

THE BULLETIN

FOR SOCIALIST SELF-MANAGEMENT

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FLYING SQUADS AND FLYING PICKETS

An agreement has just been reached between West German chemical firms and the chemical workers' union (IG Chemie) on a precise definition of the picketing laws, which will act as a precedent for other industries: no threats or force or blocked entrances, and a formula for marking an 11 foot passageway on the ground in front of each works entrance. Nothing startling, except that it was the original draft proposals of lawyers acting for the union - no bargaining necessary. Robert Carr's statement to the Conservative Party Conference that he will use special 'flying' police squads to 'deal with' pickets looks a bit crude alongside the German law. They have just one thing in common: they are difficult to enforce, especially if the militants are numbered in hundreds of thousands. The game is serious, though. The TUC - moving left, they say - spends less time with its own members than with the government and CBI, tossing unemployment percentages around as a bargaining counter (and perhaps secretly drawing up new laws on picketing). All sorts of suggestions, imported and home-grown, are made as to how to isolate the virus. We have had the EEC's suggestion of putting worker-'directors' on 'supervisory boards', German-style; a call from the Institute of Economic Affairs for a Swedish-style 'labour market board' to soften the hardships of redundancy and prevent sit-ins; the correspondence columns of the Financial Times have been touting Wedgwood Benn as a 'populist' who could save the bacon if things get too rough.

This is why the isolate-the-militants game is so serious: the potential militants, from these suggestions for a 'cure', would seem to number in nightmare proportions. Special anti-picket police squads will be no match for them.

BACK TO NORMAL ON THE BUILDING SITES?

The rank and file building workers have not been defeated either by their own national officials or the employers. The employers and their friends in the union have gained nothing but time, they can only count their success by what they managed to hang on to.

The settlement was far short of the claim, but nevertheless, it is a big step forward compared with previous settlements. The most important gain has been the spreading of militant trade unionism to an unprecedented number of sites throughout the country. Even allowing for a tailing off of enthusiasm in the coming weeks, organised workers have gained a foothold on a majority of sites, but it will need more hard work to consolidate the position. The employers are no doubt reconsidering their 19th century methods of dealing with their 'labour problems', meanwhile 'the lump', the blacklist and treacherous union leadership continue to threaten the rank and file movement.

In Birmingham the men stayed out another week after the sell-out, in defiance of the National Executive until they'd had a chance to discuss the situation and vote on a return to work at a mass meeting - such is the strength and confidence that has been built up in the area. The militants were even able to go round successfully calling out the weaker sites who had returned to work before the mass meeting.

Jim Nettles.

10.10.72

SOME COMMENTS ON ASPECTS OF THE BUILDING STRIKE

1. National Agreements and Company Agreements

National claims are important for building ideas of solidarity, but in terms of settlements they are important for pushing up basic rates on weakly organised sites. A high basic rate is the best way of attracting men off the 'lump'. In the strike Company agreements were splitting the men more than the employers, most Company Agreements were with tiny firms and the Union and Morning Star overplayed them, creating confusion among the men. The situation would have been different if one of the main Companies, like Laing, had settled for the full claim or something near it.

2. The 35 hour week

The 35 hour claim was a move to appease the militants (it is one of the Charter demands). It was important to the militants because they understood that it couldn't be eaten away by inflation, and they realised that a 35 hour week could be used to fight unemployment. However it wasn't popularised among the rank and file - most saw it as a chance to get in an extra 5 hours of over-time (not enough attention paid to 'the quality of life'). The officials played down the 35 hour demand until they managed to drop it altogether (very similar to the fate of the 35 hour demand in the Manchester Engineering Workers' pay claim). One local official at a mass meeting said the unions weren't serious about the 35 hour week because 'the employers won't give it to us anyway'. The demand for 35 hours had disappeared from official union statements and posters by the time the strike was half over. But the officials were only taking advan-

tage of the lack of popular support and understanding of 35 hour demand. Some of the Company Agreements include reduction of the working week over the next couple of years.

3. Claiming Social Security

In Birmingham the UCATT officials left claiming entirely in the hands of the strike committee (which took up a lot of time and diverted their attention away from other important issues). The strike committee was allowed to use union paper, stencils, duplicating machines, secretaries; they were even given an office in the UCATT headquarters.

The strike committee persuaded the Social Security to set up a separate office for strikers. This office was set up by the S.S. and the men had to go to the S.S., whereas during the pit strike the miners set up their own office and the S.S. had to go to them. The separate office was a mistake for the building workers, since the S.S. could threaten to close it if there was 'trouble'. Also the office was open only one day a week which meant there were no pickets out that day. However with the help of the Claimants Union and strikers with considerable claiming experience from the Woodgate Valley Strikes the men did eventually crack the S.S. in Birmingham.

The situation in nearby Dudley was completely different. There was no organisation, no special office and some of the Birmingham Strike Committee went to help out. They got the men to march on the Dudley S.S. offices in the afternoon. When they hit the S.S. office they only succeeded in disrupting the other claimants and alienating them. On top of this everybody got chucked out at 4.0 pm precisely by the police, without getting any money. Realising their mistakes they hit the Dudley office again, this time early in the morning and they helped other claimants with their claims. - "They didn't know what they were entitled to, they were getting pushed off day after day. We got one chap £2 more than he should have, they could see the S.S. were conning them. The clerks were very bitter, because we knew more than they did". (A.B.)

"It never goes the way you want, its organised chaos, but its the best organised chaos I've had since I've been doing strike claim committee work. We were on top definitely, but we weren't completely successful." (J.M.)

4. Eviction for non-payment of rent etc.

"We said if anybody was threatened with eviction we'd put a mass picket on the door. Also the workers who actually have to come and cut your gas or electric off said they wouldn't cross our picket line (round the house)" (J.M.)

The Birmingham Labour Council agreed no building worker would be evicted for non-payment of rent during the strike.

5. Building Workers Charter.

"The Charter Group in Birmingham said to the officials - 'right, there's your men, do something with them' and they had to". (J.M.)

A Charter group was formed in Birmingham after 'bovver' between officials and shop stewards. The group was practically the Birmingham Shop Stewards' Committee, minus the right wingers and the officials. The main activity was to agitate for an escalation of the selective strikes. They achieved this by touring the sites holding meetings and pressuring the officials to hold weekly demonstrations and marches through the city centre. But once the strike was

escalated the group stopped meeting, and as a group its part in the strike diminished although group members were prominent leaders of the rank and file. The national leadership of Charter said the officials had taken a fighting stand, and it was only necessary to give them maximum support; events proved them wrong.

Where Charter fell down was in not producing the paper during the strike, failing to co-ordinate the rank and file regionally and nationally, placing too much faith in the officials to the detriment of the rank and file movement. This said, Charter has played a major part in bringing the movement this far, and if the lessons of the last few weeks are learned, it will continue to be the organisational centre for militants in the industry.

6. Union Democracy

It was rank and file pressure which just managed to stop Smith and the National Executive signing an agreement the first time. The real problem wasn't that Smith was a traitor to the workers (true as this is) but that union negotiators could accept a settlement without reference back to the men. More attention to the union structure from the beginning might have influenced the final sell-out. The prerequisite for union democratisation is a powerful rank and file movement, but the sell out has proved to anyone with doubts, that the UCATT rule book must be changed. This has to be done through the union branches, but despite the upsurge in activity on the sites - the union branches remain dead to all outside appearances.

7. The Press

The usual despicable role of the bosses' press during the strike was amply demonstrated in the reporting on the attack on Mike Shilvock. A few days after the sell-out Mike was beaten up in his home in the early hours of the morning by a group of unidentified intruders. In a couple of minutes they did a very professional job in breaking his arm and then disappeared as silently as they came.

The press suggested that Shilvock was a 'moderate' and may have been attacked by 'extremist' building workers incensed by the sell-out. Far from being a 'moderate' Shilvock is well known as one of Birmingham's leading militants, playing an important part in the strike, and was previously the federation Steward at the renowned Bryants Woodgate Valley Site B. At the time of the attack Bryants workers were on strike still.

The press never suggested the attackers might be in the pay of a leading Birmingham Building Employer.

8. Tactics

"If we had started hitting the cement works earlier things would have been different". (G.K.)

"We got people involved by 'enlisting' them to the flying picket". (G.K.)

"If it hadn't been for the officials we would have called out the foundry men, people who brick boilers up. That way we would have crippled the steel industry." (J.M.)

"'Tractors at (BLMC) Transmissions' offered us 100 pickets any time we needed them, but we got sold out before we could use them." (G.K.)

One trick of the employers was to go to the docks and hire men to stand around on the site to make it look like there was a drift back to work.

D.M. 8.10.72

THE LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE

The 71st Annual Conference of the Labour Party is now over. The representation of the conference is listed below:

<u>Organisation</u>	<u>Delegates</u>	<u>No. of Organisations</u>	<u>Votes</u>
Trade Unions.	610	55	5,562,000
Socialist Societies.	6	5	12,000
Co-operative organisations.	4	1	17,000
Constituency and Central Labour Parties.	556	548	706,000
Federations of Labour Parties.	6	6	13,000
	<u>1,182</u>	<u>615</u>	<u>6,310,000</u>

These numbers do not include the even greater number of ex-officio members agents, visitors and press, radio and TV reporters. All together it makes for a very large gathering, with only a small percentage of those present taking part in the discussions with much of the time dominated by the lengthy speeches from the people on the platform, members of the national executive committee (NEC). The NEC spokesmen were in the main MPs and therefore members of the parliamentary labour party (PLP).

We can now see some of the contradictions in the organisational structure of the party. At the conference which aims to enunciate party policy through the resolutions it accepts and rejects, we have the great majority of voting power with the trade unions (this is exercised by the leadership of these unions) the minority being with the constituency labour parties (CLPs). The political expression of the labour party, however, comes mainly from its MPs who in the first instance are selected by the CLPs. These selections are often little influenced by the trade unions which of course supply most of the finance for fighting election campaigns. Important steps in overcoming these contradictions will be to give party workers and trade union members a greater say in the selection of candidates for election to parliament and to expect labour MPs to accept willingly Annual Conference decisions. There were resolutions along these lines in the preliminary agenda for the Conference but on the recommendation of the conference arrangements committee they were not put forward for debate. From the body of the hall a number of speakers protested strongly but it had no effect.

The conference this year was important for a number of reasons. Resolutions which expressed the need "to create democratically elected workers' committees" the chairing of Anthony Wedgwood Benn, the strong feelings on the Housing Finance Act, general opposition to entry into the Common Market and the part played by women from the body of the hall in the debates helped to emphasise that the Labour Party remains a coalition of real socialists and social democrats. It has a membership which responds to the needs and possibilities of the situation. These members often put forward radical alternatives to those of the social democrats. The balance of forces at the moment means that the centre social

democrats are still in control and no alternative leader to Wilson has yet emerged. If the present situation continues the left forces will continue to grow and the power of the centre increasingly eroded. It is therefore especially important at this present moment that revolutionary socialists give a lot of attention to work within the Labour Party.

M.J. October 1972.

DICK ETHERIDGE AND SHOP-FLOOR POWER

A series of interviews on 'Shop Floor Power' on BBC radio started off with Dick Etheridge, shop stewards' convenor at the British Leyland plant at Longbridge Birmingham. His replies show how far the workers' power has come, but they also reveal some illusions about how this power can be extended.

First of all, he rightly says that the increase in shop-floor power is due to changes in methods of production, in which he includes automation and job division, and the increasing size of plant, where management can only communicate with workers if they are properly represented; this has been the trend ever since the first world war, when the shop stewards' movement first sprang up in the engineering industries, partly because of the new and primitive forms of assembly line production which cut the workers off from each other. This trend has increased and spread to most workplaces, until "the question of involving the workers in the decisions and the running of the factory is inescapable for the management they might plan it (manning), but in the actual operation they find the workpeople devise better methods themselves". He also scorns the managerial experiments in other countries where "if they put people into management positions they become discredited in no time," and finally he admits that "I would like to see the change where shop floor democracy is extended to the point where we control and run the factories. But this is a political development."

Exactly - a political development. But in spite of Etheridge's recognition that the insoluble problems of capitalism automatically increase shop floor power he says nothing else about political development and returns to "the reality of existing conditions", to safer waters.

The interviewer suggests that "the trade union bureaucracies haven't exactly welcomed the emergence of shop-floor power". Etheridge replies that "if you have institutions, they tend to protect their own groups, that's natural" and that in the past trade unions have prevented the growth of shop-floor power. But however 'natural' this is, today the trade unions have "definitely, definitely... reconciled themselves to shop-floor power and are working with it." You have only to read the article on the building strike in this issue to realise that this is simply not true. But even if it were, how do institutions which "naturally" protect their own group suddenly co-operate with the rank and file? His answer is: "it's a British - it's the framework of British, you know, integration and changes to meet the circumstances", in such a way as not "to disrupt society" (a polite term for revolution). So here is the formula: conflict is due to natural causes ("human nature"), and its solution depends on "muddling through" (W. Churchill) - in other words, a formula consisting of ruling-class ideas. The aim is reformist: to avoid the "disruption of society".

Etheridge shows this again when he talks about the USSR, which he recently visited. What he praises there is "good social relationships" in an enormous factory, unmanageable by capitalist standards: "they plan from the top, the man-

agements of the factory are appointed by the government, and then they have the shop stew - ... the trade-union organisation, which is responsible for putting in the plan, and they discuss it and work it out that way." He admits that conflict does occur there: "as long as you've got supervisors and supervised, and so long as you've got production methods, you'll always have conflict". So the distinction between supervisors and supervised - between managers and managed - is as permanent as production methods: this too is "natural". But the answer is "shop-floor organisation and the involvement of working people... not the Industrial Relations Bill"; this is the way to smooth things over, to minimize conflict, and in the long run to preserve the manager-managed relationship.

But isn't this the whole issue? It is the division between manager and managed that causes conflict in the first place. So where is the fallacy in Etheridge's thinking? It lies in the fact that, for him, this division is 'natural'. It is certainly natural for managers - or owners - to cling to their division, which they benefit from. But is it natural for workers to accept being managed? Etheridge thinks it is. This is obvious too in his idea about the shop steward's role, which he sees as even more specialised than the manager: "it's like a lot of people who go to the doctor: they wouldn't consider it necessary to know the ins and outs of the medical profession in order to put their faith in him... it's in the nature of people." Shop floor power, by this definition, is the privilege of the shop stewards' movement.

"Workers running the factories" (Etheridge's own words) - workers' self-management - can be achieved neither if the existing capitalist or soviet management structures are maintained nor if the workers are not involved in their own struggle against these structures. There should be more rotation of delegates. This may raise a cynical smile amongst hardened stewards, after all, "it's in the nature of people..."

No, it isn't. It is in their upbringing - sexual repression in childhood, intellectual repression in schools, class repression generally: all the things which sap self-confidence and make people delegate their power unquestioningly to others, all the things which can only be changed by the "political development" beyond the factory gates which Etheridge mentions but then sidesteps. Real achievements are made, not after but in struggle. Any CP steward worth his salt knows that to get a well-organised shop he has to make sure that jobs - management-given jobs - are switched round often enough to create a team spirit. Why shouldn't he do the same with his own job? Perhaps this is an optimistic idea: but wouldn't this make "shop-floor power" (rather than "shop-stewards' power") really mean something? It would benefit the individual steward also; when he takes one pace forward too many, he will be less likely to turn round and find no army behind him.

SELF-MANAGEMENT IN ALGERIA : TEN YEARS AFTER

In 1962, Algeria became an independent country. At the same time, something happened which had a deep significance for the world socialist movement. As the 'Colons', the French settlers, left, they abandoned their agricultural and industrial properties, which accounted for a majority of Algeria's production and the whole of its export trade. Where this happened, 'management committees' sprang up, consisting of workers' representatives who took over the running of the concerns. These committees arose spontaneously, and were responsible for maintaining the livelihoods of the working people proving that the settlers, who had barely ever tried or found it necessary to employ Algerians in managerial posts, were wrong when they considered themselves indispensable.

Though these workers' management committees were spontaneous, sections of the FLN quickly recognised their importance. On the eve of independence, the FLN's Tripoli programme stated that in view of the chaos and misery caused by war, revolution and the flight of the settlers, the involvement of the masses was absolutely necessary for the reconstruction of the country. The spontaneous development of management committees was suited for this. Over the next two years, self-management through workers' councils was instituted by a series of government decrees and statutes, with a view to extending the system throughout the economy eventually.

However, the system had to contend with opposing interests within the FLN bureaucracy and the country's fledgling bourgeoisie. In industry, it never really had a chance to get underway. In agriculture, the biggest sector and the one where it was most important, the number and variety of the attacks made on the self-management system only serve to show how strongly rooted it was in the masses. The strength and scope of this sabotage increased enormously after 1965, with Boumedienne's coup and the detention of Ben Bella, who had seen the practical wisdom of the system and encouraged it as far as he was able. The central office which co-ordinated the system, provided credit and gave advice to self-managed enterprises, was turned first into a civil service body and then into a Ministry annexe. Eventually it stifled the system rather than co-ordinated it, withheld credit to blackmail and starved the participants into line, and instead of giving assistance supplied the enterprises with obedient directors.

But the self-management system still stood, battered, till this year. The agrarian reform due to come into force on 1st November, ironically to mark the tenth anniversary, has finally suppressed it, while paying a hypocritical tribute to its power: 'The experiment (in self-management) corresponds to an advanced level of consciousness of those involved; during the next stage of the agrarian revolution the extension of the socialist agricultural sector will be achieved by other means ...', i.e. by individual distribution.

Thus Boumedienne has decided to celebrate the revolution on its anniversary by guaranteeing that it will go backwards. Self-management remains the only guarantee in the third world against both the abuse of power by national cliques (military, bourgeois or bureaucratic) and imperialist exploitation, with which the Boumedienne government is increasingly, inextricably compromised. The tenacity of the Algerian peasants over the last seven years testifies to this.

- J.D.