

The Struggle for Wages and the Current Situation

In the present situation the Party has one principal task - to sweep away the foundations upon which yet another policy of wage restraint can be built. There is nothing new about wage restraint except as we stated at our Congress, capitalism progressively demands more of it - and, for fear of the sacrifices which struggle necessarily entails, workers have, in the recent past, agreed. Nevertheless a revolt has begun and if it is to succeed and take root we must be in the lead.

Leadership demands understanding; thus we must understand what our class has achieved and what remains to be done - especially where we are.

Following upon the decision of the AUEW in May and the groundswell of revolt against the social contract, the gathering of unions at the TUC had no choice but to reject further restraint. They were forced to say NO and that was a great step forward. Yet because it meant an advance it also meant that it can now only be consolidated by going further or face the prospect of retreat. No sooner in fact had that decision been foreseen than the government and their supporters in our Labour Movement were planning phase 111 - first in 5-6 per cent wage guidelines, later 10 per cent as successful settlements were achieved. Despite the fact that the Trade Union Movement is on record against wage restraint, this in no way by itself means that this position cannot be overturned and a new policy introduced with the connivance of collaborators in the Trade Union Movement. Unless we advance on the basis of what has already been won such a policy will undoubtedly be smuggled in.

At the same time we should also remember that in contrast to two years ago, today's fight for wages is based much more on economic necessity. Real wages have been so eroded for the most part that increasingly the demand is merely for a living wage. Economic pressures may be the reason that more and more workers are determined to press for more than the government says that they and other employers are willing to pay - but this does not

necessarily represent a high level of understanding. It should have been understood at the outset that a social contract would mean a lower standard of life - although it should be emphasised that it was not really the level of wages that was at stake but rather Trade Union independence. Would we have supported a social contract had it meant real increases - which initially it did for some workers? Low wages are always a poorer basis for advance than higher wages. After all nothing succeeds like success.

These issues point to the need for clarity in our party about the wages struggle today. Take for example the so-called 12-month rule. Why so much fuss? Wasn't it merely part of the 'package' of Phase 11 which workers, at practically all levels, accepted without opposition? In many areas an interval of 12 months between agreements has become normal - but of course by no means sacrosanct - workers should always be able to dictate the timetable of struggle. Nevertheless since it was only part of Phase 11 the fight against it was more than lost at the outset - not least because we did not do our work. So why, since the Trade Union Movement agreed to it with few exceptions, do 'militants' want to dissipate forces now by fighting a divisive battle over a dying issue? Why do they want to do this when the task is to unite and prepare everyone in the battle which is being joined now to ensure that Phase 11 is not followed by Phase 111, 11V, V and so on. If workers - ourselves included - have been so stupid as to allow such a policy would we be so liberal now as to say that those who agreed to it should not all have to endure its terms equally? Lessons have to be learned. If the working class has created a dam which now contains their resentment let us at least ensure that when it finally bursts the pressure released is sufficient to wash away the base upon which another such policy can be built.

There must be clear thinking too on tactics in this struggle. No one can teach the British working class about tactics, so it

is the party that must learn. Our primary aim must be to win what we can and in order to do this we must endure that our trade union machinery works to that end. Nothing positive will follow from unrealistic demands and from by-passing of machinery. Nothing positive will follow from wasteful and ill-conceived disputes other than disillusionment. Above all, therefore, wherever we are, we must always know and understand what it is the mass thinks and feels. If there is not the will to struggle we must accept what we can win on appearances and not expose our indecision in public. Similarly we must ensure that there is no by-passing of issues in the way demands are framed. Why, for instance, would we be seeking as a priority improvements in overtime premia when the priority should really be a reduction in overtime hours? Or why would we be by-passing bargaining altogether by submitting a schedule eleven claim to an industrial tribunal? Or will we be by-passing the issue of a basic money increase in favour of luncheon vouchers or some fringe benefit which in reality is just a basic aspect of employment. The real issue is quite simply ^{remuneration} money and class-hatred. If there are to be other improvements, let them be shorter hours and longer holidays - which free workers to be more human and may even create employment for those who at the moment have none.

Let there be clarity too about issues such as productivity bargaining. If we do not believe in sharing out our soaked workmates wages, then do we believe that the false productivity deal is the clever thing - if such a thing exists? Who in the end is kidding who? The idea that workers can cheat capitalism is just another form of servile self-deception. Again, do we accept the argument that capitalism cannot pay? Is it a relevant question. In fact after two years of wage restraint not only are most employers in a position to pay but the vast majority of claims do not represent real improvement on the 1974 position. Most are only very modest. Yet even that is no virtue, for we do not run the economy, the only economic role which we can have is bargaining about the price of our commodity - a price set at best by rising

expectations and at worst by the price of necessaries. Nevertheless it may be that the main issue to be faced in a particular situation is bankruptcy and the threat of redundancy and that this is the question around which unity must be built up, with money stepping down the agenda. Similarly while we opposed the Phase 1 flat rate increase because it eroded differentials will we build up unity on a pay claim by demanding higher percentage increases to restore differentials now - or should we deal with that in due course?

If we understand just how important it is to be clear sighted about these issues, then how much more important it is for us to appreciate the overall importance of what we are engaged in. We do not accept for example the argument of the employers and their government that workers' sacrifices make a stronger Britain. Britain is our working class, their health, skills, intellect, employment and general well-being, Poor workers make a poor Britain. So we cannot forego more money increases to defend the 'gains' of the social contract which in fact are a dramatic fall in real wages and a record number of jobless. Neither will bring new investment to re-establish our capacity to prosper as a manufacturing country. Poor workers consume less and warrant meagre investment. Yet in saying that, does this mean that higher wages will solve Britain's problems? No, they will not. Wages are primarily a quantitative matter and rarely a qualitative one. Those who now say that the battle for wages is for a fuller life and thus for socialism are making an economist philosophy out of a half truth. Of course we all need more money to pay the bills and sustain a certain level of life, but no matter how successful we are at winning improvements in wages we still have to go to work for an employer. Nevertheless if wage slavery itself is to be challenged we must first struggle for more wages and assert our right to do so. Nothing will come from the immediate alternative except less wages, more disillusionment, less collective responsibility and more lumpen thinking. So while there are no politics in money communists must lead and

win in that battle so that in the course of doing so they demonstrate leadership and foresight and compel workers to face the fact that nothing can be won through slick negotiation, through complex industrial relations machinery or through cleverly argued parity claims. For instance, we should not imagine that settlements achieved by workers in one place as a result of their struggle and conviction can automatically be achieved elsewhere by those who base their case, not on their own strength, but on spurious arguments about equality with others. There is no alternative within capitalism but the sacrifice which is necessary to secure improvements and which very often negates the effect of the immediate benefits thus secured.

The tasks facing our comrades are twofold: firstly, to secure our bases in our own arena, be it workplace, branch or national union forum and to unite all our members in realistic claims national and/or domestic which can advance their position and challenge the Government's policy. Secondly, upon that base of understanding to ensure full and correct participation in the policy-making machinery of our unions to secure a policy of 'free collective bargaining'. The first task, however, is primary, for we do not believe that correct policies will of themselves be carried through by those in our movement, who at whatever level, have proved themselves to be wither fainthearts or traitors. Only the mass can create the conditions which will neutralise otherwise hostile opponents and convince the active to go further.

Every union conference must be presented with a mass of resolutions which say no to wage restraint, whether in a general or particular way. In present circumstances this is more important than any other issue; perhaps more important than the question of unemployment, certainly more important than the shopping list of alternative economic policies which, while worthy enough as sentiments, too often are a smokescreen for inactivity or a peg upon which to hang commitment to another round of social

contract.

The task facing the working class is simple: no more wage control. The task facing our party is simple and thus immensely difficult. All comrades must do their elementary work in their unions, think ahead, warn and above all bring all they gain back to the party.