

COUNTER ATTACK

SHOP WORKERS
INTO STRUGGLE

Communist Party
of Britain
Marxist-Leninist

30p



Foreword

This pamphlet is written and produced by the Communist Party and its members who work in the retail and distributive industry.

Increasingly shopworkers are being thrust into the forefront of the major battles being waged in Britain today.

The de-regulation of shop opening hours face the industry's millions of workers with stark choices; do we accept, acquiesce - or stand and fight?

Should our shops be stocked full of imported goods - or should we make it and sell it in Britain?

Do we want only part time, short term contract, seasonal work, subjecting us to the whims of the large multinational employers who behave more like real estate buyers or sellers, instead of supplying our people with their basic needs?

On the contrary, we need full and part time permanent jobs, well paid and well trained workers staffing our shops and stores.

This pamphlet is put forward as the communists contribution to the debate amongst the thousands of trade unionists who have taken up the fight to stop our service industry becoming slave industry.

We present it in the belief that it provides a way forward for all retail and distribution workers.

The views contained herein will however have a wider appeal. This is because the plague of casualisation and de-regulation that now faces shopworkers is affecting all sections of the working class.

Without resistance, it will spread and do untold damage.

Thatcher, the shop-owner's daughter as she is so fond of reminding us, now vents her true class feelings on shopworkers with her usual arrogance. She would own "Britain for sale - Everything must go". Our reply is... "No sale Thatcher - we are returning your shoddy goods... YOU can go"

Les Elliott
Chairman



Introduction

For the last ten years, our party has warned of the dangers associated with de-industrialisation, the destruction of industry and its disastrous substitution by a 'non-union' private service sector.

The party has helped to raise the question of the threat posed by the decline of manufacturing and the results that this would have on all sectors of the economy and on the working class.

It is an issue now widely recognised throughout the labour movement and beyond. This pamphlet looks in part at Thatcher's strategy for turning Britain into an industrial wasteland, and the relationship of industry to retail. In particular it deals with the problems facing the retail industry and the challenge confronting shopworkers and their unions.

The Black Coated Proletariat

The tradition of shopworkers organisation, now extends over a hundred and fifty years.

In the early 1840's, retail branches were established as part of the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union which numbered at its height some 500,000 members. The growth in the size and number of retail outlets in the last quarter of the nineteenth century led to increasing numbers enrolling in small localised unions. These were the workers that Sidney and Beatrice Webb described in their History of British Trade Unions as the 'black-coated proletariat'. Co-operative workers were the pioneer organisers of the time. The first national union for shopworkers was formed in 1891, reaching its first 100,000 members in the early 1920's.

Two unions emerged in the twentieth century catering essentially for shop assistants, though also organising food and canning workers and employees in flour mills and dairies. They merged to form USDAW in 1947.

The recruitment of shopworkers into other unions such as ASIMS and the TGWU is a much more recent phenomenon, but increasingly shows recognition by the labour movement of the gauntlet thrown down by Thatcher and her so-called "retail revolution". More properly, it is an industrial counter revolution, described as the "cutting edge of the future" and a substitute for our decimated manufacturing base. It is this simplistic view of industry and economy that we must analyse and challenge if the future is to hold anything at all for Britain.



The World of Shopping

Retailing and distribution is the single largest industry in Britain, employing some 2.2 million workers or nearly 10% of all those of working age. Over the last century, the traditional, small, local, independent trader began to be challenged by chain stores and later on by larger traders selling a multiplicity of goods under one roof. In those days shops stayed open all hours. Shopworkers whose day often began at 7 am would not be allowed to lock up before midnight. High street department stores expected their employees to live as well as work on the premises.

After World War Two, the first supermarkets appeared. Pre-packed goods meant that high quality products could be transported from further afield and bulk buying ensured that they would be available at lower prices. The growing use of fridges and fridgefreezers meant that food could be kept for a longer period.

By the 1960's these supermarkets were the market leaders and were soon strong enough to force the abolition of price controls.

The process of concentration of retail capital through high street take over and merger closely mirrored similar developments in industry (eg cars and engineering).

By the mid 1970's a few household names such as Sainsburys and MFI's were dominating whole sectors of retailing, determining what would be consumed. By the 1980's they were strong enough to successfully pursue a policy of merger and of undermining manufacturing capital such that they could determine what was produced. Sainsbury's, through their buying policy in the mid 1970's, were able to completely determine what would be produced and the price of goods in whole sectors of the food and drinks market. Often now we are forced to buy the same product not under its brand name such as McVities biscuits but under the retailers name i.e. Tesco's biscuits.

The small trader is in decline having for example lost 30% of the grocery market in just twenty years. The co-ops have shed a third of their staff over a similar period, when once they occupied a commanding presence in working class communities.

Only thirty years ago there were 25,000 co-ops, 54,000 multiples and 503,000 independents. The 2.2 million shopworkers of today

work in 330,000 different outlets, only 7,000 of which are co-ops, 70,000 being multiples and 261,000 independents. The new Megastores are set to further eclipse the small trader and concentrate power in still fewer hands.

Merger Mania

Thatcher's claim to be champion of the small business is shown up as nonsense if the number of bankruptcies in that sector are anything to go by.

The hollowness of her claim is reinforced by the evident trend toward the concentration of capital into fewer and fewer hands. Ownership patterns in the retail sector illustrate this. A good case in point is Sir Terence Conran, Thatcherite 'entrepreneur extraordinaire'. Conran, knighted by his mentor and newly Lord of British Home Stores, already owned Habitat, Mothercare, 'Now' and Richard shops, and now commands an empire of some 20,000 employees and yearly sales of over 1 billion pounds, second only to Marks and Spencers in the non food sector.

The Sears Group own Selfridges, Wallis, Foster Brothers, Dolcis, Trueform, Freeman and Hardy Willis, Lillian Skinners, William Hills and Saxones. Dixons have taken over Curry's and Woolworths own B&Q's, Comet and Dodge. Woolies themselves were recently taken over by Paternosters in what was widely seen in the industry as a simple exchange of real estate. One thousand jobs were lost in the process. Burtons now run Debenhams, Top Shop, Greens, Peter Robinsons and Dorothy Perkins, and have general sales of £1.28 billion.

Some shops such as Harrods and Selfridges in London, and the Tesco 'Supastores' are amongst the largest concentrations of workers to be found in their regions of the country.

Pay rates in the industry are notoriously low, ranging between £55 and £120 gross per week. Very few earn the top rate. Eighty per cent of women who work in shops and warehouses and a third of males have incomes below the official poverty level. Increasingly, the industry is moving away from full and part time 'permanent' employment and taking on part timers and casual, short term contract labour.

Industry and Retailing

For many years domestic industry and agriculture formed the basis of retailing.

Though many of the raw materials may not have been domestically procured, they were refined and turned into finished commodities. After being shipped along our waterways direct to processing factories, they were packaged and delivered to the retail outlet for sale. Now the capitalists ship machinery abroad, or capital to finance the machinery of others, so much that we used to manufacture is now imported as finished goods in containers for transportation direct to the point of sale.

This development has gone relatively unnoticed by shopworkers (though dockers could tell us a tale or two). The trend is bound to continue, precisely because of the growing power of the multinational activities of the new high street giants.

For the British working class, control of our own industry is about sovereignty and independence. If we do not produce the goods here, where will we gain the power to control industry and our future from?

Sovereignty and independence is a key plank in any socialist system. Shopworkers need industry and homespun products too. Each flood of imported goods means another job loss in another section of the working class, and more power in the hands of the retail employers to use against us.

The relationship between the textile and clothing industry and retail illustrates this point.

The industry employs more than 500,000 workers directly, concentrated in areas of the country such as the North West, Yorkshire and Scotland who have already faced severe industrial retrenchment.

Thatcher's anti-industry policies soon accelerated the problems faced by the industry, post 1979. Withdrawal of government aid, an adverse sterling exchange rate making the price of products high and a failure to invest in new machinery led many companies to the wall. In the early 1980's the industry lost 30% of its productive capacity and thirty five per cent of its workforce.

All the while, the traditionally British goods that passed over our shop counters, were substituted by a flood of imports. Last year 63% of men's jackets, 70% of suits, 95% of anoraks and 94% of gloves were brought in from abroad. Much of the increased sales experienced by retailing comes from the clothing sector.

But as with other sectors such as electrical goods, this increase is eaten up by imports. Imports now account for 40% of cars and 43% of electrical goods, 41% in textiles, 34% in footwear and 30% of all furniture sold in Britain. The government aids and abets this process.

The flood of imports and government refusal to act are the symptoms of our industrial crisis.

The root of the problem is the past and continuing investment strike by manufacturing capitalists. The rate of investment in industry has steadily declined, this has resulted in a failure to re-tool, to maintain a pool of skilled labour and to pioneer new technology, research and development programmes.

Investment in retail, by contrast, has risen steadily since the war. The early years of this decade witnessed the greatest growth in investment ever recorded. The investment in new building, machinery and vehicles is evenly balanced. But it is most apparent in the building of new shopping centres and 'Supastores'.

The reason for such investment is obvious given the high rate of return and low level of union organisation. The financial interests in the city have been quick to recognise the advantages to such investment and have provided the funds to facilitate the recent spate of high street mergers and takeovers.

For these city sharks, retailing is akin to trading in real estate. Employers change so often workers are left to wonder who is actually paying their wages week by week.

Whilst the retailing giants may day dream of enormous profits and the smaller trader goes to the wall, for the millions working in the industry, the world of shopping is fast becoming a nightmare. Their future has become hostage to a spurious consumer boom.

The reality is that things are going to get worse for years to come: consumer spending has levelled out; imports are rising; domestic industrial output declines; de-regulated trading will erode full time employment and prices to the consumer will rise.

The union cannot be put into cold storage until a general election for that would be a recipe for another term of office for Thatcher.

Growth will be determined by an increased input based on local initiative and planning, alongside the commitment of funds for nationally directed campaigns against major employers. One of the strengths gained in the struggle over Sunday trading has been the value of fully utilising all levels of the unions machinery from full time officers to branches, co-ordinating committees and lay members.

In many respects USDAW is blazing a trail for trade unionism in areas which previously had only been scratched. Large sections of the labour force remain unorganised and they have to be won to the movement as the general labourers were in the 1890's.

It is one of the unions that could make a vital contribution to the demise of Thatcher. This will require tenacious defence of the small gains so far painfully achieved. But it will also need more than that. Shopworkers need to grasp the twin challenges of wages and opening hours and take the fight to the employers. We have argued that in order to effectively combat the current onslaught, the union will need to hold up previously cherished notions to critical examination.

First amongst these is the concept that a legally enforced minimum wage is a substitute for solid class organisation which addresses itself to the problem of consistently advancing standards of pay and conditions through struggle. A legally enforceable wage removes the issue from the arena of mass struggle which is the lifeblood of an active union.

The wages councils minimum rate, far from being a base is becoming a ceiling and pace setter for wage demands. As such it is in

danger of becoming an instrument of government policy of maintaining a huge labour pool of poverty labour. This is best illustrated by the use of the wages councils to institute a youth wage policy.

Legal support is not in itself a bad thing, it simply cannot be a substitute for trade unionism. A legal rate will in any case only have any substance if workplace organisation exists to ensure that it is a minimum not a maximum rate.

It should be clear by now just how tenuous legal advance is. It is the extent of poverty pay that exists throughout the retail sector that leads to the necessity for a national wages struggle.

Wage War

A wages campaign would at once build the struggle against employers who are enjoying massive profits at our expense; forge the maximum unity of shopworkers of all grades and trades; and convince those outside of the union of the need for and effectiveness of membership.

Whilst we point to the dangers of relying on wages councils orders, we also recognise that the concept of a target claim for negotiators can be of positive benefit. This has been illustrated in the TGWU's Living Wage Campaign where the £100 target has become an important vehicle and rallying point for thousands of workers nationwide in the most diverse sectors of the economy.

Paradoxically, in defending those gains that have been made, it is crucial for the union to oppose the dismembering and break-up of the wages councils. Their defence is a step on the road to a wages offensive. If we do not fight to maintain what exists, we can hardly claim convincingly that we could mount an effective wages struggle.

The fact remains that the highest paid shops on the high street are the organised ones.

Never on a Sunday

As the Sunday trading debate has advanced, groups of employers have tried to jump the gun by forcing staff to work Sundays and

late nights on a trial basis. They have thus attempted to defy the existing law, pre-empt and sabotage workers opposition with the aim of making 'open all hours' a fait accompli.

As the process devlops, shopworkers too must step up the level of struggle and take the initiative. Even if de-regulation becomes the law of the land, it will still remain for employers to force such changes through.

The unions in the localities should now be drawing up targets of large firms and shops, especially those who are most vocal in favour of de-regulation, and hold important positions within the employers federations. Against these we could launch a propaganda campaign and guerilla struggle with the aim of frustrating and eventually making the policy of de-regulation inoperable.

It is only now that the full potential effects that Sunday trading and late opening would have on other groups of workers such as bankworkers, the fire service, cleaners and refuse collectors. Millions of workers, correctly, would refuse to work on Sundays or only do so on a voluntary basis. How long would it be for example after the introduction of Sunday trading before British Rail workers were required to work on Sundays as a matter of course, rather than choice?

The TUC at a national level is decidedly opposed to Sunday trading. It now remains for shopworkers to give the lead and tap this potential. If we can save the doorstep pinta, or have a 'save the NHS' campaign, why not a 'save our Sunday'?

Some believe that to oppose Sunday trading is to stand in the face of the future, it is utopian. No doubt the same thing was said when the first workers said that Sunday should be a day of rest and that the 'living in' system should be done away with. The struggle will be protracted but it can achieve much if it is on the basis of class principle and commitment.

Unity in Struggle

In many shops, especially the larger ones and in the large food chains such as Sainsbury's, important sections of the workforce are organised in the TGWU. Competition between USDAW and the TGWU

is in danger of becoming an impediment to the unity which the present circumstances require. Class unity against the employers' threat must take precedent at all times over rivalry and inter-union friction.

In some areas we witness the classic case of re-ordering the deck-chairs on a sinking Titanic. It is criminal that poaching continues to divert when ninety per cent of shopworkers remain outside the ranks of the organised movement.

But a greater danger which faces both unions is the fostering of company unionism in name, substance or both. Unions that are built or maintained with the connivance of employers cannot really be called a union at all. It is a wages struggle and not the attainment of a check off agreement that is the real measure of a union. Sweetheart agreements are not worth the paper that they are written on. They are all too easy to tear up as we have often discovered to our cost.

More importantly they sow dangerous illusions in the eyes of members. We must especially guard against the proliferation of single union and no-strike agreements.

Britain for Sale - or Thatcher Out

According to Thatcher, the future lies in services. Not of course public services such as health and education which are being cut and privatised but in the privately owned sweat shop.

Factories are closed, machinery destroyed or sold abroad, apprenticeships disappear, capital flies abroad (£60 billion since 1979)

thousands of jobs are shed each month. We are net importers of manufactured goods for the first time since the industrial revolution.

When the oil runs out, things can only get worse as the government's (un)economic policy comes apart.

As the recent Lord's report on industry and trade showed, there is wide recognition that Britain cannot exist as a 'services only' economy, trading and consuming goods which we no longer produce.

Yet the government continue to fashion the economy in such a direction.



Capitalism is driven in this direction because a private service sector is one of the few avenues of profitability left open to it. It is no coincidence that it is also one of the least organised sections of the workers' movement.

Services, both public and private, are organically linked to industry. Only capitalism could so badly mismatch the two; the relationship and balance being totally obscured in the scramble to wrest profits from a dying system.

The service sector is widely perceived either as a leech on industry or a substitute for it, when in fact the two should be growing in unison in a measured way. It is essential that the labour movement corrects this view. Sometimes we are our own worst enemies.

For years, many workers thought that the toolmaker could be replaced by the shelf stacker and check-out assistant; that high levels of unemployment were only transitory and that changes in the economy were inevitable. Yet while unemployment has soared to record levels, the numbers employed in retail has dropped by 600,000 in the last twenty years.

Some trade unionists applaud Sunday trading on the grounds that "you cannot hold back the inevitable". Many in retail, in a similar vein, consider industry is a thing of the past, believing naively that we can survive by marketing and selling alone, with manufacturing "being left to those countries that are good at producing".

The different wings of our movement have to vigorously combat such views. Failure to do so could lead to disastrous divisions.

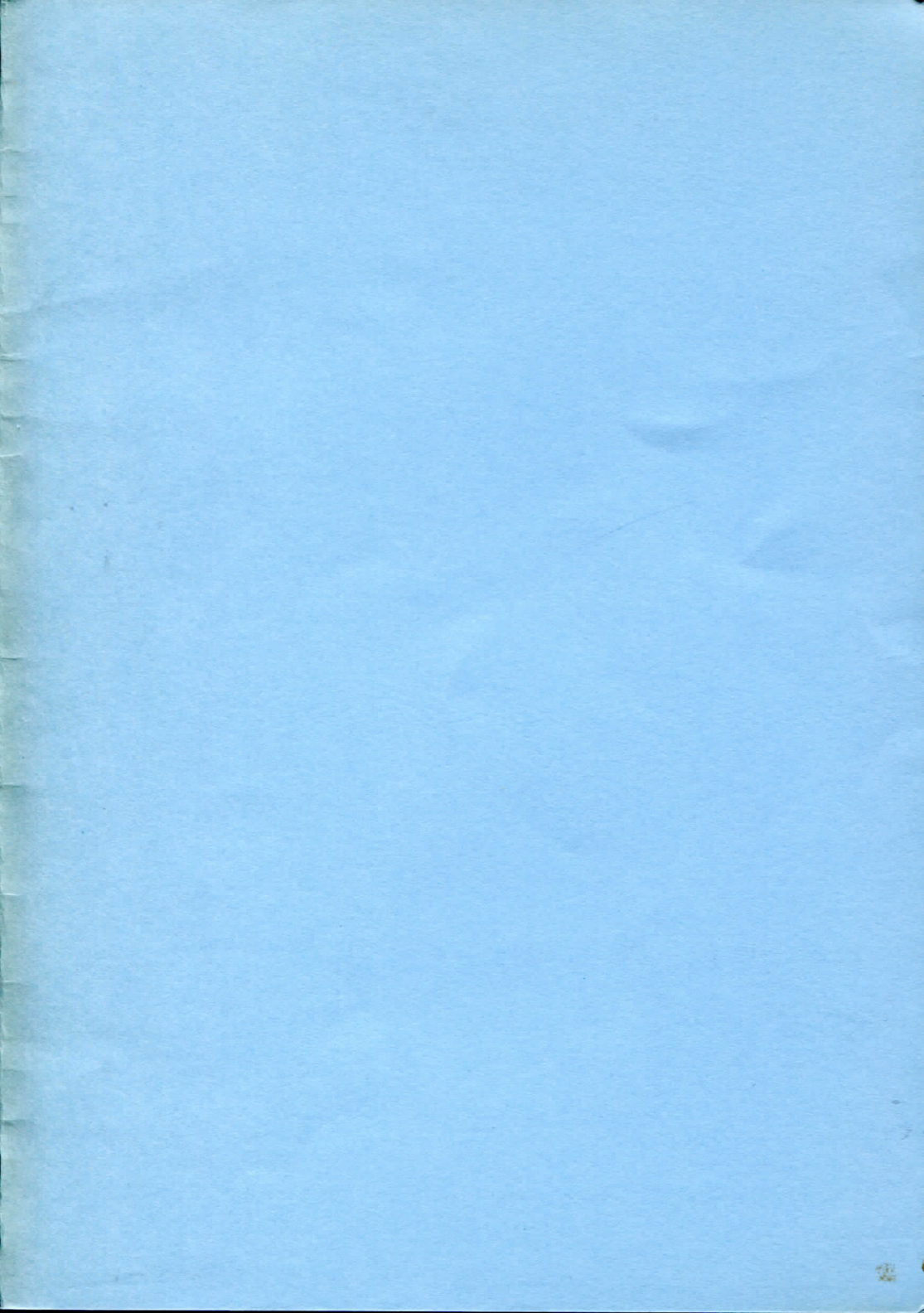
Retail workers should insist that if we are to sell the goods in Britain then they should be produced here as well. Production workers should insist that 'buy British' must be 'made British' too.

This is the opposite of Thatcherism. For her, turning Britain into a megastore for foreign goods is little different from us becoming an aircraft carrier for American cruise missile.





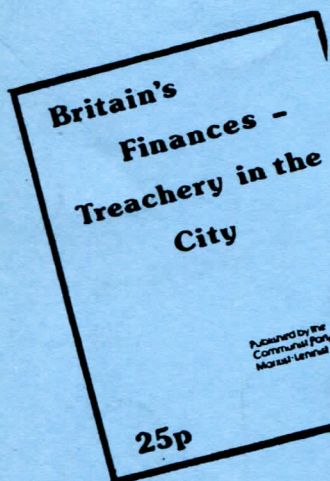
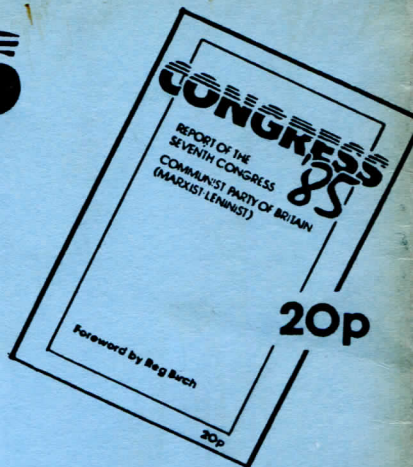




CONGRESS '85

REPORT OF THE
SEVENTH CONGRESS

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(MARXIST-LENINIST)



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The Worker

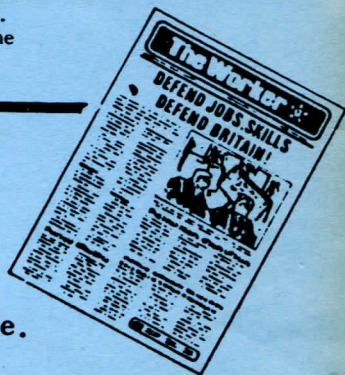
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