

THE BULLETIN

FOR SOCIALIST SELF-MANAGEMENT

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Prices and Incomes

At the time of publication there has been no decision by the TUC either to accept or reject the terms offered by the Government. The general question of inflation etc. is dealt with in the article "Talks About What", and there was an editorial on present talks in the 1st Oct. issue. We shall, however, be returning to the question in the next issue since it is one that affects us all, and may have far reaching consequences.

Ireland

The Government's Green Paper on Northern Ireland can be summed up in four words - "a load of cobblers". Despite all the long winded verbiage it still comes down to trying to have their cake and eat it. Having created their own monster over fifty years ago by setting up the six counties as a separate state they are now embarrassed by it. From the point of view of the capitalist class in Britain it would be better and cheaper to run Ireland through the Green Tories of the South. But they cannot jettison their friends in the North because it would create a Protestant backlash of such proportions that the army would not be able to contain it. Therefore the Tories have come up with a set of bland formulas by which they hope to put Northern Ireland back to sleep for another long period. But it is unlikely to succeed.

We say that the British Army should be withdrawn from Northern Ireland, they are there for no other reason than to promote the interests of British imperialism. Let the Irish people as whole decide their own future. For a United Socialist Ireland.

Help

We would like to ask the help of our readers in a number of ways. First, we would like to get more local, on the spot, reports and comments. Second, we should like readers to take a small bundle of Bulletins to sell. Third, if possible, we would be glad to send comrades along to areas to hear your views and put ours on self-management and related questions. Lastly, (yes you've guessed it!) we are appealing for money, to expand The Bulletin and make it more effective. We have a number of pamphlets in the pipeline, but the speed at which they can be produced depends on our finances.

TALKS ABOUT WHAT?

By this time it must be clear to every working man and woman, every organised worker, that the present Tory government and their monopoly capitalist interests cannot solve 'inflation'. Inflation - which is an international disease affecting all capitalist countries - has become, over the years, endemic for British capitalism.

The 1964-70 Labour government was mercilessly assailed by the Tories for its incompetence in running the capitalist system, but since the Tories took office in '70 one does not need a good memory to enumerate the catalogue of lies under which the present government operates. We were promised a halt to rising prices; electorate agreement on market entry; full employment; cheaper rents and more houses. But the dictates of the money-grubbing-monopoly-capitalist-system have given us the complete opposite: entry into the common market without the people's consent, higher rents and thousands of homeless families and one million unemployed, etc. etc...

There is nothing surprising about the twists and turns of capitalist politicians and their governments. It is a rather characteristic feature of capitalist society that all carefully worked out plans of the capitalists are thrown into confusion and chaos whenever unavoidable crises occur. That is why status-quo politicians are expert liars because they react to pressures and forces they cannot control. Lying to the people is a sacred commandment of capitalist society, for the absurdity in minority ownership of the means of existence which is based on production for profit, leaves the large majority of the people at the whim of an infinitesimal minority; only the systematic profusion of lies can justify such a state of affairs.

After assuming the helm of state in 1970 the overriding prerequisite of the government, faced with spiralling inflation, is to reduce the standard of living of the working class. Heath's initial tactic in this regard, especially the sweetener experienced over the Postmen's defeat, contained the element of blue-blooded chastisement of the entire working class (anti-labour laws) which was strongly 'rolled-back' by the miners, the railwaymen and the dockers. Because of this check to its offensive the government has been reluctantly forced to employ a new tactic, which, in relation to its former tactic is exceedingly conciliatory but not concessionary: embrace the TUC leaders (happy birthday Hughie!) and talk turkey with them. At this point it is necessary to understand that the forces swaying and driving this government lie in the historical sickness of British capitalism. Ever since this system was born workers were always called upon by their exploiters to 'tighten your belts' and jam will follow. Needless to mention two destructive world wars and numerous small wars all over the globe and still, up to now, workers haven't got all their jam. However, this new tactic by the government ought to be examined.

It is not altogether difficult to trace the sequence of events that brought about the tripartite talks. The collapse of Heath's 'lame duck' and '8% pay norm' policies created an estrangement within the monopoly class on how to pursue a victorious offensive against the working class. The weight of the latter within the capitalist economy immediately brings about a dual-power situation once the entire class moves into action. The capitalist class is powerless when faced with the collective strength of workers, so the CBI's manifest disapproval of Heath's policies pushed the former into a dialogue with the TUC. These two bodies being aware of the rising volcano, decided to

talk things over (curbing inflation) which demonstrated their mutual fears of the working class. Such an encouraging development was the green light to the government to talk to the TUC from which it had previously kept aloof.

Disagreements amongst the capitalist class and their government are not basically fundamental, even the most intelligent of capitalist governments can commit the most awful stupidities under the impact of class struggle, which has the tendency to mentally disorientate certain forces within the ruling class. Cohesion is very difficult to maintain in such circumstances. This was unmistakably demonstrated at the Tory party conference which showed that there are forces generating within the ruling class for a fascist solution. But the conference also showed the olive branch Heath is prepared to offer the TUC bureaucracy when he indicated "an offer to employers and unions to share fully with the government the benefits and obligations involved in running the national economy". This statement smacks of corporatism.

The decision of the TUC to enter talks with the government on the division of the surplus (wages) reveals the unqualified conviction of most General Council members that capitalism can satisfy the social and psychological needs of the working class. Though it is true that not all of them are in agreement with having cosy chats with the government almost all of them have subscribed to the following demands:

6 per cent growth; no Housing Finance Act rent rises; more local authority houses; unemployment to fluctuate between 400,000 and 500,000; 7½% value added tax; penal capital gains tax on property deals; penal rates on empty offices and classy flats; price cuts in cereals; subsidies on milk and potatoes; return of the consumer council; no action on wages by the government while its talks are on; better threshold clauses; suspension of the Industrial Relations Act; and so on, and so on etc...

Though these demands contain revolutionary implications as a result of the present crisis of monopoly capitalism they, nevertheless, are shot through and through with reformism. Heath and the Tories are fully cognizant of the petty bourgeois simplicity of some General Council members; they know that Feather and his moderates have no control over the mass of rank and file workers. They are also aware of the dangers of provoking a split in the bureaucratic camp: it might result in the elimination of 'right' wing influence. From all sides the Tories are cornered. It therefore follows that the present exercise in complex manoeuvres is designed either to draw the union leadership into corporate status and psychologically win the middle class (this is the class whose opinion counts as public opinion) to its side, or failing this to threaten the union bureaucrats with compulsory wage-price controls. Either way the Tories are doomed to failure.

The present crisis of monopoly capitalism precludes the possibility of the ruling class achieving any long term equilibrium. A challenge thus faces the workers' movement whose constituent parts have shown a fighting spirit beyond question. The solution, however, to the present capitalist economic chaos and anarchy is the socialisation of the means of existence under self-managed socialism. Whether the bureaucrats in the workers' movement recognise this truism or not, hard facts will sooner or later (emphasis on sooner) penetrate their skulls for a living alternative to bourgeois anarchy.

Nobby Clarke.

THE FIGHT FOR LOWER PAY

The sections of workers who most frequently fall for the 'wage and price restraint' argument are generally the lower paid workers. Why should the promise of a limit of £3 appear attractive to workers who would need an increase of £10 to bring them up to a decent living standard? Because these workers are not strong enough to keep their wages up through their own actions (which is how they came 'low paid' workers in the first place).

Since the weaker areas of the T.U. movement are unlikely to get help from stronger sections, they are likely to look somewhere else for salvation. Trade unionists in a weak position (and unorganised workers) particularly 'white collar workers' are very open to promises of a 'strong government to bring fairness and justice to all'. If you are convinced that you can't do your own fighting the 'natural' thing to do is to let your betters do it for you - but that means your 'betters' (employers/government) will choose who the enemy is that they are going to fight on your behalf.

The government for some strange reason decides that the enemy of the 'low paid' worker is the 'higher paid' worker and prepares to redistribute wealth equally and create a new and fair society. 'Society' in this case is composed entirely of people who have to sell their labour in order to live, by the way. What does it matter to the employers how their wage bill is divided up as long as the total bill doesn't go up and profits continue to rise? The 'working people' could even be left to fight amongst themselves (self-management) over their slice of the 'national cake' and with the TUC's help the working people might never notice where the rest of the cake goes.

It is the greatest tribute to the British educational system, press and T.V. that so many 'low paid' workers spend most of their lives thinking that the 'higher paid' workers (£1 an hour or more) are the expropriators who must be expropriated.

The employers interpretation of 'equal pay for women' gives an idea of their plans for a just society - to them equal pay for women is achieved by reducing mens' wages to those of women. For the employers and governments to give us a more equal distribution of wealth they must defeat the strongest sections of the trade union movement - and many 'low paid' workers would like to see the employers and government succeed, because they really believe they will benefit. As a docker said recently - "trade unions are a thing of the past, what we need now is a union for the whole working class".

D.M. 26.10.72

A CONFERENCE ON WORKERS' CONTROL IN EDUCATION AND THE MASS MEDIA

To be held on Saturday 25th November, 10-30 to 5-30 at the London College of Printing, Elephant and Castle, London S.E.1.
Sponsored by ACTT, Central London Branch NUJ, LCS Political Committee, and RACS Educational Committee.
Credentials 50p per person from: Ron Taylor, 100 Ashley Drive, Whitton, Middx.
Delegates and Observers Only - from trade unions at all levels, branch shop, chapel, school etc.; or from other interested labour movement organizations.

WORKERS' CONTROL IN THE MOTOR INDUSTRY: EROSION OR EXPANSION?

On Tuesday of last week (i.e. 24th Oct.), toolroom workers at Coventry's two Chrysler's car plants voted almost unanimously to accept a new wage structure which turns them into salaried staff on £2,500 per year; this gets rid of a piecework system that has been in operation for the last thirty years. At Longbridge, piecework is on the point of giving way to a flat-rate pay system for Austin-Morris workers. These are not isolated deals, they are pilot schemes: the impending Austin-Morris agreement will eventually reach the whole of British Leyland, and the Chrysler staff status deal will be seen by other employers, at least (and perhaps also by the AUEW), as an example of how to cope with "leapfrogging" wage claims.

Who has gained what? Take the staff status deal. Apart from going up in the world, the men at Coventry have got a rise of £3 a week, which brings them up to the level of the Jaguar toolroom workers, and some minor fringe benefits on sick pay and pensions. In return, the men have agreed to labour flexibility and a relaxing of demarcation problems, and workers on the Avenger model have agreed to work while the track is in motion. So far so good - an old fashioned productivity deal. But the positive benefits of turning wage-earners into salaried staff seem at first sight to be a mirage. For one thing, it gives an illusion of job security which is quite unjustified: the men are still direct producers, which means that they are still first in line for the chop when the market turns uncertain. Second, if the scheme is applied in other, broader areas, it will mean that the new 'salary' will have to be created out of an average wage, which means that some men will find that a salary is worth less than their previous wage: in Sweden at this moment there are wildcat strikes going on for precisely this reason, where a fair percentage of Baltic shipyard workers, recently turned into salaried staff, have found that their earnings actually went down (with their union's approval!).

But the most significant aspect is the abolition of piecework both at Longbridge and among the Chrysler toolmakers. Nobody in his right mind would defend piecework for its own sake. A hundred years ago, rightly, it was the symbol of the working man's slavery, and there were tremendous battles to get rid of it; it is still slavery. But it is also one of the main forms of leverage which the shop-steward has in raising wages. More to the point, it is one of the specific ways of turning upside down any "incomes policy" - voluntary statutory or under threat of mass executions - since a straight £2 (or whatever) increase cannot take into account the thousands of minor adjustments in the product which entail a revision in piecework rates. (Piecework in itself shows that an incomes policy is nonsense, before you even begin to consider workers' attitudes). In return for negotiating away piecework, shop stewards have a management promise to "respect the status quo".

But what is the status quo? This is the question. Hasn't it depended, particularly in track work, on the stewards' negotiating power over piecework rates? On the other hand, doesn't the abolition of piecework put an end to a particularly barbaric and humiliating way of earning a living? We have to be clear about this - doubly clear, since the main aim of the State/CBI/TUC negotiations going on at the moment is to reduce the shop-floor power to a safer level. If by the shop-floor we mean the working class as a whole, then under the present circumstances, where cost-of-living claims are political demands, this aim is absurd and unworkable. But if we mean the shop stewards' movement, then this could just feasibly be got at. Whatever the government and the bosses try to do, in their feeble way, shop stewards and the men to

whom they are responsible have to make sure that they don't help in the erosion of their own power.

There is more than one way of falling into this trap. Abolishing piece-work has its good aspects. And staff status does not mean that these workers are 'joining the other side': far from it - it is the graduates and highly qualified salaried staffs in industry and outside it who suffer from an increasing division of labour, who are more and more remote from the centres of decision making, who are strengthening and increasing the size of the real proletariat. No, the trap can be sprung by quite simple, everyday mechanisms. A case in point is the recent acceptance by AUEW workers at Lucas plants in the Midlands of a check-off system for union subs. It is not just that having your dues deducted from your pay packet gives a superficial appearance of union-management collusion: the check-off system threatens the 'status quo' by threatening one of the simplest, most basic functions of the shop steward. Even the union rep who has his eye on a pile-carpeted office, or whose brother-in-law is the floor manager, still has a visible function as ticket steward. If that goes then who exactly is he?

The whole history of the shop stewards' movement, especially in the motor industry, is tied to changes in methods of production. Major changes are just beginning here (though they have reached a lot further in some other countries). If the shop stewards' movement loses ground while these changes take place, it will only have itself to blame. Of course, new methods of production and job organisation will create new resistances and new insoluble problems for the bosses; but it would be tragic if there is a whole period of time before these can be exploited owing to a decline in shop-floor power.

It is unlikely that such a decline will take place. The shop stewards can be shunted away from their control over purely economic questions - it could easily happen in the Midlands and has already happened at Fords Dagenham. But in so far as this happens, the workers and their delegates will be forced into wider areas, into a wider definition of workers' control, involving a greater say in the whole work process, especially line speeds. Take the impending Ford claim as an example. The demand for mutuality on line speeds is near the end of the list, yet the feeling of the rank and file is that this is perhaps the most important demand: the feeling is probably only half-conscious, but it is nonetheless real, especially in a company where the average life-expectancy on retirement of a man who has worked on track for ten years or more is 18 months. Must the same thing happen again with the Ford claim? Will the workers come out of it with another compromise wage-deal ('victory' or 'sell-out' according to taste) and the mutuality demand not even whispered at the negotiating table? If the shop stewards listen more closely to the union officials than to the feelings of the men who have delegated them, they will be cutting their own throats. Why? Because joint agreement on line speeds is not only a simple humanitarian need, not only is it an absolute gain which management cannot tamper with for its own advantage, it is also the kind of area into which the shop stewards' movement and rank-and-file power must move if they are to maintain their present positions, let alone strengthen them. The lesson for the shop stewards could not be clearer: listen to the base, it talks sense.

How does all this tie in with the future of the motor industry and the men who work in it? While we are still juggling with mutuality demands, Volvo and Saab plants in Sweden have introduced job enrichment schemes. The assembly line as we know it has gone: car sections are assembled in self-contained

workshops by small teams of between 15 and 25 men, who decide among themselves how the work is to be distributed and organise their own work rhythm, breaks etc; car bodies are stockpiled between each working zone so that, as far as possible, there is a natural working rhythm throughout the process. Of course, this has been handed down from the top, by management. But although the men did not consciously fight for it, it was they who won it: labour turnover was running at 50% per year under the assembly-line system, and absenteeism and sabotage were causing tremendous production losses. The new system has proved profitable. General Motors in the U.S. is rumoured to be thinking hard about this: a series of wildcat strikes has centred around the issue of track speeds and boredom at work, to the extent that the Union of Automobile Workers has been forced to call official strikes on these issues alone, regardless of wages.

In this country, job enrichment schemes in the motor industry probably aren't on. For one thing, the initial capital needed isn't there, and neither is the necessary faith - the Anglo-American employers are notoriously suspicious of British 'labour relations', even British Leyland prefer to export production to Spain and South America, and British employers are generally scared stiff of any intrusion of labour into their divine privileges. However, the same pressures are there: at Dagenham, where the workers seem to be somewhere near the end of their tether, there have been several walkouts in the last few weeks which are very similar to the kind that have taken place at General Motors. It is quite possible that bosses here will one day find it in their own interests to give limited leeway on line speeds, conditions etc.

It would be stupid to say that since such schemes are in the bosses' interests they should not form a part of workers' demands. It is a question of what the bosses are forced to do in their own class interests: they are concerned with profits - with immediate interests, which compel them to do things which actually surrender their long-term interests to those of the workers and society as a whole. This kind of workers' control in the motor industry might help to preserve its profitability on capitalist terms, but that is not to say that it is merely a reformist or gradualist measure (although this must be considered). Once workers are free to organise their own work rhythms, to communicate with each other on the job, and (as management hopes) 'identify' with the product, then they might start to think about the nature of that product. The internal combustion engine is hopelessly old fashioned in technological terms; it pollutes the atmosphere; it destroys the towns with dirt, noise, jams and ringway schemes. It is only the equally irrational system of capitalism and vested interests that has prevented the development of an electric motor engine, clean and efficient, making possible computer-controlled traffic and circulation, and ultimately the social ownership of all means of transport.

We can only achieve control over these sort of questions if we start by listening to what the rank-and-file is really saying when it throws something inside the bodywork of a car, causing a mysterious rattle that can never be traced.

J.D. 28.10.72.

THE LABOUR PARTY IN PERSPECTIVE

The article in the last issue of The Bulletin on the Labour Party conference raised a number of questions which need to be cleared up. The article - by M.J. - although attempting to explain the situation in fact helped to confuse issues.

Can we say in fact that "the Labour Party remains a coalition of real socialists and social democrats"? This attempts a fine distinction which does not exist in reality. That the Labour Party remains a coalition there can be no doubt. But who are the component parts? Those who M.J. designated 'social democrats' are more usually referred to as the right-wing, and for good reason, since they represent the most open and consistent proponents of bourgeois ideology within the labour movement. Those who are referred to as 'real socialists' are properly speaking left social-democrats. If we say this, it is not to quibble about words, nor belittle those referred to. No, we say this so that we may understand. And this is what has to be understood, namely, that all those who today take parliamentary and Labour Party methods and politics seriously as a means of obtaining social change are still prisoners of corporativist illusions.

This does not mean that we should not pay serious attention to what goes on in the Labour Party, or that we should not collaborate with those elements who are moving towards a revolutionary standpoint, particularly on questions relating to workers' control and self-management. But this is quite different from saying that we should "give a lot of attention to work within the Labour Party." (my emphasis). For many years there was little prospect for revolutionary socialists outside of the Labour Party and Trade Unions, and they had to work within that framework. However, today the situation is different. Today the working class is fighting and creating new forms of action outside of (and sometimes in opposition to) the traditional workers' organisations. There is now a whole new world of movements, e.g. women's liberation, that cannot be fitted into the traditionalist mould.

The apparent shift to the left at the Labour Party conference was not the result of struggles inside that body, but a reflection of the class struggle outside of itself. In some respects it was a protective reflex action on the part of those - like Wedgwood-Benn - who see a potential band-waggon to jump on; just as many did with the UCS work-ins, but only to head it off. This apparent move to the left (and it was only apparent as another Labour Government would show) was something that should not surprise Marxists. Like all such parties out of office the Labour Party makes left noises to catch votes at the next election.

What would be wrong, would be to underestimate the power that such a left move can generate within an already militant working class. At this stage the left phrases of the Labour Party merely reflect this mood. Yet they have the possibility of developing a logic of their own and further re-inforcing the workers' militancy. However, our duty is - as Rosa Luxemburg said - neither to weep nor laugh, but understand.

K.J.T.31.10.72.

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