

SOCIALIST APPEAL

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FOR WORKERS' CONTROL OF TRANSPORT

by S. J. Bidwell

On January 1st the Railway industry became nationalised. This event is welcomed by the railway workers and the entire Trade Union movement. For two generations assemblies of railwaymen have called, in ever-increasing volume, for the nationalisation of the railways and other forms of transport. The case for nationalisation has always been a simple and unanswerable one.

The nationalisation of transport undoubtedly constitutes a progressive step. It ends the period of sectional control in favour of a single unified enterprise.

Railway workers, whose wages are among the lowest in industry, look forward to a new era in which their standards will not be maintained at the present low

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levels in the interest of profit. But the workers must have no illusions that nationalisation automatically means that the industry will be run in their interests. This is not the first experience of nationalisation of railways. Many capitalist states own the railways, for instance in Germany, South Africa and France. But in none of these cases did this make any fundamental difference to the conditions of the workers employed. Similarly, the nationalisation of the Post Office and the Royal Ordnance Factories in this country meant neither improved conditions for the workers employed in these industries, nor any advantage to the working class as a whole.

Instead of individual ownership, the capitalist class as a whole will own the railways and other means of transport.

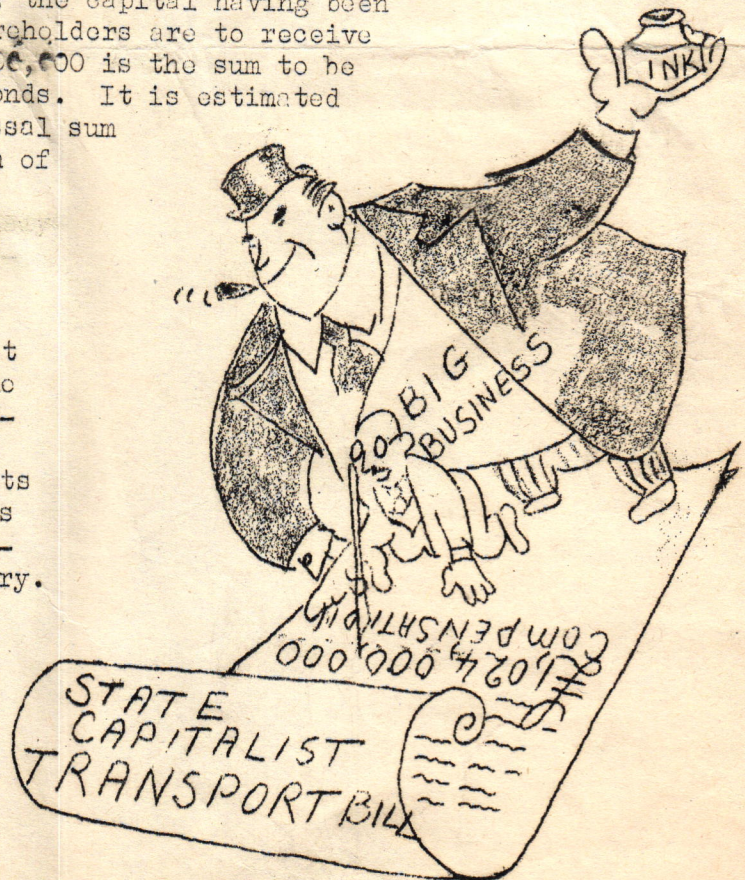
£1024,000,000 COMPENSATION TO THE BOSSES

Nationalisation of the railways follows the same pattern of the nationalisation of the mines: lavish compensation to the bosses, with control of the industry firmly remaining in the hands of representatives of the capitalist class.

Despite the fact that for years they have drawn enormous profits on their original outlay, the capital having been paid over and over again, the shareholders are to receive enormous compensation. £1,024,000,000 is the sum to be paid in the form of Government bonds. It is estimated that this will also put the colossal sum of £23,000,000 a year in the form of interest into the pockets of the shareholders.

It must have appeared peculiar not only to the railwaymen, but to the general public, which is constantly being forced to pay increased fares, allegedly due to heavy costs (such as increases in railwaymen's wages), that this tremendous burden is to be placed on the industry.

Clearly, the imposition of this terrible burden on the industry cuts right across the alleged aim of the Labour Government: that the act of nationalisation is to benefit the people. Increased freight charges which affect the



price of commodities, increased fares which assist in lowering the standards of the working class, cannot be blamed onto the miserable increases gained by the railway workers so long as this state of affairs exists.

WILL THERE BE ANY REAL CHANGE?

When one looks around further and examines the condition of railway equipment, the price the nation is already paying for the years of capitalist anarchy, one can see the farce of this situation even more. Lifting tackle at goods depots are outmoded, still depending on the old hand-winding system, instead of the use of mechanical aids. 8,000 locomotives out of a total of 20,500 are listed as over-age. There are 200,000 fewer wagons than in 1938, and over 180,000 of the existing stock are awaiting repair. Signalling system replacements are a year and a half behind schedule; permanent way renewals, two years behind. The story could go on indefinitely.

Further, the chaotic organisation under private enterprise over-shadows all these factors. The construction of competitive lines has produced in many districts a veritable spider's web of lines, multiplied far beyond the transport needs of the district, and ill-arranged for traffic purposes. It is estimated that to re-plan the railway network and terminal facilities will in itself cost millions.

Taking into consideration that the first charge on the nationalised industry will be to pay the shareholders their pound of flesh, first in bulk compensation, and annually in interest; that large sums will have to be spent to modernise the industry; and that there will be constant pressure to guarantee cheap freight charges for the employers as a whole, the workers cannot expect to see any real change in their conditions.

CAPITALISTS WILL DICTATE POLICY

The payment of this compensation is no accident. It fits perfectly with the whole set-up of the nationalised railway industry. Control is to be in the hands of the Railway Executive Committee, consisting of trusted representatives of the former railway bosses. The attempt to cover up the real character of the Executive by the fig-leaf of Allen, ex-General Secretary of the A.S.L.E & F, who has also been placed on this body, will not fool serious workers. It is significant that Allen has been given the job of Labour Relations Officer and will meet the representatives of the organised workers in any negotiations. But he will be ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE, and it is common knowledge that the best person to handle workers, from the point of view of the employing class, is one who has been drawn over from the ranks of those very same workers.

In such a set-up the railwaymen have no say at all. Even Benstead and Allen are no longer answerable to the workers, having relinquished their Union posts.

It is well known that sections of the capitalist class support the nationalisation. They do this in order to obtain cheaper transport, thus reducing their costs and making their goods more competitive on the world market. They

see the need for a degree of planning in the basic industries in their struggle for survival in face of American and other competition. They recognise that the state is the best agency for this, being in the best position to provide the necessary capital for the modernisation of these industries, by placing the burdens on the backs of the population. They do not oppose the measure provided one thing: control remains in their hands.

As Dalton pointed out: what have the railway shareholders to worry about? Under nationalisation, modernisation will be undertaken by the state and they will still be guaranteed their income; whereas if the railways remained under private enterprise, modernisation would necessitate the ploughing back of considerable profits into the industry.

WORKERS MUST CONTROL THE INDUSTRY

The only way the industry will benefit the railwaymen and the workers in general is if they control the industry. The workers are the only people who can be relied upon to safeguard, at every stage, the interests of our class.

Among sections of the railwaymen, particularly in the London area, there is a belief that Joint Consultative Committees will solve the problem. But Joint Consultative Committees as with Joint Production Committees, leave effective control in the hands of the capitalist representatives, while fooling the workers into believing that they have a say in affairs. Control is a class, not a technical question. If the railwaymen find that their pooled experience requires to be augmented by trained technicians, as they undoubtedly would, they would be the first to draw these technicians onto their Committees. But the

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essential position would remain: control of policy would be in the hands of the workers and technicians through democratically elected committees.

And, instead of Benstead (ex-N.U.R. General Secretary) receiving just under £100 per week on the Transport Commission, while the Minimum Adult Industrial Wage for the workers is only £4.12.6 per week, the workers' representatives would be paid working men's wages.

These are the problems posed by the nationalisation of the railways. If the working class is to realise its hopes in respect of the future of this industry, they must begin immediately to campaign for the policy of:

NO COMPENSATION TO THE EX-OWNERS
WORKERS CONTROL OF THE INDUSTRY

FOR SOCIALISATION - NOT STATE
CAPITALISM

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