "co-operation", so that unions can co-operate with the Act when they are under attack by it!

A policy of active opposition to the Act is, however, just exactly what is needed.

It means a policy which is not afraid to go outside the law of the land in the best traditions of the days when the early trade unions were faced with the Combination Laws, the traditions represented by the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

It means a policy which is not afraid to go on the offensive, not only against the employer, but also against the State; not only at the economic level of struggle, but also at the political level - against Capitalism itself.

## PROGRAMME

### PREAMBLE

THIS PROGRAMME has been drawn up with the following basic points in mind:-

- 1) We live under Capitalism. This means that we recognise that our society is dominated by that class of people who live on the return from investing their wealth (in the form of capital) in the labour of other (the working class) - a society in which production, being carried on for the purpose of making profit and not to supply the wants and needs of our society, is determined by the vagaries of the world capitalist market.
- 2) The self-activity of the working class. The working class has no need of anyone to make administrative "calls to action" - strike on such and such a day, take this or that action, or, adopt this or that form of struggle. On the contrary it is daily in a struggle against the employers, and is constantly inventing new forms of struggle suited to obtaining its ends - the NUM's flying pickets, the sit-ins in Manchester, etc.
- 3) The need for a political struggle. But the spontaneous struggle of the working class is fundamentally an economic struggle - to achieve better terms for the sale of labour. It takes place within the framework of the social order of Capitalism. However, this level of struggle, is now proving inadequate even for the defence of past gains, both as regards wage levels and as regards trade union organisation. What is needed, therefore, is a different level of struggle - to achieve the annihilation of the social order which forces the have-nots to sell themselves to the rich.
- 4) The need for Socialism. We believe that all the problems faced by the working class (unemployment, low wages, bad housing, etc., etc.) derive from the continued existence of capitalism, and that therefore they can only be resolved through this struggle for an end to Capitalism and the establishment of Socialism.
- 5) The need for a Programme for this struggle. If the idea of an end to Capitalism and the establishment of Socialism is not to appear to be just "pie in the sky", however, what is needed is a programme for struggle which will drive back, undermine and break up the power of the capitalist class in our society; a programme which is both realistic and yet challenges the right of the capitalist class to rule our lives; a programme that sets about solving the problems faced by the working class at the expense of the capitalist class. A programme, in short which prepares the ground for the overthrow of capitalism.

# 1. trade union independence

THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE of any workers' organisation is that it must be completely independent of the Capitalist State. The trade unions are organisations of workers for workers, or they are not trade unions.

The aim of the Industrial Relations Act is not to smash the trade unions, but to use the threat of smashing them to force their full-time officials to police the working class.

We can see this clearly in relation to recent events inside the T&GWU, where the National Industrial Relations Court (N.I.R.C.) is demanding that the T&GWU "purge its contempt" by "dis-associating itself" from its own members, the shop stewards leading the blacking campaign in defence of dockers' jobs.

In other words, instead of the executive committees and officials of the trade unions representing the rank-and-file to the bosses, they are to represent the bosses to their members. Instead of union rule books being framed to suit the needs and wishes of their members, they are to be framed to suit the needs and wishes of a representative of the capitalist state - the "Registrar of Trade Unions".

But as Mike Cooley (President of the T.A.S.S) put it so well, "IT IS BETTER TO BE HELD IN CONTEMPT OF THE COURT THAN TO BE HELD IN CONTEMPT BY THE MEN".

Therefore, we must raise in the trade union movement the following sorts of slogans TO EXPLAIN THIS FUNDAMENTAL IDEA of the need to maintain the independence of the trade unions from the capitalist state:

FOR THE REPEAL OF THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ACT

NO FURTHER LAWS AGAINST THE TRADE UNIONS

NO REGISTRATION

NO RECOGNITION OF THE N I.R.C.

TOTAL OPPOSITION TO THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ACT

NO TO STATE INTERFERENCE IN THE TRADE UNIONS

NO CO-OPERATION WITH THE CAPITALIST STATE

# 2. no incomes policy

THE TORIES SAY they have abandoned any idea of imposing an incomes policy on the trade unions, but in reality they do try to fix a "ceiling" for wage increases. Until the Miners' Strike, the "norm" was 7%. At the moment they are trying to hold the railwaymen to around 11% on the basic.

And we should note that the Labour leaders are still trying to negotiate some kind of deal with the TUC leaders over what kind of incomes policy they would accept under a Labour Government. For the Labour leadership is trying to prove to the capitalist class that it can deliver the goods with more moderate less risky policies than those of the Tories. This is what Roy Jenkins means when he talks about the need for Labour to have policies that are both

practical and idealistic. They are two sorts of policies. The latter are the "pie-in-the-sky" variety of "socialist policies" to which the Labour leadership are always "committing" themselves; they are designed to give the Party a left-wing look ready for an election. The former are to be the actual policies the Labour leaders would pursue - in the service of capitalism.

Therefore we must oppose the very idea of any kind of Incomes Policy imposed on the working class - whether it is suggested by Tory or Labour.

For it not only represents another case of STATE INTERFERENCE - this time in collective bargaining - but it also implies that the working class is in some way "to blame" for the prices-wages spiral of inflation. In fact, as we have seen (see the Analysis), inflation is the result of the situation of world trade, which in turn results from the unplanned nature of world capitalist production.

This fact also shows the total inadequacy of the slogan "Tories out - Labour in!", when the Parliamentary Labour Party, working within the framework of capitalism, will obviously be obliged to pursue essentially the same policies as the present Tory Government - albeit in a more "moderate" form.

#### NO TO ANY FORM OF INCOMES POLICY

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## 3. right of veto

AT FIRST SIGHT the right of veto on management decisions may not seem to have much relevance to the question of defence of trade unions.

But it is in the workplace that the unions are tried and tested. Without a clear programme of how we think they should fight there, the rest of our programme would be reduced to mere abstract theorising.

The fundamental question as before is to undermine the power and authority of the capitalist vis a vis the worker. It means setting new restrictions on the employer's "rights" that will make it easier for workers to defend their rights (The Industrial Relations Act aims to do the same thing in reverse - to set new restrictions on workers' rights so as to make it easier to defend profits).

The right of veto on management decisions affecting workers' jobs has two main functions:- 1) IT REJECTS ANY RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE RUNNING OF THE FIRM UNDER CAPITALISM, and 2) IT ASSERTS AN ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL REGULATOR (workers' mass meetings) OVER AGAINST THE VAGARIES OF THE CAPITALIST MARKET.

Thus the RIGHT TO VETO JOB LOSS would mean that workers could not be made unemployed just because of a "down-turn" in the market for the products of the firm they work for.

The right of veto would take the form of imposing a comprehensive series of "STATUS QUO" clauses in all agreements, such as the following:-

- THE RIGHT TO VETO MOVEMENT OF WORKERS WITHIN THE PLANT
- THE RIGHT TO VETO SHIFT WORKING AND OVERTIME
- THE RIGHT TO VETO NEW SYSTEMS OF PAYMENT
- THE RIGHT TO VETO DANGEROUS WORKING AND SPEED-UP
- THE RIGHT TO VETO THE INTRODUCTION OF NEW PLANT
- THE RIGHT TO VETO JOB LOSS

# 4. trade union democracy

FOR A REALLY EFFECTIVE CAMPAIGN in defence of trade unions, the largest number of workers possible must be involved in the struggle. But, through undemocratic practices, and failure to pursue their members' interests on the part of many union leaders and officials,

many workers have ceased to be involved in the affairs of the trade unions. This is most dramatically illustrated in the miserably low numbers of workers attending branch meetings.

Most people who end up as full-time trade union officials began as good militants. But there is an inbuilt tendency for the emergence of bureaucratic interests in the workers' movement - that is, interests which are in contradiction to those of the rank-and-file membership.

Continuous contact with employers (who often turn out to be quite pleasant personally), accompanied by a relatively higher standard of living and style of life than their members, and psychological pressures such as praise from the employers (the "captains of industry") and the Government (not to mention the press!) for persuading their members to "exercise restraint" - all these make a powerful impact on full-time trade union officials.

And in addition, unofficial rank-and-file action serves to disrupt the routinism of a trade union office - and with it, the possibility of a smooth quiet life!

This is why so many trade union officials become ready and willing to stop or "moderate" any rank-and-file struggle. Indeed, they are almost obliged to attack any rank-and-file moves outside their control since their social position depends on them being able to "deliver the goods" - to the employers as well as to the workers.

As long as they feel they cannot influence decisions, the mass of workers will tend to be indifferent to their trade unions.

Therefore, in order to involve the mass of workers, there must be a massive extension of trade union democracy. There must be an end to executives over which the rank-and-file have no control, and an end to officials who are SELECTED from above instead of ELECTED from below.

ALL OFFICIALS TO BE ELECTED AND SUBJECT TO INSTANT RECALL BY THE RANK-AND-FILE

OFFICIALS SHOULD NOT BE PAID MORE THAN THE AVERAGE WAGE OF THE MEN AND WOMEN THEY REPRESENT

NO BANS OR PROSCRIPTIONS

NO SECRET NEGOTIATIONS

ALL DECISIONS TO BE TAKEN BY MASS MEETINGS, OR BY MEETINGS OF DIRECTLY ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES OF THE WORKERS

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## CONCLUDING NOTE

THE CONCEPT OF THE PROGRAMME set out in the preceding pages, bases itself on the idea that the Liaison Committees for the Defence of Trade Unions should see themselves NOT as a "ginger" group to "get things moving" (and then disband), but as the nucleus for a series of left fractions in the trade unions which will fight for the trade unions to adopt this sort of socialist programme of struggle - against capitalism itself.

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