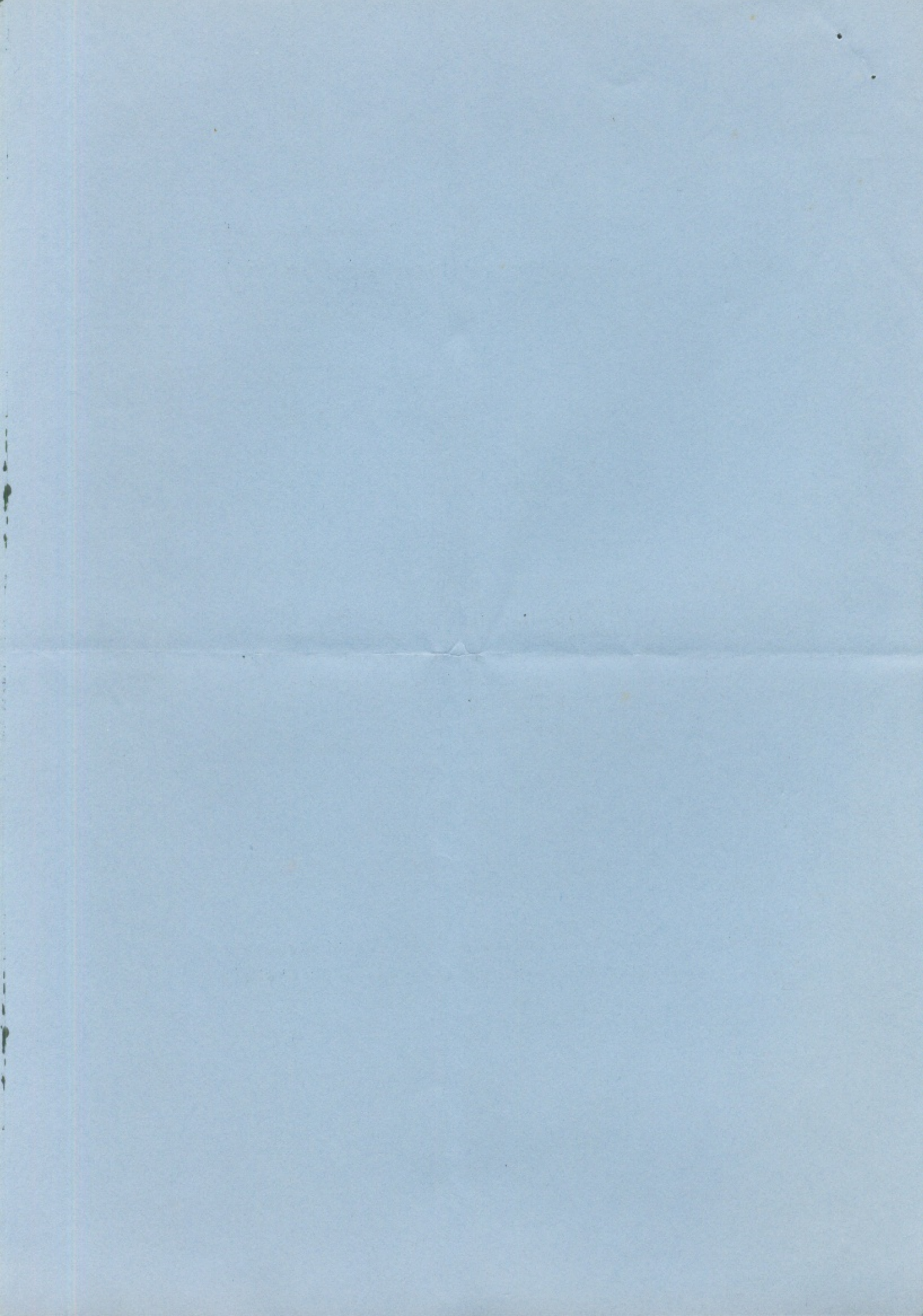

TRADE UNIONS, THE LABOUR MOVEMENT,

THE STRUGGLE OF THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS.

PART 2.



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INTRODUCTION

Let us first look at the situation of the British working class in 1975.

Jack Jones and his £6 rise, whether maximum or minimum, the greatest betrayal of the Labour Party manifesto since the war. It is a reverse for the working class, sadly following their victories over 'In Place of Strife' and their defeat of Heath and his NIRC, 'National Industrial Relations Court'.

It means that in 1975 Heath's policy has been accepted by the working class through the Labour Party.

1975 represents for Britain the worst state of chaos that capitalism has ever produced. The mergers, the coupon clippers, the new whizz kid millionaires, the property speculators have flourished. London has been denuded of industry, has been made bankrupt. All this is a culmination of the evacuation of capital abroad.

The candy floss economy, motors etc., have now to be sustained by enormous amounts of paper money, while basic industries such as steel, rail transport are cut back. Other developments, notably oil, are in the hands of financiers, chiefly foreign. The machine tool industry, the barometer of British industry, has never been developed or had reinvestment since the war. This stemmed from the U.S.A. Marshall Plan, designed to put all Europe in pawn. Machine tools in Britain were acquired through the Marshall Plan so there has been no rehabilitation of basic industrial strength anywhere in Britain.

In contrast, every nation in Europe is in a state of expansion to a greater or lesser degree.

Capitalist Britain is in decline. Constantly rising food prices have caused the ever hidden poverty, especially among the old and the members of large families of young children, to show itself in actual hunger of a growing section of the people. The rising unemployment figures are a clearer statistical clue to the state of the people, here more than anywhere else in the world, for this is the most proletarian country without appreciable seasonable differences such as fishing or forestry. To add to the official figures one must take into account part-time married women who do not register because there is nothing in it for them and the early retirement of other workers.

The deliberate destruction, through the agency of the Common Market, of British agriculture, the most efficient in Europe, is further evidence of the fact that entry into the Common Market was merely a ploy to starve out British indisciplined workers.

The growth of committees of the House of Commons, set up on the lines of the Senate Committees, is a further attack on the working class; indeed on employers, in the interests of finance capital. The 'Motors Committee' with its ass of a Labour Party Irish Catholic chairman, fighting for publicity may be a joke now but McCarthy started as a joke.

The British working class stands alone in the world. Only British workers can change the situation.

WHAT WE NEED TO STUDY

It is necessary to back track a little to understand how all this has come about. We could start with the General Strike of 1926 and must discuss some of the political events of the world which had such a great effect on the struggles of the workers. We must study too, the formation of the Labour Party and the T.U.C., creatures of the working class!

THE LABOUR PARTY

Among the first who called for an English Labour Party free of the condescending 'help' of the Liberal Party, were the North of England Socialist Federation of Northumberland miners, Engels who encouraged Eleanor Marx and Aveling, then working in East London, and Bland, a former colleague of the Fabians but disillusioned with working with the Liberals. They were partly inspired by the success of the Irish nationalists who formed a united and active party in the House of Commons and from the example of the American United Labour Parties. The establishment of the Labour Party "striving to conquer political power by promoting to election of socialists to Parliament, local governments, school boards and other administrative bodies" was a confused and noisy issue but it involved communists, anarchists, trade unionists, intellectuals and was not foisted on the working class by a small élite. Nothing has ever been foisted on the British workers by a small élite since the Norman Conquest; chiefly because British workers have never recognised anyone as more élite than they are; even God did not measure up. It is interesting that socialism, the arguments for its efficacy to improve the lot of men, figures largely through all discussions. Critique of the Gotha Programme includes answers to some of the arguments. On the 27th February 1900, in the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, now pulled down, the first conference of the Labour Party was held. Little interest was shown outside; there were nine spectators in the gallery and the 'Times' gave less than a quarter column report. There were one hundred and twenty-nine delegates, representing over half a million trade unionists. The delegates represented less than half of the representation at the T.U.C. because only the most militant of the large unions, Railway Servants, Gasworkers, Engineers and Boot & Shoe Operatives, sent delegates. Voting was according to membership and these four unions controlled over one-third of the votes. The Chairman was Steadman of the Barge Builders, a member of the T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee, Radical M.P. for Stepney and a member of the Fabian Society. The aim was, as put by Barnes of the Engineers, 'to keep in mind the need for the largest possible degree of unanimity'.

THE T.U.C.

The T.U.C. was courted by all in the formation of the Labour Party 'because it had been established by 1871 and accepted as the central parliament of Labour, meeting annually; and its Parliamentary Committee was the recognised agent for applying political pressure on behalf of the trade unions at the centre of government; it was strong because the Acts of 1871 made unions legal and, in the same year, the engineers of North East England struck for and won the nine hour day.

It would be outside the scope of this elementary study to go into detail but as recommended light reading one could guarantee interest. MacDonal,Ramsey, from the L.L.P. was in at the inception in 1900 and the death, in the thirties, of the Labour Party as an organisation assisting the working class. A very moth-eaten Faust!

THE GENERAL STRIKE

Let us dispose now of the myth that the General Strike was, had been or could have been of a revolutionary nature.

After the boom of 1920 in coal, there was a slump because the Versailles Treaty ordered part of Germany's reparation to be made in coal, leading to the halving of the export price of British coal. After a slight revival of the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 and a strike in the Ruhr coalfields, the miners, led by Arthur Cook, were able to win higher wages. As coal exports slumped from 42,000,000 tons in 1924 to 35,000,000 in 1933, battle between coal owners and miners was inevitable when their twelve month agreement ended.

Baldwin had inherited from Lloyd George the proposals of the Sankey Commission for nationalisation; George was a bogeyman and Baldwin had his own speeches 'for a sane commonsense government with an end to class bitterness and industrial strife' to live up to. His appointment of Churchill as Chancellor; Churchill who had sent troops to the South Wales coalfield, had pressed for intervention in Russia and had defeated the Black & Tans, made the future clear. Churchill, in 1925, announced that Britain would return to the pre-war gold standard; thus restoring London as the chief money market. The chief result was that British exporters had to accept 10% less in sterling. Wages **must** then bear the burden of increased costs. Within two months the mine owners, announcing that the industry was running at a loss of £1 million a month but not that 300,000 miners were out of work, proposed a new agreement with pay reductions of between 10% & 25%, abolition of the national minimum, a return to local wage bargaining with great differences between 'rich' Yorkshire and poor Forest of Dean. In the latter a miner with three children would receive 4s 4d a day, 5½d less than if he were on the dole. The miners refused, the General Council put itself 'at the disposal of the Miners' Federation'. Bevin moved resolution that transport workers would give full support. A court of inquiry, not attended by the miners, was surprisingly sympathetic; the Chairman, Sir Josiah Stamp, blamed the Government's return to gold and recommended a subsidy.

Baldwin, at first, rejected this. The mine owners reported on 'The extent to which the Labour Movement is permeated by subversive elements'. MacDonald blamed Baldwin for handing over 'to the very forces that sane - well considered socialists feel to be its greatest enemy' - and he did not mean the mine owners.

In July 1925, a coal strike had been averted by the grant of a subsidy and promise of a Royal Commission but Government preparations were immediately started to fight a general strike.

Communist leaders were arrested but fascists bound over which Oswald Mosley, as the bright new star of the Labour Party, condemned. Public debates and denunciations between such figures as the Duke of Northumberland and Arthur Cook became a 'free show' of London. The Samuel Report of March 1926 'recommended re-organisation of the industry, to end the subsidy, rejected longer hours and wage cuts'. It pleased nobody. By May 1st, every pit was idle and 1,000,000 miners locked out. At the conference, 'Lead Kindly Light' was the favourite hymn of the singing to while away the tedium.

The general strike lasted nine days, opening with a football match between strikers and policemen which the strikers won and ending with unconditional surrender by the T.U.C. although there had been no appreciable return to work even by the inexperienced and by the non-unionists and white collar workers who had joined in strike action.

From May 12th, the miners carried on alone but received support and help from 'busmen, carmen, dock men, printers, pressmen, engineers and electricity men'. The 'blackleg comfortable people' who tried to spoil the strike, made in all little impact and they were saved from black eyes by the T.U.C.'s exhortation 'to no violence'. Even the chaps in pith helmets riding horses and with swords were spared!

By the 2nd September, 125th day of the lockout, the miners had in hand funds of 1s 8d a head; there was some drifting back to work. The guardians (Social Services) did not pay relief to miners on strike only women and children and by July, the total had risen to 2½ million. To avert starvation, fund-raising groups went to Europe, Russia and America - the Soviets were especially generous. But Chamberlain said there is no starvation 'they are living not too uncomfortably at the expense of the ratepayer'.

A coalfield ballot rejected return to work but at delegate conference by a majority of 150,000 recommended all districts to reopen negotiations. By November work was resumed except by those victimised by the owners.

After a lockout of seven months, the miners had to face longer hours, lower wages and loss of their national agreement. The Tories were elated in spite of a trade loss of £400 million. Average earnings went down from 47s a week in 1927 to 45s a week in 1929. The shops shut, the girls went off to be skivvies in the houses of the better off and old clothes and boots were distributed by charitable persons.

The miners did not strike again till 1972 when there was a different ending; flying pickets of young miners of a thumbing of the nose to the General Council produced the climate of victory.

DISCUSSION

Discuss the reasons for the failure of the strike. Answer the arguments of the anti-worker 'lefties' who demand general strikes as the answer to all our ills.

The history of the years following, to the Second World War, should be thought about carefully so that we can understand what is happening now.

Following the General Strike was an attack by the Tories on all fronts, the 'contracting out' so reducing the funds of the Labour Party, attacks on the Communist Party but MacDonald was able to grab power for himself when the Labour Party returned to power in 1929. It was in a stronger position than it had been in 1924 but still a captive of the Liberals and now hit by a world economic depression which divided the Labour Party. Stock values collapsed on the New York Stock Exchange in the last week of October 1929 and the depression ended only with the outbreak of the Second World War. An American historian, Bernley, blames it for the Japanese expansion in Manchuria of 1931, the rise of Hitler in 1933 and for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Certainly British exports dropped from £729 million in 1929 to £391 million in 1931 so industrial activity also fell. There were 1,200,000 unemployed in 1929, slightly more than 10% of workers covered by unemployment insurance; by 1931 there were 2,700,000 or 21.3% of insured workers and by 1938, 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ million unemployed. Imbalance of payments meant export of gold; a Government deficit of £120 million. The Labour Government proposed to meet this by economies of which two-thirds would come from cuts in unemployed rates of pay.

In August 1931, MacDonald ordered resignation of Cabinet Ministers and announced a coalition government with himself as Prime Minister. He was expelled by the Labour Party as was his friend Snowden. The National Government lasted till 1935. The 'special areas' and the unemployed were the greatest sufferers but a fall in prices meant comparative comfort for those in work, unlike other countries in Europe.

The growth of Fascism in Italy and Germany, the bombing of Shanghai, the insolence of the Japanese invaders who made English gentlemen take off their trousers in public and the move to European war, with Spain as a curtain raiser, followed. The home grown variety had Mosley, the erstwhile socialist, as a chief but existed only by the help of the police guard. Not only communists, hundreds of thousands of people turned out against the Blackshirts in their provocative marches through East London where they were greeted from top floor windows by full chamber pots and boiling kettles. They were not a serious threat. The government and its minions, the police, were, especially the mounted, back from India and Africa with their lathis, long sticks to beat the rabble.

In the growing threat of Nazism the British ruling class still refused to achieve a policy with the Soviet Union and insultingly sent Strong, a clerk in the Foreign Office, for talks. In 1938, the U.S.S.R. offered to help Czechoslovakia if Poland would allow troops to pass through. This was refused. Munich was the apogee of the ruling classes aim to assist Hitler and Chamberlain became the Saviour of the People. He gave £8,000,000 to the Skoda works in Czechoslovakia, immediately given to Hitler. One ought to study the role of the Sudetan German, Dollfus of Austria. (There is an interesting tale of when socialists in Vienna went to the assistance of the beleaguered inhabitants of Karl Marx Hof, they travelled by train each day to the station opposite the flats and carefully paid their fares). Benes and Masanyk should be examined just to see the harm social democrats can do. In France it was the Popular Front and Blum. He put Spaniards escaping from Perpigna in prison, he handed the French film industry over to the U.S.A. allowing them to destroy the classical French films, he allowed Stavisky to exist. Indeed, he was the ancestor of Doriot, Laval and Petain, hence the Vichy government. The King of Belgium surrendered and our army was defeated at Dunkirk so the legend of 'Britain stood alone', ignoring the fact that they had repudiated the Soviet Union. Lord Croft said 'we'll use pikes' and Churchill, head of the National Government, talked of 'my friend Stalin'.

The phony war lasted while the Tories hoped Hitler would turn East but after the failure of the Norwegian campaign, Hitler was free to let loose the Blitzkrieg on France, Belgium and Holland. Then came the bombing of London followed by other major cities. The rank and file of the Communist Party were opposed to the war. They did not believe in the Tories' promises to fight their closest friends the Ribbentrops and Co. Concentration camps were opened in the Isle of Man and Italians interned plus one British worker called Mason, for no quite clear reason. Brabazon said 'Let Hitler and Russia devour each other' which did nothing to add to confidence in the motives of the ruling class.

As usual the employers were ready to get the best out of the occasion and they had an ally in the person of T & G.W.U. ex-Secretary Bevin, Minister of Labour. He was determined to put the workers firmly in their place. He used the opportunity in a small factory in Park Royal, Swift Scales, where there had been strife between the management (foreign) and the Stewards, culminating in the dismissal of the Convener, a West Indian. Bevin took the case to the Old Bailey and seven Shop Stewards, including a woman, were charged. The hope and expectation was for a long prison sentence but the entry of the U.S.S.R. brought a suspended sentence. That was first blood to our Chairman.

The whole push now was for production and to hell with union rights, the revisionists being in the leadership, some even getting O.B.E's for their work. The fight to preserve liberties that had taken centuries to win carried on, and the remnants of paternalism, company unions etc., were mopped up in the major centres. Battles with employers raged over the question of a Convener which seemed to cause more anguish than anything else.

'Managerial functions' was the war cry of every employer because he was most anxious to look after his 'cost plus 10% income' guaranteed by the government.

The leaders of the working class were the engineers, particularly in aircraft factories, members of the A.E.U. There were large party branches and 100% trade unionism in such places as De Havilland, Handley Page, Rolls Royce, Hawkers, Faireys, Bristol Aircraft, Napiers before successive governments destroyed the British aircraft industry which was the pioneer and, at this time, the most advanced in the world.

Even though a great tragedy was being enacted in the world there was still time for nonsensical theories from intellectuals. Syndicalism had been the vogue in the twenties and in the forties it was 'The Managerial Revolution' propounded by Burnhouse. In 1942 we were reading that 'the Managers' were a new class moving towards social and economic dominance and that the idea of proletarian dictatorship was dead. Another more useful debate was on 'payment by results'. During the first war employers tried to bring in this method of payment instead of time payment. All tradesmen were opposed. To buy them over, time and a half was guaranteed, which meant, if the average wage was 50s, they would get 25s on top. After the first war and 1931 cuts, all wage negotiations were on basic rate not overall earnings. If earnings were 1s 1d, 2s 2d per hour was paid as double time for Sunday work. There was a cost of living bonus of 2.47d an hour not in calculation for piece-work. Piece-work earnings, therefore, became poorer in relation to basic rate. In the second world war, Beaverbrook, to increase aircraft production, agreed with the frame makers, sheet metal union, that they could earn 100% and he would pay. In the past workers could not put in all their work or the ratefixer would lower the price. A fast worker could have as many undeclared products under his bench as on top. This caused difficulty at the end of the year so many a canal received its quota of units. Toolroom operatives could not work on piece-work so they were given guaranteed earnings relating to production workers, average earnings plus bonus. There is the story of a shop that had only one sheet metal man so they kept him up to 1000% earnings by everyone lending a hand so they all had 1000% earnings, i.e., ten times the normal wage. As the employers were on costs plus 10%, they were reasonably amenable.

The silliest of all, however, was the People's Convention with D.M. Pritt, a lawyer, as putative Prime Minister, organised by the C.P. and meeting in the old Russell Hotel with the usual quota of public figures on the make, including actors unto the third-generation.

The call from the rank and file of the party was for the second front. The raids were bad, the buzz bombs and rockets were worse; civilians, except for seamen and the young pilots and the girls on the anti aircraft guns, were taking a worse beating than the services. But America and Britain were hoping to see Socialist Russia bleed to death. When it looked as if the Russian army was about to take Berlin, then a big push was made.

Now the revisionist party ended factory groups without discussion or consultation. The cry now was 'win the local and national elections', 'the L.C.C. gold telephone for our London Secretary'. Unbelievably, that was a party slogan. Churchill was defeated in the first post war election by the soldiers' votes, Roosevelt and Stalin died and Marshall Aid was in full blast. American capitalism thought it could buy gratitude. Included in its expenditure were funds to create new unions in Europe in correct fashion. So they remain to this day.

Attlee conferred with Truman to drop the atom bomb on Japan. Stalin was not consulted. He said 'it is a wanton act' and 'the atomic bomb is to atomic energy what the electric chair is to electricity'. In 1949, China was liberated. Revolution established socialism.

1946 The Greeks had to be smashed by Churchill. Mountbatten, supremo in the Middle East, was interfering in Vietnam.

1946 The Labour Government betrayed the working class by Cripps' Wage Freeze.

1947 Selwyn Lloyd's (a Tory) Pay Pause

1966 Then Brown with his Prices & Income - 'if we want a bigger slice we must bake a bigger cake'.

Another T & G Secretary, Cousins, had been Minister of Technology and resigned. Benn got his job.

The Labour Government was defeated.

The battle against the working class was constant, whether the Government was Labour or Tory.

Barbara Castle's 'Away with all Strife', Heath's 'National Industrial Relations Court' (NIRC) were both horses out of the same stable.

The Parliamentary Labour Party, at the Labour Party Conference, vowed 'never again to fight the Trade Unions'. Now we have £6 but Jack Jones fathered it.

NIRC, Heath's great solution is nothing; study it in detail and that can be done by referring to past copies of 'The Worker'. It was to shackle the unions once and for all. The T.U.C. gave lip service, indeed organised a demonstration. But the only union that actually repudiated the Act was the AUEW. The unions were to register. Some refused but it was only the AUEW that was constantly fined by Donaldson. A few illgotten knaves calling themselves members acted as footmen for the Court. The names you know, we should not give them even infamy. The T & G.W.U. tried to be militant without penalties. Sued as being responsible for their own stewards, the T & G.W.U. repudiated them. It tried to co-operate with the Court and

went to the House of Lords but still found responsible. Only the A.E.U. refused to acknowledge the Court's existence.

The 'container strike' about 'containerisation' by the dockers, led to big stoppages so that those dockers put into Pentonville had to be released. The miners' strike about wages enabled Heath to make his next big error which cost him the leadership of the Conservative Party, the three day week.

In all the struggles of the last few years, the fight of the AUEW against the Government and its' Court stands out as a political battle. The others, the miners, the dockers, the builders, good fights as they were, were still economic. The valuable lessons of unity were to be seen in abundance. The miners had no strike pay (why?) but were generously treated by other workers and, best of all, by power station workers, mostly engineers, who refused to allow the delivery of coal to the power stations. The Heath ballot of the miners, to his surprise, resulted in 'NO' but the very acceptance of a ballot meant acceptance of the National Industrial Relations Act. There was Marxist-Leninist leadership among the engineers, it was lacking in the miners. This is shown in the ridiculous fuss being made about one person going on the T.U.C. General Council as a delegate. On or off it is of slight importance. The interesting thing is how many people worry about it.

Always but with increasing fervour since 1960, the cry has gone up to the Heavens that greedy workers are causing inflation that not only is 'too much money chasing too few goods' but that rising costs are due to labour costs. Roughly translated that means, workers demand to work and they demand to live like civilized human beings. We have seen financial crises in 1947, 1957, 1961 now 1975. On all those occasions, government and those 'scholars' who pontificate on the workers, blame the working class. The workers of Crosfields showed what they thought of that.

Are we going to watch the full cycle come round again? The number of men unfit to be chosen to go and die in the trenches because of starvation and physical disability shocked 'the nation'. This has been largely remedied by the second war but the number of ill-fed verminous children found among the evacuees again shocked this sensitive upper class! After all, they said, 'soap and water are cheap' but they are not. The ruling class is again enunciating the demand that only a large pool of unemployed brings a healthy economy. But the working class, by its own efforts not by any handout, has come to know about and to demand a life as a civilized human being. The young won't live in tenements; they will rebuild an old house in the wrecked desolate centres of our large cities, most of all London when all the local councils can do is bulldoze them. Neo Malthusian pundits rejoice that the birth rate of the native born working class is diminishing rapidly; after all our economic problems would be solved if workers stopped reproducing leaving only a small well-disciplined minority to be the helots. Some 'Marxists' talked of automation and the glories of science making workers unnecessary except for a few button pushers. This idea was exploded when it was realised that man is still the most efficient and cheapest of machines, needing no capital outlay on the part of the employers.

Will the full cycle teach the lesson finally that economic battles are not enough, that only the destruction of the capitalist system, which manufactures wars, depressions, starvation, ill health, inflation, will change anything? When will the working class repudiate the false leaders and the false militants? When will they clean their own house and fight for the democracy of their own organisations that their ancestors created? When will they stop being 'militant' when it means having an extra couple of weeks' holiday at the union's expense, i.e., other workers? When will they stop the petty corruptions of 'moonlighting'; of doing two jobs, of excessive overtime all in the sacred name of the consumer society?

In 1793 a Scottish man, Gerrald, accused in Edinburgh of reading the works of Tom Paine and worse, recommending that rank Jacobin, answered the prosecuting counsel who had said that Jesus Christ was a reformer, 'Muckle he made o' that: he was hangit'. Gerrald got fourteen years transportation but died on reaching Botany Bay. He should be long remembered for his analysis of reformists, social democrats.

FOR DISCUSSION

Why is it that the most advanced section, the AUEW, that brought down the Labour Government and destroyed the Tories now settle for what Heath wanted?

BOOKS (ALL OBTAINABLE IN SHOP)

Back copies of 'The Worker'

The pamphlets on Women, White Collar, Guerilla, Class, Teachers Dictatorship of Proletariat

Critique of the Gotha Programme

Origins of the Labour Party	H. Pelling	
(factually good, draw your own conclusions)	Oxford Paperbacks	£1.10
The General Strike	Christopher Farmer	
(turgid but has the date and facts; a silly title)	Panther	£1.00