

A black and white photograph of Leo McGreevy, a man with a mustache, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark jacket. Behind him, a large banner is partially visible with the words "UNEMPLOYED", "STRUGGLE", and "FOR" visible. The banner is held by a crowd of people, some of whose faces are visible in the lower right corner. The overall scene suggests a political rally or protest.

# LEO M<sup>c</sup>GREEVY

WHAT A MAN....  
WHAT A FIGHTER!

by  
Jim Arnison



# **LEO M<sup>c</sup>GREE**

**WHAT A MAN....  
WHAT A FIGHTER!**

**by  
Jim Arnison**

An account of Leo McGree's part in the working-class struggles in Liverpool.

© Jim Arnison

Published by: The Union of Construction, Allied  
Trades and Technicians.

U.C.A.T.T. House, 177, Abbeville Road,  
London. S.W. 4

Printed by Preston Community Press,  
16/18, Lancaster Road, Preston, Lancashire.

December 1980.



# Contents:

Foreword: by Les Wood, General Secretary UCATT.

Introduction: Jack Askins.

Chapter 1. McGree's Early Life.	Page 4.
2. Into Print.	11.
3. The General Strike.	16.
4. Depression and Unemployment Riot in Birkenhead.	19.
5. Prison Years.	31.
6. The Rise of Fascism.	36.
7. Post War Activity.	42.
8. The Pillorying of Leo McGree	46.
9. Grass Roots Attitude.	62.
10. Left - Right Struggle.	68.
11. International Viewpoint - Clashes at the TUC.	72.
12. Local Politics in Liverpool.	84.
13. Demonstrations against Unemployment	87.
14. Retirement.	93.



## Foreword

by Les Wood. General Secretary. U.C.A.T.T.

Leo McGree's lifetime of service to the British Working Class Movement essentially covered the period when Great Britain knew the harsh days of the post 1914-18 war era, the depressive days of the 30's and the privations of World War 2 and its aftermath. It is essential that the character of the man is seen against this kind of setting to understand the causes of his motivation.

A comparatively short stocky figure in build with dark, bushy hair and moustache, he looked like Lenin, was possessed of the same powers of oration as Lenin, and more importantly believed in Lenin. He was an unashamed Communist at a time when the distinction between political left and right was more sharp than it is today. It was no accident that as District Secretary on Merseyside of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers he was constantly at variance with his Executive Council - not because that was his general inclination but because he was inwardly convinced of the correctness of his actions. His prime objective in life was to further the interests and aspirations of the Working Class Movement. This was to be seen in the work that he did as a Full-Time Trade Union Official and it was also to be seen in other directions; for instance, when he was the prime mover in a council tenants' revolt on Merseyside.

By disposition he was intellectually a very serious man because his belief in Communism as a solution to the economic problems of the working class took fully into account the difficulties that confronted the Communist cause in Great Britain, a country that was class-ridden and shrouded with all the trappings of a Capitalist establishment.

He was not without humour, although he tended to

mask the sincerity of his inner fundamental beliefs.

Picture Oxford on a sunny July afternoon. Within the portals of Ruskin College a Full-Time Trade Union Officials School is in progress. All is quiet, except for the monotonous tones of a management lecturer delivering a talk on job satisfaction. The lecturer had reached the point in his talk at which he said: "Job satisfaction stems from a man's desire to do a particular job of work. Take, for instance, the Irish navvie. There is nothing he likes doing better than digging holes: the bigger the hole the more pleased he is." At this point the slumberous silence was broken and in a sufficiently loud voice for all to hear, Leo expostulated: "It all depends on who he is going to bloody well bury." That was McGree. The man who was guaranteed to say the right thing at the right time in the right place.

When he was beaten in his bid for election to the A. S. W. Executive Council in 1953 he accepted defeat without rancour. To him it was just another setback in the everyday battle that most true Communists learn to accept.

He bore no real malice, neither against fellow Trade Unionists nor Employers - it was not in his nature, but throughout his life he remained convinced that "expropriating the expropriators" was not likely to be achieved either by Parliamentary or constitutional methods. His influence as District Secretary of the A. S. W., District Secretary of the Liverpool Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, and Liverpool Operatives' Secretary of the N. J. C. B. I. was considerable and he used it to full effect in his dealings with Liverpool employers.

He was not an 'establishment' man - hence his contempt for Trade Union Leaders who accepted civic honours, although he personally had great regard for them as fellow leaders in the cause of working class unity.

He was, if anything, Liverpool's own 'beloved rebel'.

This book - an autobiography of Leo McGree has been sponsored by the North West Regional Council of U. C. A. T. T. In recording the life of a turbulent character whose heart and soul lay in the movement, the author has reminded us that the power of organised labour was not handed 'down on a plate'. The book is a tribute to one who, like many others, led a full and active life in the service of his fellow men; and that alone justifies its being read by all who believe in men of action.



# Introduction.

This story is not intended to be a full biographical account of the life of Leo McGree. There are gaps and omissions of which many who knew and worked with him will become aware as they read this.

The main purpose is to highlight the major events with which Leo became involved, together with some of the background to those events and the difficulties of the times, when the balance of forces was weighted more against Socialist ideas and Trade Unionism than it is today.

LEO MCGREE was a trade unionist who also became a Communist. Most of the drama and excitement in his life came from his activities as a Communist trade unionist and there is an emphasis on this in all that follows here. But his work as a Trade Union full-time official from 1938 until his retirement in 1966 was also of great significance. There is not a great deal of drama or excitement in the day to day work of a full-time Trade Union officer, but it is to such people that the Trade Unions owe their existence and survival. Their link with the rank and file and their daily rounds of meetings, negotiations and discussions are the key to maintaining the organisation which is now expressed in the affiliation of 12 million members to the TUC.

Leo's main contribution was to the old Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives and the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions. It is reflected in the minutes of the various committees of those bodies and reports of the annual conferences through his speeches on the major topics and problems they faced at the time.

In writing this, much thought had to be given on how to deal with the traumatic events during the McCarthyite witch-hunting period of the 1950's when his union took a decision to strip Leo McGree of his union positions. It is a lengthy section which reproduces almost all the correspondence which passed between Leo and the Executive of the ASW, and ends with the subsequent High Court appeal. It has been included in full for a quite deliberate purpose. It is now fashionable for McCarthyism to be condemned by all, including those in this country who helped to sponsor the evil doctrine of the crypto-fascist American senator. Younger people can be forgiven for believing that the activities of Joe McCarthy were directed only against his own political opponents in America, and principally against Hollywood film directors and actors. It was not so. It had a much deeper purpose and its influence spread to this country and into the life and work of the Trade Union and Labour Movement. The McGree case was an example of how dangerous and damaging it became. The events leading up to the case and the correspondence which took place around it, tell their own story.

One of the difficulties encountered in attempting to write the Leo McGree story is that most of those who knew and worked with him will recall chiefly his sharp humour, his extremely witty but cutting remarks, barbed comments and mastery of that form of repartee for which Merseyside is unique. But Leo McGree lived and struggled through one of the most difficult periods of working-class history. It was hard. It was repressive. He was part of an oppressed minority striving to build the trade union and political organisations of the working-class victimisation, blacklisting, physical assault, harassment, arrests and imprisonment were the lot of these pioneers of Trade Union and political organisations.



Bad times have a way of producing a psychological reaction in those who experience them, leaving them mainly with the memory of the humorous aspects. It is good that people should still recall the humour of Leo McGree, the manner in which he was able to face up to the grimmest of situations, and the most vicious opponents, yet still emerge as the master. This was his essential characteristic, developed from his back-ground as a citizen of Merseyside. Yet it is essential to remember what those times meant and the sacrifices that were necessary for us to have reached the present situation, in which the same basic tasks still confront the Labour Movement.

Jack Askins.

December 1980



## Chapter 1.

### Leo McGree's Early Life.

Leo was born on December 2, 1900, the son of an Irish father and a Scottish mother. His childhood days were spent at a time when Robert Noonan was engaged in the struggle to build Trade Union and Socialist consciousness among his fellow building workers in his novel, "THE RAGGED TROUSERED PHILANTHROPISTS". It was a time when trade unionism was still struggling to emerge as a co-ordinated, cohesive force after various expressions of organisation had been tried and had been broken up by a combination of oppression and structural and ideological weaknesses. In Liverpool, the builders' Union had been formed in 1830. In 1833 the Union clashed with the employers over a demand to be allowed to study work contracts. The battle lasted for a year and at the end the union had lost and was disbanded. The Stonemasons then played a leading role in the fight for a nine-hour day during 1846, achieving a partial success. The city's first May Day demonstration was held in 1891: this was the prelude to the mass demonstrations and strikes in the early part of the twentieth century.

In the 1911 Transport strike two warships were sent to the Mersey and the second battalion of the Warwickshire Regiment was placed on standby in Liverpool. In August of that year, workers attacked a squad of 18th Hussars escorting prisoners to Waltham gaol. The soldiers opened fire, killing two men and wounding four, and there was a brutal police attack on demonstrators celebrating victory in the strike. One can only imagine the thoughts of youngsters like Leo McGree as such events were taking place and being discussed by their parents and associates.

At the age of twenty-one he was a Branch Secretary in the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, beginning a process which was to take him into many fierce battles with the employers, the repressive forces of the state, especially the police and the judiciary, and with political opponents inside the Trade Union and Labour Movement itself. Looking back to those days of the twenties and the thirties, students of Labour Movement history often remark on the sectarian nature of much of what was said and done by Communists and others on the Left. Sectarianism was present in the very beginning and first stirrings of Socialist thought and action. The early pioneers faced harassment, oppression, beatings, jailings, all with great courage and fortitude. But worst of all was the negative response and active opposition from within the very class which they had set out to liberate from exploitation.

There was ruthless opposition from the Church and most of the early Socialist pamphlets and writings expressed an almost fanatical anti-religious theme. From this grew attitudes towards workers who opposed Socialists and later Communists on religious grounds which took root and which probably still persists in some forms. It is not all that long ago that a fight against a "right-wing Catholic reactionary" was seen to be equally if not more important at times to a fight against the employers. Leo McGree hated the capitalist system. He hated poverty and oppression and his main enemy was always the bosses. He loved his own working-class but could be scathing at times of their weaknesses. He detested hypocrisy, and this led him into many a confrontation with the right-wing in the movement. His clashes with such people were conducted, to his own expression: "More in sorrow than in anger", but at times they were bitter clashes. There were some bloody-minded people in the Trade Union movement who recognised in men like McGree a

threat to their collaborationist careers and who were prepared to stoop as low as possible in their efforts to retain their positions. If the response to this was often harsh and bitter the background and the conditions in which this aspect of struggle was being conducted ought also to be noted.

The trade union movement was not strong. The TUC did not have the 12 million members it has today. Trade Unionists were victimised blacklisted, arrested, very often reviled by their own workmates. It would never have survived without the people who fought at factory, Branch and District levels to force recognition from the employers and from the governments. When such people began to emerge in positions of leadership, there were men at the top who viewed them with as much alarm and fear as did the natural class opponents of the unions, with whom they sought to collaberate. Today, as the balance swings more in favour of Socialist ideology throughout the world, the same elements still exist, as does capitalism in Britain, and because of the fact. Only the degree is different. There are still trade union leaders who connive with employers and who seek their aid in winning election to office under the banner of anti-Communism. There are still betrayals and refusals to mobilise the full power of the movement at crucial moments of struggle. There is victimisation, blacklisting and arrests and imprisonment of Trade Unionists. We should not be too complacent or critical of those who faced all this and worse in more difficult circumstances. Leo understood the dangers of sectarianism within the labour movement and always fought against it. He had the ability to overcome personal animosities and always looked for ways of involving even his most bitter opponents in any activities on which broad general agreement could be reached.

In negotiations with employers he was always considerate and helpful to trade union colleagues with whom he may have had the sharpest differences on wider, political questions. During the cold war period of the fifties, divisions in the movement led to the ludicrous situation where annual May Day marches were split, the 'official' Labour Party and Trade Union contingent marching, and the Communist Party forming a separate section at the rear. In Liverpool an attempt was made on one such occasion to interpose a squad of policemen between the two contingents. Leo was furious. He risked life and limb, standing in front of police vehicles and arguing with the police and eventually literally single-handed forced the two sections to join up as one. From that day on there has never been a demonstration in Liverpool which has been divided into separate sections, for any reason, and even the police have been known to deal promptly with anybody so much as trying to cross from one pavement to the other through the ranks of marches in a demonstration.

The young Leo McGree, 21 and a Union Branch Secretary, was typical of many of those in the 'twenties' who hurled themselves into the struggle to raise the sights of their class, to build their Trade Union strength and to raise the banner of Socialist revolution. The Russian people had done it - why not the British? All that was needed was for the message to be given out and the fight organised. Leo and his Communist Party colleagues in Liverpool set about the task with a will. The Docks area became a regular spot for week-end and lunchtime public meetings. At first Leo used to introduce the speakers and then sold copies of the 'WORKERS WEEKLY'. The meetings lasted until he had sold all 72 copies, whereupon he would signal the speaker to wind up. One Friday night the speaker did not turn up and Leo was urged by a member of the audience to "have a go, son". Beginning rather nervously, he delivered

a speech which dealt with the Industrial Revolution, the Combination Laws, the Enclosures Acts, Imperialism and the struggle for the markets and the growth of monopolies. He spoke for an hour and gave the entire solution to the problems of society without one interruption from those listening. As he got down from the rostrum (an old chair) a grizzled old anarchist came up and said: "That was a fine speech, son". From then on Leo learned his trade as a public speaker in the toughest, roughest forum of all, on the streets of Liverpool. He teamed up at meetings with the great orators like Willie Gallacher, Harry Pollitt, and Bob Stewart. Here he developed his own, Merseyside-style with the wit, humour and repartee which became a legend throughout the Labour movement. Nobody who crossed swords in a debate with Leo McGree ever came out on top. On one occasion he was being introduced to an employer who quipped: "I think I should get danger money for this". Back came Leo with "Yes, and I should get dirt money".

The police kept a sharp eye on all activities of the Communist Party and began a spying and surveillance programme which continues today and extends to all progressive forces. For a time it was feared that the Party would be banned and arrangements were made on the Merseyside, as elsewhere, to go underground. In the event repressive actions did not include such a ban but there were arrests of leading party members and the banning of publications. Much of the party's work was devoted to the unemployed and there were to be tremendous struggles on this question resulting in some of the most brutal police actions against working-class families with raids on homes, beatings, arrests and jailings of their leaders. But before these events there was much discussion in the Communist Party on the need to pay attention to those at work as well as those unemployed.

## Chapter 2. Into Print.

Merseyside Communists began the task of winning influence among the workers in the factories, shipyards and on the building sites by publishing specialised bulletins and other publications. One of these was "THE CAN LANE SALT BOX", produced in 1925. In the Can Lane area of Liverpool thousands of Corporation houses were being built, providing building workers with an opportunity of much longer-term employment than was usual in this casual industry. The construction of the houses, back-to-back terraces, two up and two down, resembled Salt Boxes, hence the title of the monthly publication. It was sold in the pubs near the sites, at some of the pay offices and at Tram terminals at the price of one halfpence. At one time sales reached 600 a month. Contributions in the form of articles, poems and cartoons came from the workers themselves. There were articles covering political events, pay and conditions, and opposing the introduction of bonus schemes. One cartoon depicted a hare being chased at the dogtrack by greyhounds labelled: Joiner, Bricklayer and Plumber. "THE SALT BOX" was attacked in the local press for inciting workers to strike but the Liverpool Trades Council used it as an example of how to increase sales of "LABOUR'S NORTHERN VOICE".

Another monthly paper was sold to shipyard workers at Cammell Laird. The company insignia is a camel; so the paper was called "THE HUMP". It was sold on the first Friday of the month, after the payout of wages at the yards and all copies were sold out. One issue led to a response from the management on the question of whether there should



be "battleships or bread". The management's letter was published on the front page. Later the paper received a letter from solicitors for Cammell Laird demanding withdrawal of a statement which had been published dealing with Company's profits and pointing out that there was no canteen for the workers. The letter was published but no legal action was taken. "THE HUMP" played an important part in uniting the Shop Stewards' committee at the yard, in the fight for better conditions and an end to casual labour.

A third paper began the long, bitter struggle of the Dockers to put an end to the degrading method by which men were chosen for daily work. It took many years before the favouritism, the nepotism, the choice or rejection of men on religious grounds and the victimising of militants was finally ended but the "DOCKERS BULLETIN" really began the campaign. The paper endeavoured to create unity between dockers and the seamen against the shipowners and the stevedore firms. It consisted of four pages produced on an ancient duplicator. It took three turns of the handle to print each sheet of paper. Production rose to 4,000 copies a month, or twenty-four thousand turns of the handle. Then came the folding and sorting into bundles of 100. The work would commence on the Thursday morning and would go on into the night and the Friday morning when distribution to the selling points took place. Each month there was an editorial on the main political question of the day. Inside were stories sent in by dockers about incidents at work, the fiddles of the "putters-on", those who selected the men to be taken on each day, and even about "stool pigeons" who were giving information to the police. The employers' response was to hire toughs to threaten the sellers, but only one punch-up was ever recorded and the threats ended. The bulletin played a leading role during one of the big dock strikes, urging unity between dockers and the seamen. This resulted in

a six mile march from the Pier Head to the Gladstone Dock with the seamen and dockers marching together. There was even a profit made from the sales and this was used to send dockers' delegation to a conference of the National Minority Movement and to purchase new equipment.

The plot of the master builders to force a wage reduction was answered by the publication called the "BUILDING WORKER". Leo McGree was once arrested while selling copies outside the main Employment Exchange in Liverpool. Carrying his unsold copies, and with a policeman wheeling his bike, he was taken to the Warren Street Station, Bridewell. They were followed by a procession of unemployed building workers, curious to know what was happening. They gathered round the entrance which was promptly closed to their inquisitive gaze. Leo was placed in a cell and was able to overhear a conversation on the telephone between the station sergeant and the chief of the CID at the Dale Street Station. The CID man wanted to know if the printers' name was printed on the paper or typed and the sergeant was getting confused as to what difference this made. Eventually he read an extract from the paper: "Sad death of T. P. O'Connor (MP for the Scotland Division) We are sorry to report that the MP for Scotland Division died last week after representing the workers for over twenty years in the House of Commons. Editorial Comment: At last he has done something useful for the workers." When the conversation ended, Leo was brought before the red-faced sergeant who told him: "I have just spoken to Inspector Moore of the CID and he has advised me to overlook the offence of selling these papers outside the Employment Exchange and causing a disorder. You may leave the Station, but don't do it again." McGree was not satisfied. He had been publicly arrested, marched through the streets of Liverpool and placed in a cell and he was not leaving until he had been charged. There was a hasty consultation between

the policemen after which they took him to the front door and pushed him out. There was a big cheer from the waiting crowd as he emerged. "What about my bike" yelled Leo. They gave him his bike but not the unsold copies. A week later Leo appeared in the magistrates' court with a summons for wrongful arrest. A sympathetic magistrate listened to his story of having been arrested and detained but told him that this was not the appropriate court to deal with the matter. He advised Leo to get a solicitor and apply to some other court. Fixing the magistrate with a dignified stare, Leo left the witness-box but forgot about the three steps down. He landed in a heap on the floor, much to the amusement of those present. He proceeded no further with his case for wrongful arrest.

The bulletins, factory news-sheets and other publications played a very important part in the development of the working-class organisation. Later, when the decision was taken to launch a Communist daily paper there was already a fund of experience at hand regarding distribution and sales. The struggles of the "DAILY WORKER" to survive have been well recorded and it was certainly a mammoth task. Tremendous sacrifices were needed by enthusiasts all over the country and Merseyside played its part along with other areas. A meeting of Party members was held in Liverpool, which decided to give a lead to the rest of the country in selling the new paper. It was not an easy task. The Lancashire wholesalers boycotted the paper. The Communist Party members had to organise the distribution and this meant meeting the London train at Lime Street Station at 4.20am, searching through the luggage van for the small parcels and then cycling round to the news-agents to push copies through the letter-boxes, in addition to selling on the streets and the workplaces. For one special May Day issue, McGree had the job of meeting the train together with another comrade

and arranging the distribution and extra sales. A thousand extras had been ordered and the parcel was too heavy to lift. They manhandled it to the station buffet where the woman in charge let them leave the papers behind the counter. Stuffing as many copies as possible into their bags they set off to the news-agents, leaving six extra copies at each shop. At 6.0 am they were back for more. These were sold at Gladstone Docks, where Leo addressed a street meeting as his colleague sold the papers. From there they went to a clearing point where the dockers not selected for work that day were gathered. Again Leo delivered his May Day speech and more copies were sold. Then back to the station to re-load and, at 10 a. m to Canning Place for a meeting with the unemployed seamen before moving off to Islington Square to speak to more unemployed workers gathered there. All day they worked and the last meeting took place at 7.30 p. m. Leo suggested that those with money give a shilling or sixpence to buy copies for those without money. The idea was a success and all the remaining copies of the May Day special were sold out. It was through the hard work and devotion of such people all over Britain that the "Miracle of Fleet Street" survived. Without their efforts there would never have been a "DAILY WORKER" or a "MORNING STAR".

## Chapter 3.

### The General Strike.

The 1926 General Strike has, deservedly, been analysed and debated at great length. It produced moments of great sacrifice and pride. It ended in total capitulation by the General Council of the TUC and the results of this had a demoralising effect on the Labour and Trade Union movement which lasted for many years and which still inhibit some Trade Union leaders when faced with the necessity to mobilise the power of the movement. As happened with later serious reverses for the Labour Movement, there followed a period of internal recrimination and a sharpening of conflict and division between left and right. The fundamental causes of sectarianism are frustration and defeat.

In Liverpool the experience of the Trade Union movement from 1900-1920 had brought about an upsurge in trade union activity. In 1911 Tom Mann had led the general transport strike of seventy thousand seamen, carters, tramwaymen and railwaymen. The Trades Council reported that. . . "the docks were deserted, mills stopped and engineering works shut down, and Liverpool's industrial population stood to arms". The outstanding feature of this strike was that the dockers and carters were fighting in complete unity, as the dockers were largely Roman Catholic and the carters Protestant. Much of the credit for this goes to Tom Mann who insisted on excluding religious differences from the strike committee. This strike was of immense importance in bringing unity and Trade Union discipline to thousands of inexperienced members who were flooding to join the unions. The strike was a success for the seamen, who won union recognition and better pay, and it led to other sections of transport workers putting forward their demands. There was a

celebration demonstration on August 13 on the plateau of St George's Hall. This became known as Bloody Sunday as a result of the attack carried out by the police, who as one observer was later to remark: "Tendered their fraternal greetings with batons deftly used on the heads of innocent people." Hundreds required hospital treatment after the incident, which led to street battles between police and demonstrators. Later that week two men were shot dead by soldiers during an incident in the Vauxhall Road. What had alarmed the authorities most was that the demonstration comprised both Catholic and Protestant workers who had disregarded their church leaders pronouncements that the strike had been 'an atheist stunt'. In the days that followed full advantage was taken by some elements to re-kindle sectarian religious strife.

In July 1919 the police themselves were on strike against the Police Bill which made Trade Unionism illegal in the force. In Liverpool, and particularly in Bootle, the strike was better supported than anywhere else in the country. Two-thirds of the force were on strike. There was looting and rioting and 2,500 soldiers, four tanks, a battleship and two destroyers were sent to Liverpool. There was wide and powerful support for the strike from the Labour Movement and a general strike throughout Merseyside was threatened. The strike failed, however, and there were mass dismissals from the force of those who took part. On September 12, 1921 after a large demonstration of unemployed, a group of marchers who tried to occupy the Walker Art Gallery were attacked by the police. When those arrested appeared in court most of them had their heads swathed in bandages. The Recorder at the court censured the police for their "unnecessary violence".

In 1926 the trade union movement in Liverpool was more united and consolidated than in most parts of the country. This was the basis of work that was

to be carried out consistently from then on by Liverpool Trades Council, a body that to this day continues to give lead in organising mass movement and activity. In 1920 the Trades Council had formed a Council of Action to campaign on behalf of the "Hands off Russia" movement which was opposing Churchill's 'War of intervention'. A similar Council of Action was set up for the General Strike, with representatives invited from all parts of Merseyside. It printed bulletins, of which 500,000 were distributed, and organised 72 public meetings, many of them overflow meetings. Raymond Postgate, author and working-class historian, classifying those areas of which he had reports for a 'solidarity' table placed Liverpool and Birkenhead in "Class 1" and Bootle in "Class 2", one being "Amazingly fine" and the other "Wholly effective". It was a hectic period for all trade unionists and for the local Labour movement. Leo McGree and his colleagues played their part in organising effective strike action, in addressing meetings, distributing leaflets and selling copies of the "BRITISH WORKER". A problem arose with some building workers due to the declaration by some union officials that there should be no hold up in the task of building homes. Leo and other building workers active in the strike found that they were having to visit some sites more than once to make sure that the strike action was being maintained. The defeat of the strike brought recriminations against the leadership. There were charges of betrayal, and the subsequent disillusion led to a weakening of the Trade Union movement.



## Chapter 4.

### Depression Years and Unemployment Riots in Birkenhead.

There were grim times ahead and those whose ultimate goal was the Socialist revolution found themselves fighting defensive actions against unemployment, to rebuild the strength and unity of the Trade Unions, and against poverty, hunger and repression. Struggles developed against landlords who were evicting tenants who fell into arrears with the rent. Leo McGree organised a specialist group to resist evictions. An intelligence unit was formed to get information regarding where evictions were threatened. Leo's group would call on the people in the area to assist in preventing the bailiffs from acting. Any furniture or other possessions thrown into the street by the bailiffs were immediately carried back into the house and the bailiffs 'persuaded' to leave the area.

McGree's ability had been noted by the leadership of the Communist Party and he was asked to take up a full-time Party job working among the seamen and trawlermen of Hull. He accepted and hardly had time to get settled in that port before the fishermen were on strike over their appalling conditions. The strike lasted eight weeks and during that time he assisted the strikers, helping to organise solidarity, collections and action. His work in Hull led to the Communist Party asking him to go to Moscow to report to a conference on the conditions of British seamen. There were delegates from China, Japan, Germany and Italy attending the conference. Leo was asked by the Russian hosts to prepare his report for translations. He prepared six pages. "Too long", he was told: "You must cut it down to two pages". McGree borrowed a pair of scissors and some paste. He trimmed the edges, stuck the first three pages together and then the



second three and displayed his 'two' pages for the translators.

Having completed his stint in Hull, Leo McGree returned to Liverpool to rejoin the struggle of his comrades. It was a time of mass unemployment under the McDonald National Government. The despicable Means Test was in operation and there was much to do in organising the resistance of the unemployed. There were protest demonstrations in all the major towns and cities and vicious police action designed to smash the growing resentment and action. At one stage Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party, reported that 70 of the Party's most active members were in prison, including editors of the 'DAILY WORKER' and miners leader, Arthur Horner, sentenced to 15 months' hard labour for his political activity in the Rhondda.

Joe Rawlings was one of the leaders of the unemployed in Birkenhead. It was there that a statement from the Chairman of the Public Assistance Committee sparked off a protest that was to lead to mass demonstrations and some of the worst police actions ever experienced. It was September 1932 and 140,000 were on the dole on both sides of the Mersey. People were starving, their children suffering malnutrition, rickets and other diseases of capitalism in crisis. There was severe overcrowding in slum houses. The grinding poverty of the 'thirties'. The Chairman of the Public Assistance Committee had accused the unemployed of living in luxury off the ratepayers. They spent their time, he said, at midweek football matches and in breeding expensive racing dogs. McGree was asked to address a meeting at Birkenhead. An apology was demanded from the man and a march took place to the Public Assistance offices. There, a deputation was elected and sent in to meet their accuser, but he had been tipped off and had already left. The demonstration moved on to the man's home. The police were lined up across the

road guarding the house, but they allowed a deputation to go through. No apology was forthcoming but as the deputation left the house the police refused to allow it to rejoin the waiting crowd. An argument ensued and then the order was given for the police to charge. They did so with great vigour, batoning people to the ground. The demonstrators retreated, taking their wounded to hospital.

That night a large crowd gathered at the entrance to Birkenhead Park. Again the demand was put for an apology. On the following day shipyard workers joined the protest. They marched through the main streets of Birkenhead. Some shop windows were smashed and food was looted and given to the hungry people. A number of revenge attacks were carried out on policemen who were driven from the street by the enraged workers. The people prepared for an attack. Manhole covers were removed from the streets and replaced by carpets in readiness for the mounted police.

That night the police invaded the area, breaking into peoples homes, truncheoning them, smashing up their furniture and throwing it onto the streets. From Liverpool police reinforcements were sent for and an attempt was made to get them across the Mersey by boat. They were beaten back by workers throwing rivets and stones but eventually arrived in Birkenhead by the underground and pitched their tents in Birkenhead Park.

Among those arrested was Joe Rawlings. McGree was not present at this stage of the battle. He had been organising support for the Burnley cotton workers who were on strike. On the Friday night he spoke at a rally in Liverpool called to collect money and food for the families of the cotton workers. He left the meeting with a young girl striker who was to stay in Liverpool that evening. The police followed him. At his home Leo and the girl counted the collection and left by the back door so that he could

escort her to her lodgings for the night. Returning home he found it was impossible to get near the house. A huge crowd blocked the road and a police patrol car was waiting outside. McGree doubled back to where the Burnley girl was staying. The woman of the house went out to discover what was happening and when she returned it was with the news that warrants had been issued for the arrest of 66 people - 65 from Birkenhead and Leo McGree.

Leo went into hiding, moving from one 'safe house' to another while the police scoured Merseyside searching for him. They kept a close watch on the Communist Party headquarters and attended all public meetings. He was billed to speak at a meeting in the Scotland Road Hollow and great precautions were taken to get him there and safely away afterwards. He was given a shawl to wear, and an escape route was planned through the expected police cordons. He spoke for twenty minutes to a large crowd ringed by police. Then, on a signal, the police moved in to make their arrest. Leo leaped from the platform and made a run for it. He had forgotten the escape route and ran into a cul-de-sac, chased by two policemen. They caught him. One of them pinned his arms behind his back and the other one said: 'I'll give you what we got in Birkenhead'. A fist smashed into his face and then he was beaten unmercifully by the guardians of law and order. That night he was charged with inciting a riot in Birkenhead. After being charged he was taken to Walton prison handcuffed to a plainclothes man. They travelled on the underground, straphanging with the chains of the handcuffs clearly visible to all the passengers. People were staring at them and whispering. McGree said in a loud voice: 'I had great difficulty with this chap, but eventually, I caught him'.

Afterwards the others were brought before the courts and most of them were sentenced. Joe Rawlings was charged with having been the leader of the demonstrations. All his attempts to make a speech

from the dock were silenced by the judge and he was given 20 months' hard labour, most of which he served at Wakefield.

While on remand, Leo found that the Deputy Governor was quite reasonable. After a run in with a military-minded warden he was taken to see the Deputy Governor. The Army-type warder asked if he was a Communist and went through a list of names: Pollitt, Gallacher, Dutt, Jackson. "Did you know these people?" McGree knew them, so did the Deputy Governor. He had been at the prison where they had served their time and thought they were all fine chaps. He thought Leo was a fine chap too. Privately, he asked for Leo's co-operation. McGree began to think that the deputy might turn into a fine chap too. He did co-operate and found that most of his requests were granted. He asked for a razor. The warders refused the request, but when the deputy governor found out he instructed one of the warders to take Leo to the medical officer immediately to get the razor issued. The warder was furious and threatened Leo with all manner of retribution. The medical officer was rather nervous. He asked Leo if he had any suicidal tendencies. "No" said McGree, "Only murderous ones." Three days later he thanked the deputy for the razor but suggested that it would be a good idea if he had a blade to go with it, otherwise he would have to grow a beard. His next venture was not successful. He was granted the use of pen, ink and paper to petition the Home Office in order to get the "DAILY WORKER" delivered to him. The petition was never granted either at Walton or at Strangeways, where he served his sentence.

It was at the prison church services that prisoners sometimes received news of what was happening outside. A church Army officer often read items of news from the pulpit. One Sunday he told them that the McDonald government was proposing to cut police pay by 5%. A great cheer went up. Then they heard

that the same treatment was planned for the judges who had warned that any attempt to cut their pay would be answered by wholesale resignations on handsome pensions. Soon afterwards McGree was to face one of these judges in his four-day trial. During his trial he was able to make the point that the unemployed did not have much recourse in their plight except to demonstrate on the streets. Unlike judges, they could not threaten to resign on large pensions.

He conducted his own defence from a position beneath the bench next to the prosecuting barristers. The basis of his case was that the Birkenhead arrests and subsequent trials were a political action by a government afraid of people who were angry and had been forced into action through hunger and poverty. In this country, all trials of this nature are rigged. They are rigged as a result of the way in which the legal system and the judiciary have evolved and the class structure on which the law is based. A person charged with obstruction, incitement, conspiracy or any other offence arising from political, or industrial action, is never allowed to develop a case showing the background to the events which have led to the arrest. The build-up, the speeches and threats from politicians or governments and press - all this is irrelevant. Was there an obstruction? What form did it take? What is the evidence? Never - Why? What justification? Only the technicality and the evidence. The evidence is preponderantly that of the police and is mainly a concoction to support the technicalities. A very skilled concoction familiar to all judges who bristle with indignation at any suggestion that the police may be lying and are more likely to hand out a much stiffer sentence to an accused who makes such a charge. In conducting his defence, Leo McGree was not concerned with technicalities but with politics. He was constantly interrupted by the prosecuting barrister who pointed out that the defendant was introducing material "not relevant" to the charge. The charge was Incitement to Riot. It

referred to events at Birkenhead at which McGree had not been present. The judge was at great pains to explain to the jury that it was not necessary for the accused to have been present at the time. On a previous occasion he had incited the people to riot and was therefore responsible for the trouble at Birkenhead.

Some things may have changed since those days, but not the law when applied to workers who take action in defence of their interests. In 1973, Des Warren, Ricky Tomlinson and John McKenzie Jones were convicted at Shrewsbury of Conspiracy to Intimidate during the 1972 building workers strike. The jury were told: "It is not necessary for the prosecution to prove that they ever met or that they even knew each other." At one point in the McGree trial the prosecution produced a large wooden pole with a four inch nail protruding from the top. The police had claimed that it had been carried as an offensive weapon. McGree explained that it was obviously a banner pole from which the pinnacle had been smashed during a skirmish. It was the head of the nail that was showing and he told the court: "I am a joiner and if I was going to use a four inch nail as a weapon, I would make sure the point was showing not the head." Even the judge rejected that particular police concoction.

McGree's greatest achievement in the trial was to call six witnesses who were serving sentences at Wakefield on the same charge. Among them was Joe Rawlings, who was able to deliver the speech which he had been prevented from making at his own trial. It was a magnificent speech in which he turned the tables on the accusers; a political speech giving the case for the working-class against their oppressors.

The result of the trial was a foregone conclusion. The jury found McGree guilty. The judge after giving much praise to Leo for the way he had conducted

his defence, sentenced him to twenty months. Ignoring the remarks by McGree about judges and their pensions, he pontificated about the behaviour of the unemployed. If they had grievances they should let them be settled by the House of Commons and not attempt to solve them on the streets of Birkenhead.

## Additional Information on Birkenhead Riots 1932.

from:

Wal Hannington's

### MY LIFE AND STRUGGLES AMONGST THE UNEMPLOYED

On 13th September 1932, 10,000 unemployed demonstrated to the Public Assistance Committee with the following simple demand:

"Relief to all able-bodied unemployed and an increase of 3s per week; immediate supply of boots and clothes and one hundred weight of coal during the winter; and the starting of work schemes at trade union rates."

The deputation was received and stated its case before the town council, whilst outside the town hall masses of unemployed awaited the results of the interview. Fuel was added to the fire of indignation amongst the people of Birkenhead over their poverty conditions when hundreds of police were drafted in from Liverpool and the surrounding areas. The demonstration was however, quite orderly, as the deputation led by Joe Rawlings and Mrs Barraskill returned to report that the council had agreed to send a telegram to the government that day calling for the abolition of the Means Test. They had also agreed to institute work schemes at trade union rates to the total value of £180,000.

As the unemployed began to march away, the police interfered with the procession, a conflict took place and a number of arrests were made. Two days later the unemployed again demonstrated outside the P.A.C. offices to secure improvements in their relief scales, and later outside the house of the chairman of the P.A.C. to express their dissatisfaction and to demand the release of the workers who had been arrested at the previous demonstration.



The demonstration was peaceful and orderly, but quite suddenly large numbers of police were ordered to draw their batons and they began to club to the ground demonstrators and pedestrians, including men, women and children the aged and the infirm.

This roused the feeling of the whole of Birkenhead, and that night a tremendous demonstration assembled at the park gates to protest against the police action. After short speeches they formed up and marched round the town returning to the park gates, and when the demonstrators were just about to disperse, the police, without any apparent reason, made a baton charge. Unemployed and employed workers stood their ground, and one policeman was thrown through a plate glass window. The crowd took up the offensive and the police were ultimately compelled to run; but they rallied again and a pitched battle ensued. Workers tore up railings to defend themselves, and the fighting went on until past eleven at night, thirty seven policemen being carried to hospital. Most of the wounded amongst the workers were taken into the homes of their class to have their wounds dressed, in order that they should not be marked for police arrest. Next day a further huge force of police were drafted into the town, coming from as far away as Birmingham, until the town looked like an armed camp. The police marched through the streets in military fashion in order to intimidate the workers. Another great demonstration took place, and again the police now in great numbers, unmercifully beat up the demonstrators; but the courage of the workers was unbounded; handicapped and unarmed they fought back. The resistance of the workers appeared to drive the police frantic, and according to the reports, carefully verified afterwards, they began a campaign of terror.

At midnight they raided working-class streets, smashing the lower windows with their batons in order to terrify the women and children. Joe Rawlings and the whole of the branch committee of the N.U.W.M. were arrested at midnight and taken away a black-maria. In the early hours of the morning, groups of police forced their way into working-class houses and assaulted workers who were known to be associated with the demonstration.

The police terror continued the next night, and, as they entered working-class streets to beat up the inhabitants, the workers fought back by every possible means. Wire was stretched across the streets, over which the police stumbled, one falling into a manhole, the cover of which had been conveniently removed. Ash cans and other missiles were flung at the police in the streets from the windows of working-class houses. The night of Sunday 18th September was one the workers of Birkenhead will ever remember. Lorry-loads of police descended upon blocks of thickly populated tenements in the dead of night. Their pretext was that they were 'searching for loot', claiming that the workers had looted the shops during the demonstration:



Afterwards, women stated that their husbands and sons were dragged from their beds by the police, and beaten into unconsciousness and then flung into black mairies with blood streaming from head face and body wounds. They were carried off to the courts to be charged with riotous behaviour and assaults on the police, and then transferred to the hospitals to have their wounds dressed. . . . Over one hundred workers were taken to hospital with severe injuries, including cases of broken pelvis, fractured ribs, broken arms and legs. One worker, who had been badly beaten up, drank ammonia. He died later, and at the inquest it was stated that when the police were informed of what he had done, they replied 'Go back and tell him to take some more'. This evidence was printed in the press without any Coroner's comments. Further arrests on the Sunday night brought the total up to forty four, one of whom appeared in court a week later on a stretcher. . . . The leader of the unemployed, Joe Rawlings, was sentenced to two years imprisonment, and Leo McGree, the Liverpool unemployed leader, recieved a similar sentence for his part in connection with the struggles. . . . "

---

## Joe Rawlings

Joe Rawlings, at the time of his arrest in 1932, had been leading the unemployed in struggles for more than ten years. Towards the end of 1921 Joe, quite spontaneously, had precipitated an action in Birkenhead which led to some 200 workless enjoying a "feast".

The occasion was the opening of a new Sanatorium at Thingwall. The Birkenhead Council had booked a hall opposite the sanatorium for a banquet after the opening ceremony.

On the day in question Joe was on his way to the Labour Exchange when he saw a crowd gathered round a horse drawn limousine listening to an address by a local politician, a Major Thompson. Hanging from the vehicle was a poster which proclaimed: "We Birkenhead ratepayers protest at the Aldermen and Town Councillors guzzling and wasting the rates by holding a banquet at Thingwall." Major Thompson was saying: "Now, if someone will move this resolution, and you are agreed I will send it to the Council." Joe Rawlings said he would move the resolution if Major Thompson would agree to . . . lead these men to Thingwall so that we can take part in the guzzle and teach our civic fathers a lesson. This, he suggested, would be a practical protest whereas sending the resolution to the Council would be too late as the feasting would have taken place. With the audience roaring assent at this suggestion Major Thompson exclaimed "My God! If you do that you will get arrested for trespassing," and he promptly drove away.

Joe then asked the crowd if they would be prepared to march the four miles to Thingwall. Years later Joe wrote his own account of what happened. "We lined them up four deep and about 200 fell in and away we went at a brisk pace singing all the Irish rebel songs we knew, and the songs we had learned in the trenches during the war. When we arrived at Thingwall, Thompson was there shouting to us to go back. We made for the Hall and out came Alderman McGull, red in the face and shouting 'What's this? What do you want?' I said, 'We have marched from Birkenhead to pay tribute to the men who built the new sanatorium and to take part in the sumptuous banquet along with you and the councillors.' McGull cried: 'My God, unthinkable. You can't come in here.!' The crowd roared: But we are coming in. McGull then said that if we sat on the grass and elected a few orderlies, they could go in and bring some food out to us. We picked a dozen men and sent them in. They seemed to be in a long while and the rest became suspicious. Then a sudden mad stampede started and they began pouring into the Hall. I was carried along in the rush. My God! What a sight met our gaze. Tables groaning with food. Pork pies of huge proportions, cut ready for eating. Cakes, sandwiches, meat, ham, tea and soft drinks. Not an Alderman or Councillor in sight. They had got the wind-up when McGull had gone back inside and had all nipped out the back way.

The lads tucked in. A swarm of wasps seemed to have followed us in. They were buzzing like hell and everybody was swatting them and getting the food down. In one corner a police sergeant and one constable. They had a table all to themselves with pies and cakes stacked on it. I went over and took a pie and when the others saw me they felled suit. The sergeant was furious and said; You greedy lot of bastards.

When all the tables had been emptied we lined up again outside and as we marched away a charabanc arrived full of detectives. We gave them a loud raspberry and marched off. When word got round, all Birkenhead was laughing and no charges were brought. It would have made a farcical court case."

A few weeks later Joe Rawlings led a similar raid on the Mayor's annual banquet in Birkenhead. He had discovered that at the first Council meeting after the elections the new Mayor would deal only with correspondence, or any item needing immediate attention, and then close the meeting by inviting all present to attend his banquet.

Here again is Joe's account of what happened:

"I told everybody I met to get along to the Council meeting as 'visitors'. The unemployed went through the doors six abreast. The two Coppers on the door played hell and kept saying 'There wont be any business today, you're wasting your time coming here'. Inside the Council chamber the air was electric. I had told the lads to

get off the mark quick when the Mayor made his invitation and to get into the banquet hall before the councillors. The Mayor had hardly begun his invitation when the rush started. Thingwall wasn't a patch on this one. The Mayor was a very generous person. His mace bearer had whisky, rum and cigars to hand out. There were so many of us, the councillors didn't get a look in. At the next council meeting it was decided that in future all visitors to the meetings would have to get a pass from their councillors."

---

## Chapter 5. Prison Years.

Leo was sent to Strangeways Prison in Manchester. He immediately asked for a transfer to Wakefield and was told his request would be considered. He spent his first week at Strangeways in his cell and, in the absence of a bed, slept on boards. At his medical examination he was given a cursory check-up and asked his trade. "Joiner". "Right", he was told, "You can go to the bakehouse." The warder in charge at the bakehouse asked him some questions about his politics and Leo used this as an opportunity to ask him about his request for a transfer. The warder, giving advice from his thirty years' experience, told him he would be far better staying where he was. Over the next few weeks he taught Leo how to bake bread, cook, make the dinner and stir the porridge. Before going off on holiday, the warder told Leo that if he still wanted a transfer when he got back, he would recommend it. On his return Leo told him: "I'll stay". The warder grinned: "I thought you might", he said.

McGree had already realised how important the kitchen was to the prison. It is far easier to say than to do, but once in prison, as in any other difficult situation, it is better to accept and try to adjust. McGree did better than that. He virtually ran Strangeways from his kitchen. He was the baker, the preparer of all meals, dietician to the sick and the religious. McGree ruled and for the prisoners that was OK. Towards the end of November he was told to prepare the Christmas pudding, a giant three hundred weight. Relays of prisoners were set to crushing the breadcrumbs and cracking the 72 eggs. Some of the eggs began to disappear and there was wholesale thieving of candied peel, currants and raisins. McGree

did not appreciate the petty thieving and threatened to ask for a guard with a machine-gun to watch over the proceedings. He had his own ideas on what should be done and was keeping them a secret. On the big day the Christmas pudding ritual took place. First, the governor entered the kitchen and stirred the mixture three times with a big wooden spoon. Then it was the matron's turn. As she stirred she chanted: "Health, wealth and prosperity to us all." In one way her prayers were answered. McGree had plotted to siphon off portions of the pudding for use later on. Tins filled with the rich mixture were hidden under the coke and the prisoners were eating Christmas pudding until the end of March.

At Wakefield, Joe Rawlings was organising, politically and industrially. At his trial the judge had described him as an intelligent man but a danger to society (whether this was relevant to the technicalities of the charge is doubtful but judges invariably give the game away at some stage). Rawlings was a skilled moulder and he did not take kindly to being paid fourpence a week in the Wakefield foundry. He led a fight for a pay rise, was placed on a charge, put on bread and water and lost three days' remission. One night there was a lecture with lantern slides on "Through Darkest Russia". Before long Joe was on his feet challenging the speaker. He suggested they have a talk on "Through Sunlit Russia". The next day it was the talk of the prison and other prisoners began to show interest in this Communist inmate. He organised a Communist group and soon had 18 members. He made an arrangement with a Communist from Castleford who regularly tossed over the prison wall a copy of "LABOUR MONTHLY" to the waiting Joe Rawlings. After eleven months Wakefield had had enough of him. He was transferred to Strangeways.

When McGree learned that his comrade had arrived he sent to Joe's cell a can of tea and a custard

pudding 'Compliments of the chef'. They began attending lectures at the prison and soon turned them into political forums. At first the subjects chosen were anything but political but with news of the Reichstag fire and the subsequent Dimitrov trial McGree and Rawlings were able to persuade the lecturer to deal with current events. The lecturer was from Manchester University who would discuss matters from the editorial comments of the 'MANCHESTER GUARDIAN'. They discussed the Dimitrov trial and the growing danger of the rise of fascism.

One Monday McGree had a visit from Harry Pollitt who had spoken at a big Rally in Manchester's Free Trade Hall on the previous night. He began to tell Leo about the success of the meeting but McGree suggested they discuss other matters. He knew all about the meeting having persuaded two warders to attend and to bring back some literature. He told Pollitt how many people had been present at the Rally how much money had been collected and how many new members had joined the Communist Party. He then produced a copy of the Party's latest pamphlet on sale at the meeting.

As his release drew near McGree became restless to rejoin the struggle. A lot was happening. The Irish rail workers had been on strike and had derailed a scab train; there had been marches to London; there were two-and-a-half million on the dole and fascism was on the march. In America, tear gas was being used against strikers. British bombs were dropping in India and the Japanese were killing thousands of Chinese people with arms supplied by the British government. This was the world McGree and Rawlings re-entered on leaving prison.

During Leo's imprisonment, Hetty had shouldered the responsibility of keeping home and family together. There were now three children, another daughter, Betty, having been born in February 1932. To write about the part played by Hetty McGree in all the

struggles in which Leo was involved would take another book of its own. Her courage, her support and help to Leo and her own political contribution to the working-class, naturally overshadowed by the position Leo held in the movement, was nevertheless something of which Merseyside can be proud. Even today, Dorian and Betty still recall the time when their father was in prison. Dorian remembers clearly how, while in hiding from the police before his arrest, Leo would pay clandestine visits home. The children were told never to say 'Dad' while he was there just in case they might be overheard. She visited him once when he was on remand at Walton and said: 'I never went there again. It was too upsetting seeing him in that awful place and having to speak to him through an iron-grille.' The family did visit him often at Strangeways where their gifts of chocolate-bars were always confiscated by the warders.

During his term in prison, the family suffered severe deprivation. From the public Assistance Committee Hetty received the scant support provided by the system, often in the form of food coupons. The traditional solidarity of working-class people, neighbours and local shopkeepers helped to ease the problem.

Throughout his life, Leo McGree, as a husband and father, was a different person at home from the hard-bitten, skilled negotiator, political fighter and public orator others knew him to be. His youngest daughter, Betty, said 'He never liked being away from home. If he attended conferences and could get home in the evening, he would do so. He would suddenly turn up and tell us 'I can't stand hotels'. ' Even when his children had grown up he would leave colleagues at the end of a meeting saying: 'I want to get home to the wife and kids. '

He never insisted on his children accepting without question the politics which he had adopted as part of his life's struggle, though he often took them with

him to meetings.

Betty recalls how once Leo, under pressure from her and Dorian, made a dressing table for them. It consisted of a plank fitted into an alcove in the bedroom and a mirror. It was functional, even though the mirror bore the advertising slogan: 'Wear XY Corsets'.

On one occasion he was working late at night on repairs to his old Ford car. He crept upstairs and got Dorian out of bed with whispered instructions to follow him and not to wake mother. Putting on a coat, Dorian went with him outside where he told her to stand on the car bumper, while he got underneath. "What do I do now?" she asked. "Jump up and down" said Leo. He had merely wanted some leeway in order to get a nut threaded onto a bolt under the car.

"Without his family, he was often lonely", said Betty. During the war he drove an ambulance having joined that service as part of his contribution, and he would often take at least one of the children with him.



## Chapter 6. The Rise of Fascism.

When Leo returned home from prison, the political situation made more demands on him, on Hetty and the family. Fascism was on the march. Mussolini ruled Italy and Hitler was coming to prominence in Germany. It was essential that an anti-fascist movement be generated. The Tories and the forces they represent welcomed the emergence of Fascism and began to organise support. Anyone who doubts this has only to read the book written by Tom Winttingham: "YOUR MP" at the end of the second world war to see what the Tories were up to in that period.

Britain had its own Fuhrer. Mosley emerged with his uniformed blackshirts marching and carrying the Union Jack, just as the National Front have been doing recently. Mosley's aping of Hitler and his own brand of Jew-baiting, together with the thuggery of his followers, produced a response from the working-class and other sections of society who recognised the danger. The press, with the exception of the Left-wing section, either supported Mosley's fascists or appealed to the people to ignore them, which was much the same thing. The "Ignore it and it might go away" attitude was also recommended by the Right-Wing leadership of the Labour Party, although the membership in the main repudiated them.

Merseyside was one of the many areas to adopt the slogan: "Mosley Shall Not March or Speak". He made some attempts to spread his poison in Merseyside and on one occasion advertised a big outdoor meeting on a plot of land at the end of Queens Drive in Walton, Liverpool. Leo McGree began the meeting and, with the help of others, held the site for hours until the arrival of Mosley's van with its loudspeaker equipment and filled with his uniformed thugs.

Leo, who had the platform at the time, appealed to the crowd not to give Mosley a hearing. They responded. A great mass of people began to push and shove at the van, trying to overturn it. The loud-speaker equipment was put out of action and Mosley and his gang retreated, under police protection, to a nearby warehouse yard. McGree continued to speak to great applause from the audience. Mosley was stopped from speaking in Liverpool.

The anti-fascist struggle grew in momentum and was soon to face even more serious and dangerous action, in which many brave men from Britain were to take up arms and to fight fascism on the battlefield without any support, indeed in the teeth of opposition, from their own government.

Many historians of the Second World War conveniently forget that the rehearsal for that war was the civil war in Spain. The reason for their lapse is that it helps to avoid explanation of the role of the left, and particularly the Communist Party in the war against Franco fascism. Merseyside's contribution to that struggle will never be forgotten. The men who went to Spain, who fought and died there from all corners of Britain and those who survived the war, capture and imprisonment, were the first real heroes of the Second world war.

Frank Deegan of Liverpool, in his auto-biography tells some of the story and of Merseyside's contribution. The names of his comrades who fought with him in Spain are on record. Among them, Jack Coward, whose incredible story has been written and whose exploits would surely rival any fictional war film. There was Jack Jones, at the time a Labour Council-lor in Liverpool and later to become leader of the Transport and General Workers Union. Frank Deegan's list of those from his region who fought in Spain includes dockers, seamen, building workers, meat porters, timber porters, engineering workers and transport drivers. These were the kind of men who

first fought fascism on the battlefields of Spain. Communists and Labour Party members together - with no bans or proscriptions. And with them - the man described by a Tory judge as "A danger to society" - Joe Rawlings.

In deciding who was to go to Spain, the Communist Party faced a dilemma. There could never be enough volunteers but there could, in one sense, be too many. There had to be some form of control. In Spain the Party lost some of its best members. Its membership would have been further denuded had there not been some restriction placed on the numbers who wanted to go. Family considerations had to be taken into account together with the need for people capable of campaigning for public support at home. Consideration also had to be given of the positions of responsibility members had within the Labour Movement.

Leo McGree was one of those who had to stay behind and whose work was to be devoted to the campaign at home. The public campaign swept the country and eventually forced a change in the attitude of the Labour Party leadership which had at first declared support for the policy of Non- Intervention. Meetings, collections of money, the campaign inside the organisations of the labour and trade union movement - all this was to occupy the time of Leo McGree and those who fought an important battle for Spanish democracy in this country. Franco, with the help of Hitler and Mussolini, defeated Spanish democracy and established the long, dark years of fascist dictatorship. The world waited for the next onslaught.

During the struggles against Franco, the Mosleyites and the spread of fascism across Europe, Leo had returned to his trade as a joiner. He became a delegate to the District committee of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, was elected District chairman and, in 1938, was elected District Secretary of the union, a position he was to retain until his retirement in January 1966.

As President of Mersey District of the C. S. E. U., he became the outstanding leader and spokesman of the Merseyside trade union and labour movement. But, in 1938, there was more to worry about than the important task of defending and improving the wages and conditions of trade union members. The years of plotting to build up the Nazi war machine for an assault on the Soviet Union were reaching the climax which led to the holocaust of the Second World War. Chamberlain, the chief representative of British ruling class treachery and deceit, was secretly arranging the betrayal of Czechoslovakia, but the prime objective of Chamberlain and the forces he represented was not to be achieved. The contradictions in the capitalist world led to a situation where, instead of the Nazi machine, urged on and supported by Hitler's natural allies, launching straight into the crusade against the Soviet Union, Hitler turned on those who had been assisting his conspiracy.

These were difficult days, and when Britain declared war on Germany on September 3rd 1939, there was conflict and disagreement among the anti-fascist forces and within the leadership of the Communist Party. Debate still continues about the decisions and actions of that time. Was Harry Pollitt correct in his call for the British people to throw their full weight into the war that Chamberlain had declared? Whatever conclusion one reaches, it is without doubt that the reasons which led to the decision to oppose the war at that stage and to launch a campaign for peace was rooted in suspicions over the real intentions of the ruling class at that time. Their history of scheming, of aiding the Nazis, their paranoic hatred of Communism and of the Soviet Union, the entire record and philosophy and the manner in which they set out to conduct what is now known as the "Phony War", was sufficient to cause the most serious doubts as to what they really intended. It is the Communist Party which is most concerned with a serious debate about the events of that period. Their opponents would naturally prefer

to forget the part they played or their own motives. The intellectual paucity and dishonesty with which they now treat the subject can hardly be described as a contribution to any intelligent discussion of the events.

The leadership of the Labour Party can hardly be credited with having played a positive role in those events. During the fight against the fascist forces in Britain the right wing had appealed to their members not to take part. Their policy of Non-Intervention in Spain had only been reversed as a result of rank and file unity between Communists and Labour Party members during the civil war. One of these leaders was Herbert Morrison. As Home Secretary in the war-time government he banned the 'DAILY WORKER' and in the House of Commons he referred to Communists as "Traitors" and "Those bastards". In the First World War his socialist ideals of opposition to that imperialist slaughter was expressed by his becoming a conscientious objector while other, more genuine Socialists, were being sent to prison for their ideals. It was he who led the campaign within the Labour Party, after the war against Hitler, for the re-armament of West Germany.

The most crucial decision following Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union was that taken by Winston Churchill. Few in the labour movement ever had any doubts about Churchill's role in life. Anti-working class, anti-communist and anti-Soviet to the pitch of hysteria. But Churchill, was astute. He recognised the danger to British Imperialism in Chamberlain's policies and the danger posed by Hitler: "Who fights with Hitler is our enemy - Who fights against Hitler is our ally". It is true that much he did thereafter still revealed his basic outlook of defending the interests of British Imperialism and that he continued his hostility toward the Soviet Union, but his declaration at the time of Hitler's attack was a decisive moment in history leading to the development of world

forces which smashed the fascist Axis of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Japan. It placed new responsibilities on the British working class and their organisations. They threw their weight into the war effort, sacrificing many of the gains they could otherwise have won in a period when labour was in high demand. Other sections of the community showed their patriotism by making a 'killing' out of the war effort.

For those like Leo McGree there were new problems. There was still the need to protect the interests of those they represented but with this, the need to cooperate in the struggle to defeat fascism. There was an occasion when it became necessary to take action against a firm that was blatantly 'fiddling' on Liverpool Docks. The firm was contractor to ship repair companies and engaged in clearing the Quays. Rumours of 'ghost' employees and of theft of materials led to the firm's owner committing suicide. There was an investigation followed by arrests and liquidation of the firm. That was how some people operated during the war while others made supreme sacrifices. Merseyside suffered some of the worst bombings of the war, yet its record of supplying material for the war effort was unsurpassed. During the war 1,235 convoys passed through the Port - a tribute to the superhuman efforts of the Dockers.

## Chapter 7.

### Post War Activity.

Everybody was inspired by the resistance of the Soviet people and the deeds of the Red Army. There was a great upsurge of interest in Socialism and the membership of the Communist Party was growing. Political discussions, lectures and classes enriched the working-class movement and paved the way for Labour's greatest ever election victory in 1945. At a meeting to honour the defenders of Stalingrad, Leo McGree shared the platform with Lord Derby - then an old man who had to be helped onto the platform. Lord Derby made a brilliant speech in support of the people of Stalingrad. Some time later McGree was to attend another meeting along with Lord Derby. This discussed industrial development in the North West. Also present was Lord Sefton who, like Lord Derby, was a great landowner. Lord Derby urged that demands be made on Parliament for new factories in the region. "The crying baby" he said, "got the most milk". McGree thanked him for his interesting speech but said: "While it is true that the crying baby got most milk, this was and should not be the case in a well organised nursery." He suggested that if the region had to have new factories it would be necessary to take over the land at present in the hands of landowners. When Lord Derby asked: "What will you give me for my land?" McGree quipped "A receipt."

There were great stirrings in colonial territories and the emergence of national liberation forces. Churchill had gambled much on his image as the Great War Leader, but despite his speech in making an alliance with the Soviet Union there was much hostility to many of his actions during the war. The deliberate delaying of the opening of the Second Front in Europe had aroused the anger of many, including servicemen and women. There had been massive demonstrations



including one in Trafalgar Square, organised by the Communist Party, at which 80,000 people demanded that the Second Front be opened. Servicemen had demonstrated and had even written to the newspapers saying they were trained, fed-up and raring to go. At the end of the war there were strikes by servicemen and women over the slowness of demobilisation. Above all, they were raising the question: "Will we get the same treatment as our fathers after the First World War?" It was the service vote which crushed Churchill and gave Labour its biggest ever Parliamentary majority. Willie Gallacher was returned to Parliament and had a new colleague in Phil Piratin. New, important Social reforms were being prepared, together with plans for nationalisation. The class enemy was in retreat and disarray. At the first Parliamentary sitting Labour MPs stood up and sang the Red Flag as the Tories sat slumped and dejected in their seats.

The Communist Party had made great efforts in the campaign for a Labour victory in addition to campaigning for the return of Communist MPs to strengthen the fight of the Left in Parliament. The new government faced serious problems and needed the continuing support of the working-class. The trade unions pledged their support and at that time there was real meaning to the slogan: "Don't embarrass the Labour Government". The Communist Party supported this policy, and while it was necessary to step up the fight for improvements in wages and conditions a brake was applied to any actions that could create difficulties for the government. The efforts begun in the war to produce for victory had to be sustained but now under a Labour government committed to a programme of reforms which could lead to even more significant change in the future.

In the shipbuilding industry, as in other vital sectors, a debate opened up on Payment by Results. There had always been resistance to this from the



Building Unions and particularly the ASW. The Right-wing leadership of the Labour government, after betraying most of what had been promised by the 1945 victory, tried to hide their actions by the slander that the Communists and the Left in the Labour Party had set out deliberately to wreck the government. Part of the answer to that slander is on record in the report of the Woodworkers' Conference of 1947. Discussing the Payment by Results resolution, Leo McGree said: "There has been talk about easy money and money being thrown away by the employers ... The shipbuilding employers represent the most ruthless section of the capitalist class in this country and they give nothing away ... We are in a severe crisis ... In view of the manpower shortage and in view of the fact that we have a Labour government in power with its policy of full employment, if we are to get out of the present critical situation, we have to ask our people to do a day-and-a-half's work in one day they will ask 'Are we going to get a day-and-a-half's pay?' and we have to say 'Yes'."

This was the year in which Churchill delivered his infamous Fulton speech setting out the course for the Cold War years which followed. It was Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, who gave the first indication to Parliament that the Labour government was ready to join in this disastrous policy spelled out by Churchill. As Bevin spoke, an air of elation began to sweep the Tory opposition benches. Gallacher stood up and sang the Red Flag - alone. As today, the Americans were using their economic blackmailing tactics to dictate policies to a Labour government, and again, as today, the dominant Right-wing leadership was only to ready to give in. Policies do not change overnight, and the policy of the Communist Party continued to be one of support for the government, no doubt in the hope that sufficient pressure could be brought on it to pull away from its disaster course. But the pressures against continuing this support grew and they arose from the bitter experiences of workers. Disillusion

set in when the government began its cold war and wage freeze policies that were to lead to its defeat by the Tories in 1951.

The Cold War hysteria affected the trade union movement and caused tremendous damage. It is now fashionable to condemn McCarthyism but this disease motivated a good many of the leaders of the trade union movement and those who seized upon it as a means of wresting leading positions from Communists and others on the Left who were far more able. To many of them this was their only motive. Adopting the tactics of McCarthy, the Right-wing of the Labour movement soon showed that they were as capable as he in conducting witch-hunts. There were many casualties of this evil practice, but the most outstanding victory against McCarthyites in the trade union movement was that recorded by Leo McGree.

## Chapter 8.

### The Pillorying of Leo McGree.

In 1950 the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions negotiated a national wage increase with the Employers' Federation. There were wide divergencies in interpretation because of the differences existing with regard to agreement and practices in the regions. Merseyside was one of the trouble spots. The Merseyside employers received their copy of the agreement and without any consultation decided how they would interpret it. It meant an increase below that being awarded to other areas. The unions took strong exception but a meeting with the employers failed to reach any solution. The Confederation District Committee held a special meeting on January 23, 1951, to discuss the situation. At the time McGree was District President but in the absence of the secretary, Fred Turner, Leo took over this job with Bill Crichton chairing. There was a unanimous decision to reject the employers' offer and to press for increases of eleven shillings and eight shillings a week. It was also agreed that there would be a strict ban on overtime. The Merseyside Management Committee of the ASW met and supported the Confederation policy and on the following Sunday there was a mass meeting in Picton Hall, in Liverpool. It was an overflow meeting and the District Committee's policy was unanimously approved.

On the following day Prime Minister Attlee made a major speech on the government's defence programme but in the next day's papers his speech was only given equal prominence to interviews with Leo McGree. The McCarthyite British press was out for the blood of McGree. The "DAILY EXPRESS" said: "Mr Leo McGree, the Communist leader of the shipbuilding union last night threatened to spread the Merseyside overtime ban on shiprepairs to Scotland and Ireland.

Fifty year -old McGree, wearing a red tie, prepared telegrams which will go off today to Clydeside and Belfast asking for the fullest support of every ship-worker." It quoted Leo as saying: "We want the whole of the country's shiprepair men with us in this fight. I am confident we will get them. If it should lead to a strike we cannot be blamed. Of course I am a Communist. I am not ashamed to admit it. But this dispute is non-political. If a single ship is moved from the Mersey to be re-fitted elsewhere, it will mean an immediate strike." The one thing that stands out about this statement is that it was not McGree's style- and certainly never the kind of thing he would say to a representative of the Tory press. It is the kind of statement that a militant might make in the heat of the moment, but Læ was an experienced Communist and a trade union official.

The "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN" had a different version: "Mr McGree said that support for the ban was spreading. He had sent telegrams to Scotland and Belfast asking for the support of shipbuilders and repairers there."

Under the heading "The workers - not me", the "DAILY MIRROR" reported him saying: "Look, everybody knows I am a Communist. Anything I say as Chairman of the Confederation at a meeting of the men is what the Committee of over 50 men, most of them non-Communist officials of the union, have unanimously agreed to." The "MIRROR" continued: "He paused and smiled. It's the workers that involve me in dispute, not me that involves them. These are not political issues. They're bread-and-butter matters and the boys look to me because it's my job to get them the eleven bob. I'm trying to do it."

When McGree read the press reports he immediately called a press conference. He asked the reporters who attended to write a repudiation of the statements attributed to him. His main complaint was that he had not said that telegrams were being sent out to

other ports. Among the papers represented at the conference were the "DAILY EXPRESS", "LIVERPOOL ECHO", "LIVERPOOL DAILY POST" and an agency man for the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN". Only one of the Liverpool papers carried his denial. The others ignored it. Most of what followed resulted from what had appeared in the "DAILY EXPRESS" and the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN".

Confederation General Secretary, Gavin Martin, wanted to know more about what was happening on Merseyside so he wrote to Fred Turner on January 30:

'The national press reports that ... a mass meeting of engineering and shipyard workers was held in the Picton Hall, Liverpool and a decision was taken to ban overtime and piecework from Monday, 29 January until the employers had extended the recent wages awards of eleven shillings and eight shillings per week to all workers.

'We desire to learn from you if this meeting was held under the direction and control of the Confederation Mersey District Committee; and if so, what authorisation you secured for such a meeting to be held?

'It is further reported in today's press that Mr Leo McGree, President of the Confederation Mersey DC, claimed that the Confederation's ban on overtime and piecework was being obeyed by the area's shipworkers and further, that he had drafted telegrams to Belfast and Clydeside and that this was going to spread all over the country, and "we want the whole of the country's shipbuilding and ship repairing workers with us - and we will get them".

'I have to request you to inform me if these matters ascribed to Mr McGree are correct; if so, what authority Mr McGree has to send telegrams in the name of the Confederation, either locally or nationally.

'I have further to request you to inform me why

procedure has not been carried out in this case...'

Already the incident was being blown up out of all proportion. But there was much more to follow with the "DAILY EXPRESS" and "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN" reports being taken as fact and McGree's denial disregarded. Turner was still off ill when the letter arrived and McGree, in his capacity as acting Secretary, replied on February 2:

'Dear Gavin, I can only assume that when you wrote the letter, our Minutes No. 142 of our Special District Committee had not reached your office.

'However I have pleasure in enclosing you a copy, which will give a complete answer with regard to our authorisation for such a meeting. I may only add that we had full attendance, and the decision was only taken after a full discussion and to draw your attention that the employers on Merseyside took a decision to implement their interpretation of the National Award without any consultations with the unions.

'... The placing of the ban on all overtime is quite in order, under our local overtime agreement, which grants overtime only after consultation with the shop stewards ...

'With regard to the statements alleged to have been made by Mr. Leo McGree, you may rest assured that they are incorrect, and also that no telegrams were sent to other Ports by McGree, or any other official of the Confederation.

'It may be of interest to you to note the enclosed page of the "LIVERPOOL DAILY POST", in which Mr McGree has issued a denial of the statements to a press conference, 24-hours before the receipt of your letter.'

The letter was placed before the Confederation's Executive Council and its contents noted. That was as far as it went with the Confederation, but not with the ASW. The Fulham No. 2 Branch had its fair share of "DAILY EXPRESS" readers and they went after McGree's

blood. They met on January 30 and by 19 votes to 7 passed the following resolution:

'Resolution moved by Brother L. May seconded by Brother Webb. That this branch considers Brother McGree of Liverpool has brought the Society into discredit by his recent activities and statements in connection with the ban on overtime by the Merseyside Confederation. In the light of the Defence Programme outlined by Mr Attlee on January 29 we are of the opinion that any attempt to hamper or delay this programme in any way should be dealt with rigorously and we therefore call upon the EC to deal with Brother McGree under the provisions made in General Rule 31 Clause 1.'

The resolution was forwarded to union general secretary, J. F. McDermott with the request that the issue be placed before the next meeting of the Executive Council. The EC met on February 2 and it was agreed that 'the observations of Brother McGree were requested'. McDermott next day sent a copy of the Fulham resolution to the secretary of the union's Liverpool Central branch. On February 5, McGree replied briefly:

'Dear Brother McDermott, In reply to your letter of the 3 instant, enclosing the resolution from our Fulham 2nd Branch, I beg to submit the following observations: (a) I have made no statements with regard to the programme outlined by Mr Attlee on January 29. (b) The local ban on overtime was decided by the unanimous vote of the District Committee of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions.'

On February 15 the EC met again and produced another statement:

'The EC could not agree that the answers given in Brother McGree's letter were satisfactory reply to the terms of the Fulham 2nd Branch commun-



ication. It was pointed out that he must be aware of statements that had appeared in various organs of the press arising from the Merseyside dispute, and it must be clear to him that his position as Chairman of the Merseyside District Committee of the Confederation could not be divorced from his position as District Secretary. Extracts from press reports were forwarded, together with a copy of the reply given by the Minister of Labour to a question in the House of Commons, and Brother McGree was asked whether or not the statements quoted were in fact actually made by him, and if not, what steps if any, he had taken to repudiate such statements. '

The question in the House had been made by a Tory. He was Sir H. Oakshott, Bt., MBE. Hansard reports Oakshott's question and Minister of Labour, Aneurin Bevan's, reply:

'Has the Minister's attention been called to the reported statements of the leader of the movement on Merseyside, who is an avowed Communist, that this ban will continue whatever the emergency? In view of the gravity of the Prime Minister's statement on Monday, will he realise how important it is to get an immediate settlement, and to prevent a recurrence? (Mr Bevan): I should have thought that the statements made by this person would undoubtedly have affected the relationship with the men he is misleading. '

Thus, due to some inaccurate press reports the union and a government spokesman were sniping at McGree who was merely carrying out his duty as a union official. On February 21 he again wrote to the ASW, General Secretary:

'Dear Brother McDermott, May I submit these further observations: The original charge from Fulham 2nd indicated that the ban on overtime placed on Merseyside by the District Committee



of the Confederation would hamper or delay the defence programme outlined by Mr Attlee on January 29. They declared that my statements and activities had brought the Society into discredit. I consider that my reply on 5th instant fully covered the charge made by Fulham 2nd.

'However, the Executive Council have now submitted extracts from the "DAILY EXPRESS", "DAILY MIRROR", "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN" and "HANSARD", and to these I now make the following reply: The EC will no doubt appreciate the difficulty of an official during the industrial dispute, being engulfed by all these representatives of the capitalist newspapers, and how difficult it would be to check up all the irresponsible statements made to the press, all of which are highly coloured by the politics of the owners of each particular newspaper.

'I hereby declare that I have made no statements calling for a strike, I have never stated (nor have I ever sent any telegrams) that it was my intention to send messages to other ports, or that "we want the whole of the country's ship-repairmen with us in this fight."

'When I read some of the press statements, I called a press conference ... I repudiated the above incorrect reports of statements attributed to me ... The extract from "HANSARD" makes it clear that both the questions and reply are based on the distorted press reports mentioned above.

'... it should be noted that in this district we have a signed agreement for the complete control of overtime by the Trade Unions ...

'The ban on overtime has been fully reported to Brother Gavin Martin, together with copies of all minutes, and my efforts in this dispute have resulted in uniting all the unions, the shop stewards, and the workers in the industry in the struggle to compel the local employers to honour their own agreements.

'I therefore repudiate the charge of Fulham 2nd Branch, and the letter from the EC to the effect that I have, by my activities, in any way brought our Society into discredit.'

The union executive was still not satisfied. Still doubting McGree's word, it wrote to the editors of the "DAILY EXPRESS" and the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN". The editors were informed that if their newspapers' reports were correct McGree's job might be in jeopardy. The editors were asked whether or not they were represented at the press conference McGree claimed he called and added, if so, it was a very serious matter that his denial had not appeared in the papers. The executive concluded by requesting the editors' comments.

The "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN" replied, after a reminder:

'... The report we published, in common with other newspapers, on January 31 was supplied by a News Agency, and we had no reason to doubt its accuracy.

'No member of our staff attended the Press Conference called by Mr. McGree ... and all that can be said at this time is that no one here had any recollection of a report of the denial which you say was issued by Mr. McGree reaching us from any source. Had any such report reached us I do not see how we could have failed to publish it ...

'I should point out, however, that the fact that no member of our staff was present at Mr McGree's conference on January 30 is not evidence that his belief that the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN" was represented is necessarily incorrect. It is unfortunately possible that somebody might have said that he represented the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN" without any authority from us.' The letter was signed by the assistant editor.

The "DAILY EXPRESS" reply from the Manchester editor was brief:

"Dear Sir, I am in receipt of your letter of April 3. We have been unable to trace any denial of our report."

The ASW were also checking McGree's statement with other sources. The general secretary wrote to Gavin Martin.

"... In view of the publicity which has accrued to our Society due to the fact that one of our officials is the Chairman of the Merseyside District Committee of the Confederation, my Executive Council requests the Executive of the Confederation to state whether or not the action taken by the Confederation District Committee ... has in fact the authority of the Executive Committee of the Confederation and if not, what action the Executive has taken or proposes to take in connection with this matter."

Martin sent a copy of McGree's letter to the Confederation to McDermott and added: "This letter was placed before my Executive Council and noted."

On April 13 the ASW Executive met again and decided that the replies received from the "DAILY EXPRESS" and the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN" disclaimed any knowledge of a press conference and that McGree should be asked to explain why he had not written to the papers, demanding that a denial be published and asked why he did not inform the Executive that denials had not appeared. Informed of the decision, McGree asked for copies of the newspaper letters, but never received them.

His next letter to the general secretary was critical of the Executive's handling of the whole affair:

"... In the absence of the courtesy of a reply from the Executive Council, I beg to close this correspondence by the following observations:

(a) I cannot accept the statement of the EC that I should have taken "the action any other member of our Society would have done of writing to these two newspapers demanding that a denial be published." This is ridiculous. Have I to read copies of all the capitalist press, each day, during an industrial dispute, then call a press conference to deny any wrongful reporting by these papers, and then write to the papers who fail to publish my denials ? To do this would mean I would have little time left for my Trade Union work. (b) Why did I not write to the EC and ... "notify them that no denials had appeared in the newspapers referred to, in order to clear myself as a member of the Society" ? Clear myself of what ? Not having a guilty conscience, what had I to clear ?

"It is clear from the correspondence that I have had with the EC on this charge that they much prefer to accept the "assurance" from two noted reactionary newspapers than my assurance that I called a press conference on Tuesday, January 30. "

The Executive wanted McGree to 'expand' upon his statement. It was not satisfied with his reply. It did not answer the 'specific questions' regarding the steps he took to repudiate the newspaper stories. But before McGree could write again the Executive took action. On May 11 they removed him from all Union offices, except that of full-time District Secretary of the ASW. The ban would prevent McGree standing in any Union elections and would last for two years. It meant that he would have to give up 14 positions in his own Union, on the Confederation, the NFBTO and other Union bodies. McGree wanted to know which offices he was being removed from. It was important for him to continue Union work on the Confederation and the NFBTO. He got back the helpful reply:

" ... As Brother McGree has appealed to the

General Council against the EC's decision this question is sub judice, and therefore, no comment can be made on your communication. "

McGree's appeal to the General Council accused the Executive of judging him on the evidence of the capitalist press. He also pointed out that the ban on holding Union offices for two years was invalid. He had been sentenced under Rule 31, Clause 1 and the Executive had no power under that clause to take such action. The Merseyside Management Committee of the Union backed McGree's appeal with one of its own.

The General Council met to consider the appeal in June. Three proposals were placed before the Council - two backing McGree, the third supporting the Executive action. The first attacked the decision to accept the story furnished by the papers concerned. It was lost by 4 votes to 5. The second asserted that it was not possible to insist on the press issuing denials of statements alleged have been made and condemning the Executive for not supplying McGree with copies of the letters sent out by the "DAILY EXPRESS" and the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN". This was rejected by 6 votes to 3. The proposal supporting the Executive action was finally put and carried by 5 votes to 4. It read:

"That insofar as Brother McGree took a leading part in action which was prejudicial to the best interests of our Society, and having in mind the fact that this action received national publicity without adequate steps being taken to repudiate these statements, the General Council upholds the decision of the Executive Council and dismisses the appeal. "

Reading through this correspondence today, there are many people who may feel astounded and angered at the way in which the Union leadership dealt with Leo McGree and their obvious intention to 'get him' at all costs without having anything like a case for treating

him as they did. Only those who lived through the period of the cold war and the witch-hunting atmosphere created will really understand it and the motives of those who acted in this manner.

McGree was not the only victim. There were many good people driven from office and some were broken by the experience they suffered. There was the hounding of John Billington by the Executive of the Plumbers Union. He was the full-time secretary of the Manchester No. 2 Branch. His support for the activities of the Peace campaign in the fifties led to a witch-hunting meeting packed by hysterical, anti-Communists who had never before attended a Branch meeting. At one stage one man wielded a chair, threatening to crack the heads of Billington's supporters. A resolution of no confidence was passed and the Executive moved in immediately. That same week they threw Billington out of his office and changed the lock on the office door. An Executive member, when challenged about this at a subsequent meeting, was reminded that John Billington still had the right of appeal. 'I know all about that', he said. 'Don't worry about the outcome.' Nominations for a new secretary were called for and resulted in only one being received - that of Roy Grainger who, like Billington, was a member of the Communist Party. The Executive forced Grainger to submit to a postal ballot which he lost, the majority of members failing to record their votes in such a farcical election.

In this same period, another leading member of the ASW in Manchester, John Brougham, also fell victim to the witch-hunt. John Brougham had lost his position as union organiser in a ballot which he described as "the least doubtful". He went back 'on the tools' working as a joiner on the building sites in Manchester. During a campaign for a 9 pence an hour increase for building workers he became a member of a rank and file committee which distributed leaflets calling for a half-day stoppage in support of the claim.

For this crime the ASW Executive banned him from holding any position in the union for a period of two years. The leaders of the Building unions eventually settled for an increase of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  pence. They were becoming expert at winning battles against their own members but were not so clever when it came to fighting the employers.

At that time there was much discussion about the possibility of challenging such actions in the courts. The Communist Party view had always been that no worker should ever challenge a working-class organisation in a capitalist court. After much heart searching, an exception was made in the case of Leo McGree. He challenged the decision of the ASW in the court before Mr Justice Danckwerts. He was represented by D.N.Pritt, QC and David Turner-Samuels who, 22 years later was to be one of the defending counsel in the trial of the Shrewsbury pickets. The Union was represented by Sir Frank Soskice, QC, John Thompson and J. Milner- Holden. The case began on Thursday, May 22, 1952 and lasted for two and a half days. The McGree case was based mainly on the evidence of correspondence and his own contribution to the court added little to the facts as presented in the letters.

In his summing up, the judge really laid into the Union. He criticised the Executive and McDermott for their interpretation of the letters from the "DAILY EXPRESS" and the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN".

He criticised the General Secretary for saying the matter was sub-judice when McGree had asked for more information on what positions they were stripping from him and he attacked the Executive's and General Council's decisions;

Danckwerts said: 'It is difficult to see how it can be in accordance with natural justice to penalise the plaintiff for carrying out the directions to call a mass meeting on the question of banning overtime when he



was one of the 51 members present and unable to vote, if that be one of the offences with which he was charged. "

The Executive had sentenced McGree under Rule 31, paragraph 1. This said the judge, did not allow for such action. It read: "It shall be competent for the EC, or any Management Committee or Branch at a special quarterly meeting, to fine (not exceeding £3) or to exclude any member from the Society upon satisfactory proof being given that such member has refused to comply with their decision, or by his conduct brought the Society into discredit, or has wilfully violated the recognised trade rules of the district in which he is working, or is or has been working on a co-partnership system ... " The rule provided that any charge must be made in writing within a month from the discovery of the offence.

The judge said McGree did not know under which rule he was being charged. "I am unable to see how it can be in accordance with natural justice for the plaintiff to be told that he is being charged under one rule and then, after conviction, to be told that he has been convicted under another rule to which his attention was never called," he said. The Executive had no right to ban McGree under the rule and "that point is enough to dispose of the case," he added. But he was not finished. He said the Executive and the General Council had not carried out natural justice. "The point depending upon the rules may be a matter of technicality. This question is not. "

Justice Danckwerts continued: "It is elementary justice that an accused should have sufficient particulars of the charge made against him to enable him to appreciate them and answer the complaints which are made. It is difficult to conceive anything more vague than the charges preferred by the Fulham No. 2 Branch which were passed on in an unaltered form by the General Secretary of the Union ... All that this could convey to the plaintiff is that there were some activities and



statements of his, in connection with the ban on overtime, of which the Fulham No. 2 Branch (in London) disapproved. "Surely it is not for the accused to guess at what statements and what activities of his were complained of?" He continued: "As the steps taken to check the plaintiff's statement that he called a press conference for the purpose of denying the press statements appear in the correspondence, it is I think a reasonable inference that the Executive Committee took no steps to find out whether or not telegrams had been sent by the plaintiff to the Union representatives or anyone else at Clydeside or Belfast. "The answers of the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN" and the "DAILY EXPRESS" do not really dispose of the plaintiff's statement as regards the press conference. He was not allowed to see the replies from these newspapers and the effect of the replies was not correctly reproduced in the letter from the Union's General Secretary to the plaintiff ... "In my view, the plaintiff was regarded from the moment of the receipt of the letter from the Fulham No. 2 Branch as guilty of charges of a vague and unspecified nature ... Accordingly, it seems to me that the decision of the Executive Committee cannot be upheld. The decision of the General Council endorsing the decision of the Executive Committee must, in my view, be invalidated also, by reason of the irregularities incident to the conduct of the matter by the Executive Council." McGree had won his battle with costs.

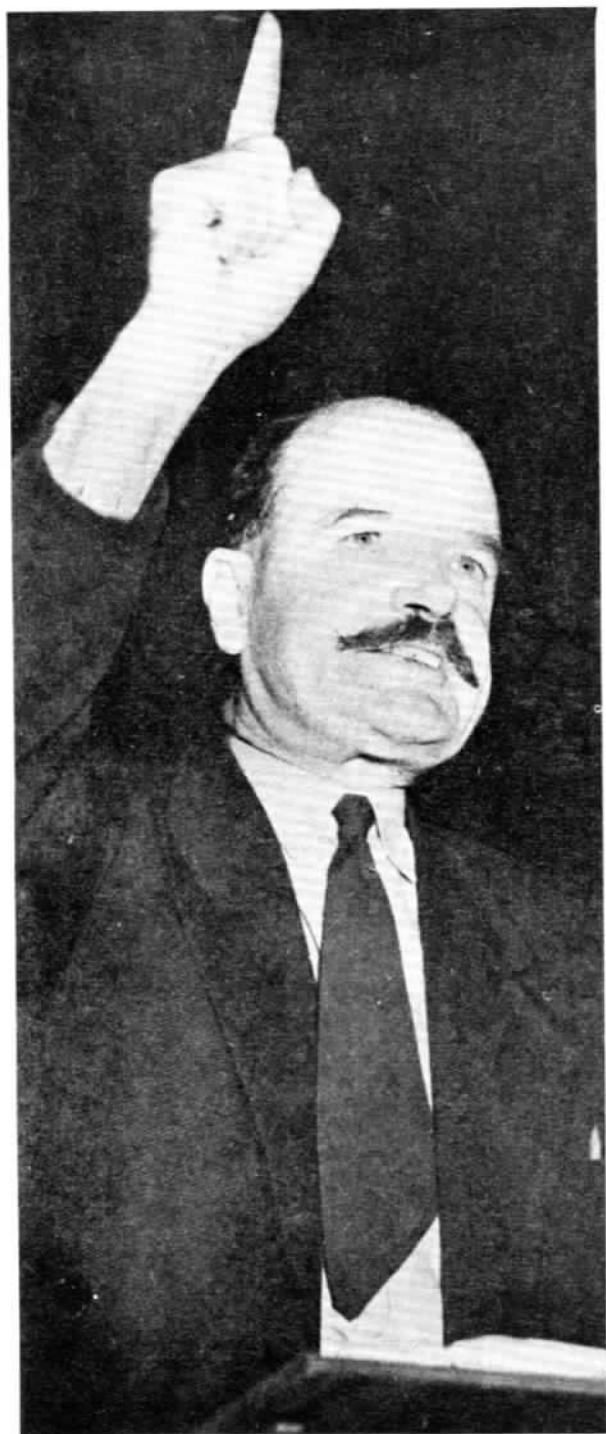
Outside the court he was besieged by reporters. They wanted to know what McGree, a Communist, now thought of British capitalist justice. McGree answered: "In my view, Comrade Danckwerts gave the correct decision."

Although delighted with the outcome, he was bitterly disappointed and angry that it had ever been necessary. The case had involved the Union in considerable expense which the membership would have to pay through their contributions. Even worse, it had arisen from

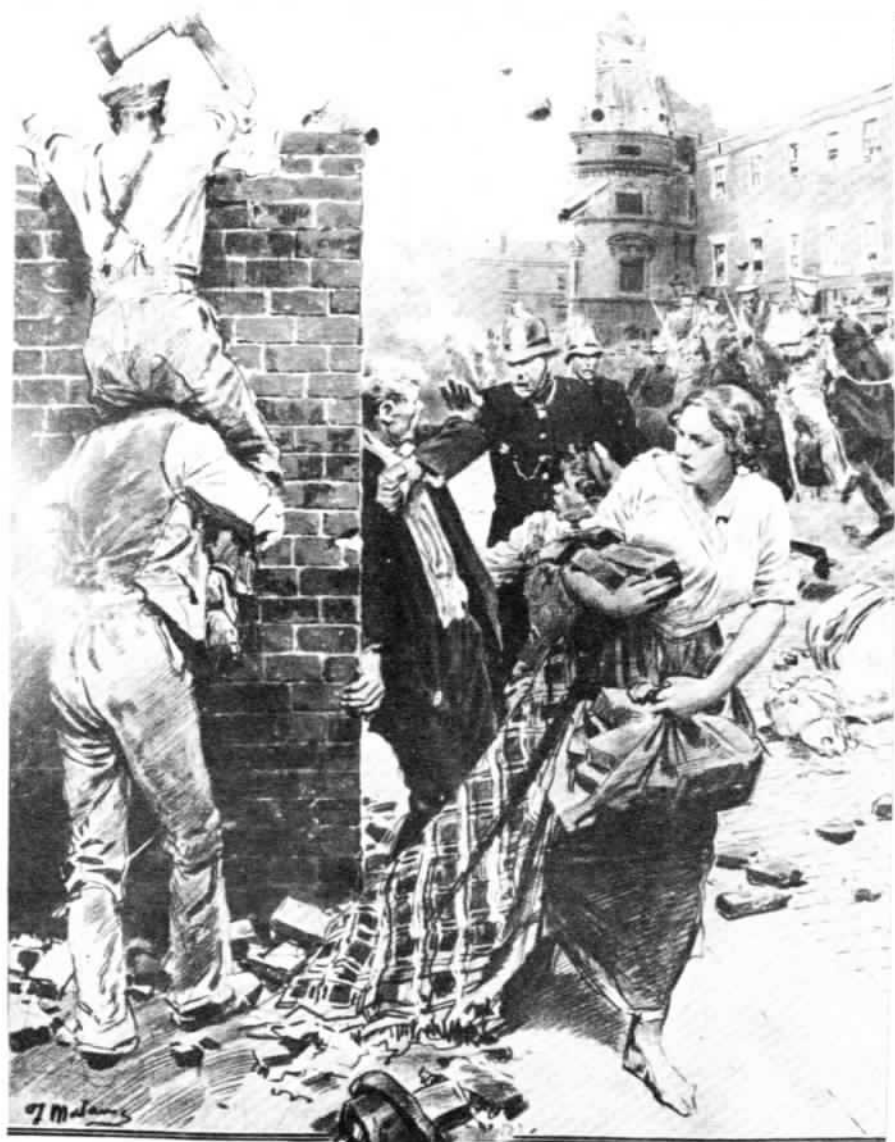
an action in which thousands of workers were challenging the employers over pay. How the shipbuilding employers must have laughed at the spectacle of an internal wrangle within one of the Unions concerned and how they must have appreciated the actions of the ASW Executive.



"Dead-pan expression and devastating wit"



Leo McGree in full  
speaking form at  
Conference.

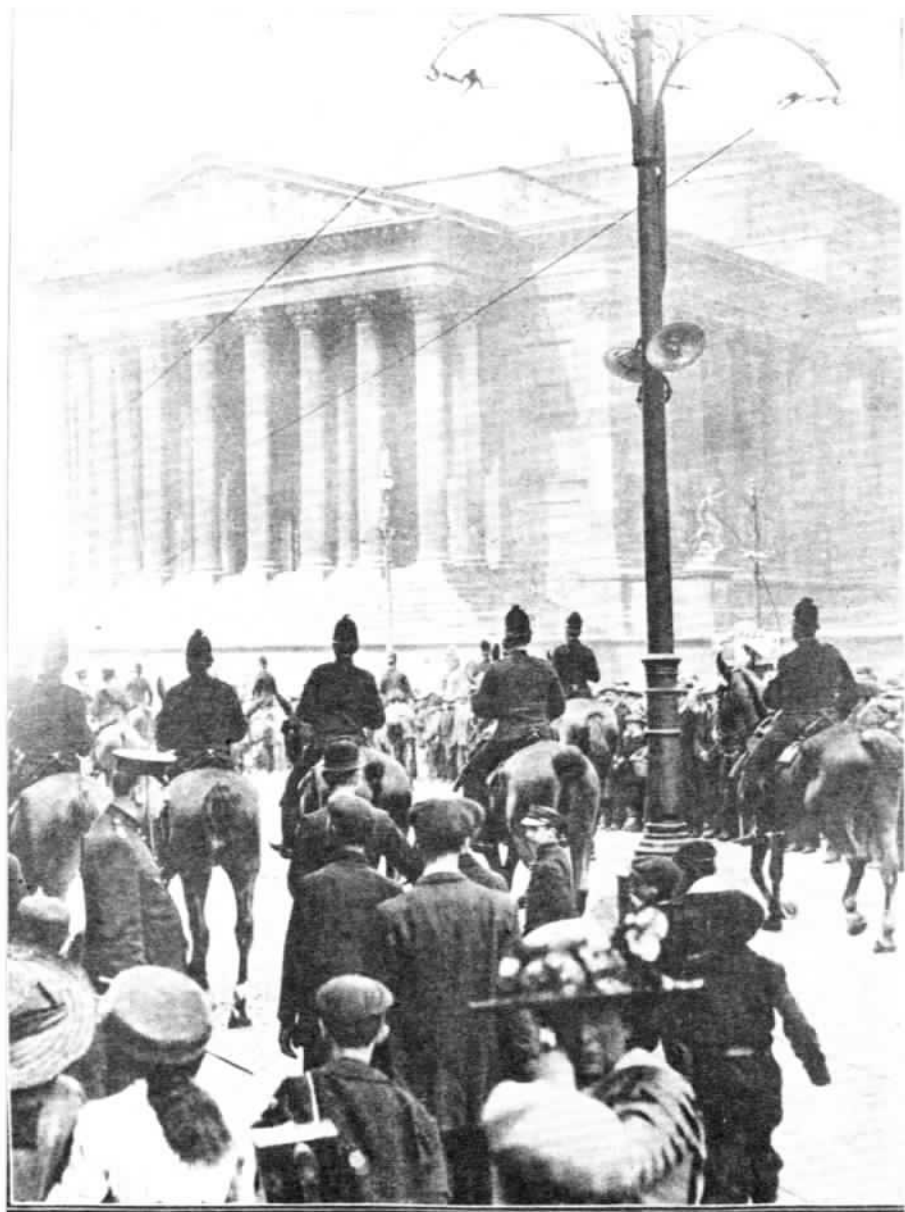


THE GREAT STRIKES IN LIVERPOOL.

RIOTERS ARMING THEMSELVES WITH AMMUNITION.

near to Chinatown Street actually returned by our side. The same of the riot has an army of its own. It will be observed that the rioters are here seen a wall for weapons it was used against the police and that a woman is assisting by carrying bricks in her apron. The horse was shot by a soldier after he had been beside a minute. The police were stopped these accidents from the windows of a hotel in Chinatown Street.

An illustration depicting the clash between workers and police in the 1911 Liverpool strike



LIVERPOOL'S MOUNTED POLICE GUARDING THE STREETS OF THE CITY

By accident they were sent to guard the Liverpool, where railway goods trains were in order. The trouble arose through the action of some hooligans who were sent to jail a contingent of Birmingham police who had been drafted into Liverpool. These men, who replied with such determination that "hooligans were the kind of people who were sent to jail for the purpose." The police swung their horses on either side of them with amazing action so long as they could reach a human body.

Mounted police out in force in Liverpool during the 1911 strike



"God Bless Tom Mann"

Children march in support of the 1911 strike in Liverpool



Lancashire cotton workers on strike - leaving the mill, 1932



Telephone No. Bank 4069.

Telephone No. Bank 4724.

DISTRICT JOINT STRIKE COMMITTEE.

6 Spekelard Buildings,

22-Canning Place,

LIVERPOOL.

9th August, 1911.

The Strike Committee instruct and authorise that

*all tickets shall be given for  
transit of milk in usual way*

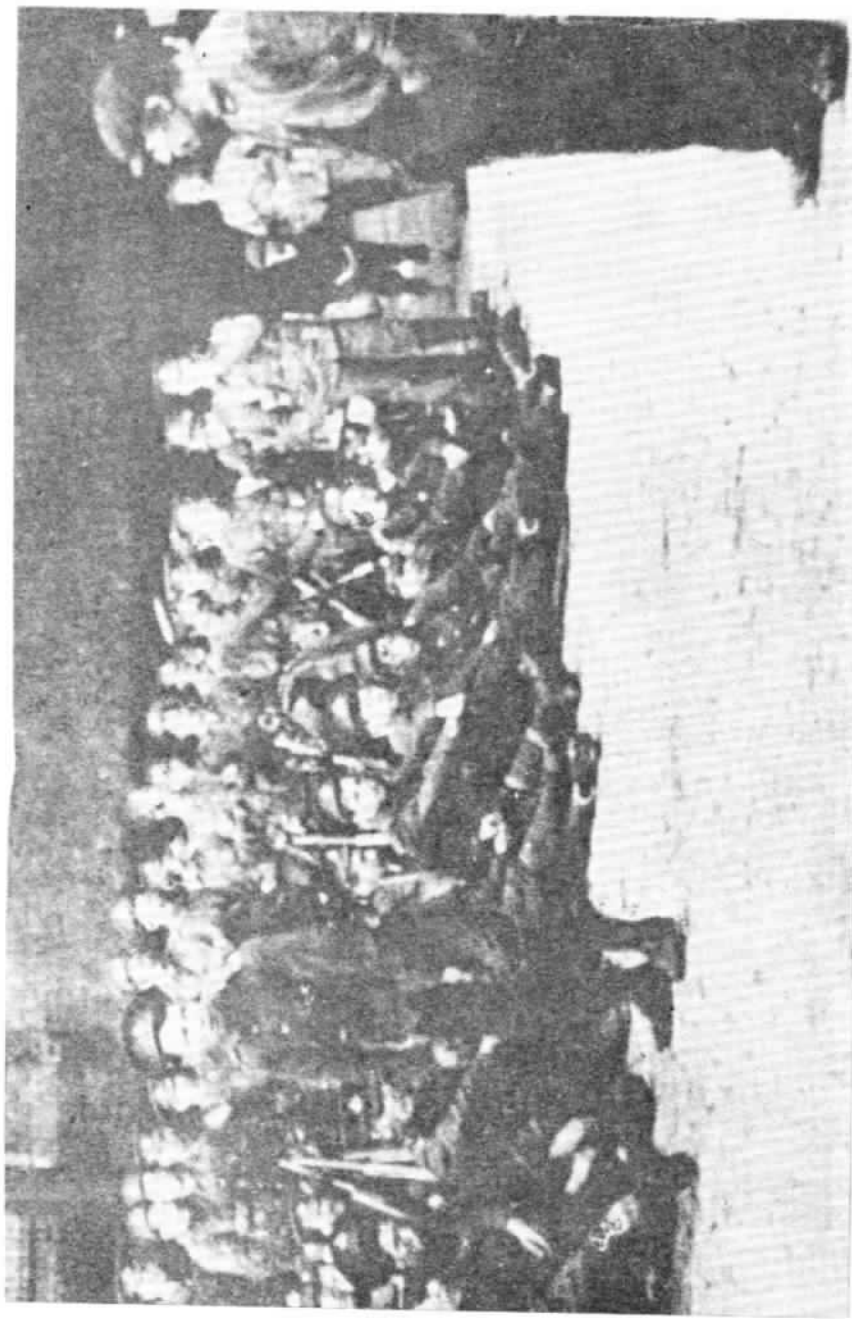
*By order of Committee*

*Tom Mann*

*Chairman*



Harry Pollitt in Spain with the International Brigade



Troops in Liverpool are confronted by a striker in 1911



Seamen demonstrating during their strike of 1960

## Chapter 9.

### Grass Roots Attitude.

There is a world of difference between the Leo McGree type of trade unionist and those who see the movement as offering a career with rewards along the way and at the end. McGree's roots were on the shop floor. He was the rank-and-file member who succeeded in bridging the chasm which often develops between the rank-and-file and their full-time officials.

There has always existed, on Merseyside in particular, a feeling of distrust from the rank-and-file towards anybody who attains a full-time position. Generally this is healthy, but it can lead, and has often led, to workers not paying sufficient attention to the vital question of leadership at the top. Leo McGree knew the value of rank-and-file organisation and struggle. He had done more to develop this on Merseyside than anyone else. His understanding was that such movements from below always carried a natural antipathy toward the official leadership which could only be overcome by the example set by full-time officials.

There are others who see rank-and-file movements as a danger to their position and are always ready to attack them as 'unofficial'. Some go so far as to single out the rank-and-file leaders for special forms of victimisation, including expulsion or exclusion from any office in the Union. McGree never allowed his full-time position to divert him from his aim of developing rank-and-file action. He was incorruptible.

On one occasion an employer sent a messenger to his office in Liverpool with an envelope containing £25. There was no indication as to who had sent it, the envelope was merely delivered. Leo made a guess as to its origin, went round to the employer and said: "What do you want me to do with this. It either goes

to the "DAILY WORKER" or the Communist Party and will be publicly acknowledged." He left it on the desk and walked out.

His attitude to the acceptance of honours by trade union leaders was summed up in a speech he made to the Woodworkers Conference at Blackpool in 1953.

"In seconding this motion I think the delegates will appreciate that there is no question of sour grapes, because I belong to a Party whose principles and policy makes me immune from the embarrassment of even refusing an honour.

"The pages of working-class struggle are some of the most glorious pages of sacrifice, service and loyalty. Of course in a movement we always have traitors. The noose of Judas permeated this conference yesterday afternoon, and the price of treachery is still 30 pieces of silver, although I believe that is the minimum rate."

The employers both hated and respected him as did some of those in the labour movement who opposed his political philosophy. He became something of a legend at TUC conferences for his principled stand and fight against right-wing policies and his unflinching courage in taking on opponents at the highest level during the debates. Cabinet Ministers, top-brass trade union leaders, were never a match for his wit and logic. They could win the block votes for their policies but always, after the fiercest of debates, it was Leo McGree's contribution that the delegates applauded and remembered.

Labour Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, attended the 1947 conference at Southport. He was prepared to deliver his big speech, an apology for the governments trailing behind Churchill's cold war speech at Fulton and the subsequent crawling for American economic aid.

Bevin put on his big, hand-on-heart act.

"I get accused of tying Great Britain up to America. My God! I am here this morning to appeal to you to fight for our independence in the workshop. It is a very ignoble thing for any Foreign Secretary to have to deal with anybody upon whom you are dependent. Who wants that position ? Who wants it with a trade union training such as I have had ? I who built a union on purpose so that I could stand up equal to anybody in the world. Who can accuse me of being subservient to the East or to the West ? Churchill said in the war: 'Give me the tools and I will win the war'. I say in peace: *'Give me the tools of production and a full result and I will change the foreign policy of Europe and help in its rehabilitation.'*"

He continued with a tirade against the Soviet Union and the Communists. It was close to the lunch-break and the platform was ready to wind up and to take their important guest for a celebratory meal after his keynote speech.

Up jumped McGree. There was still time for more of the agenda and he wanted to speak on the question of timber supplies, which Britain was not allowed to get from the Soviet Union under the terms of the American generosity. He began:

"After listening to the previous speaker I now know what it means when people talk about the importance of being Ernest.

"There is a need for timber and I am not convinced, having heard Mr Bevin's speech, that enough has been done to get it. I want to assure Ernest Bevin that we welcome that part of his speech in which he said the British working-class are going to stand on their own two feet.

"Every dollar that comes from America is accompanied by an impudent note informing us how we are to conduct our internal affairs. We want to reply to America and say that if we cannot get the dollars, then in the language of the building trade

we can tell President Truman what he can do with them.

"I want to assure Mr Bevin that we would rather have an intelligent, scientific exchange with the Soviet Union for the food and timber than go to America cap in hand begging for dollars. If there is one jot of honesty left in Truman he ought to climb the statue of Liberty, remove the torch of freedom and replace it with three brass balls. There is no Marshall Plan, it is a Marshall Plot."

At this point the president of the conference interrupted and told McGree to stick to the subject.

"I believe that any reference to Mr Bevin's speech is a military secret," retorted McGree. "Very well, I will refer to 'the previous speaker'. I will not even mention his name."

Said the President: "You must refer to timber supplies."

"All right", said McGree. "I will deal with timber supplies. I want to say that the delegation which went to Moscow for the timber did not fail over the question of the price, or on the dates for delivery of machinery from this country to the Soviet Union. They failed to reach agreement because of pressure that was exerted at the Foreign Office."

There were interruptions from the body of the hall. McGree's claim was met with the chorus of "How do you know?"

"I will explain it", he continued. "Is there an engineer in this Congress who is going to challenge the facts that we are in a position to give the Soviet Union, in exchange for timber, woodworking machinery with a date for delivery? The Marshall



Plan, as I said, is a Marshall Plot, devised by America when they realised that the Soviet Union was in the position of having a magnificent harvest and timber that could be brought to this country. We say frankly that the British working-class are prepared to make sacrifices in order that Britain can stand on its own two feet, but we ask the government of the day to turn their eyes for better trade and for closer associations to the East and away from America."

Turning to the Building industry, Leo continued:

"Four thousand building workers living on 57s. 6d a week dole - and thousands living in condemned houses. We are building two great Cathedrals in which we can worship the Almighty; great commercial buildings to house the football pools promoters (Littlewoods and Vernons); our dance halls and cinemas are being turned into bingo shrines; we have even got ten-pin bowling alleys. But not sufficient homes, hospitals and schools. What an indictment of this Government!"

With so much attention devoted nowadays to the problem of youth unemployment, it is fascinating to read what Leo McGree had to say about that same problem in 1962, at the time when Merseyside Trade Unionists were planning to lobby Parliament over unemployment. McGree wrote:

"In 1958 the Liverpool Lord Mayor convened a meeting of representatives of local authorities, industry and commerce and other interested parties to discuss the problem of providing adequate employment for school-leavers between 1960 and 1964. What were their main findings?"

"Firstly: What is the cause of unemployment?"

Answer: There is not only a high rate of unemployment, but also a high birth-rate - that is to say, less jobs for

more people. This is to us the most serious and important aspect of the whole problem."

Leo commented:

"By the same logic, it could be the low death-rate. In this scientific age we have too many children. Our drug houses are marketing pills to keep the population down (and profits up), while in the Socialist countries every child born is an addition to the production power of the country. Under capitalism it is another unwanted mouth to feed."

The report mentioned by McGree had made two recommendations:

"1. To sponsor a recruitment campaign for Her Majesty's Armed Forces.

"2. Serious consideration be given by Commonwealth Governments desirous of stimulating emigration from this country, so as to encourage as many suitable young people as possible to accept the advantages that are offered."

Leo McGree had other ideas for tackling the problem.

## Chapter 10. Left—Right Struggle.

In 1945 the Labour Party had campaigned on a programme "Let Us Face The Future, which had inspired the labour movement and reflected the spirit of the times and the mood of the people arising from the victory over Fascism. This was the reason for the landslide victory.

The Right-wing leadership had been careful never to repeat this 'mistake' which caused such dismay to the ruling class and its allies abroad. Labour Party and TUC conference decisions which conflict with the outlook of the Right-wing dominated Parliamentary Labour Party are ignored and no clear Socialist perspective is put to the voters.

If a new "Let Us Face The Future' were to be put to the electorate it is likely that the Tories would be routed. In the absence of such a perspective it is more likely that we will continue to return governments with little more than a 38% vote and with no clearly defined programme.

In 1962 McGree urged:

"The urgent need at this moment is to increase the purchasing power of the working-class: better wages, benefits and pensions would result in big improvements in the demand for consumer goods. So increase the pension of our aged people, and relieve the  $4\frac{1}{2}$  million of them who today live in want and misery. Cut the huge expenditure of war preparation and use the money saved to provide local authorities with low interest loans for houses, schools, hospitals and roads, and to scrap and rebuild all ships over twenty years old. End the embargo on East-West trade and give Britain her

rightful independence to trade with all countries who desire to trade with us. Assist the under-developed countries to build up their economy by sending them not arms but technical equipment. This was the policy behind the Merseyside Lobby to Parliament. This is the policy that can bring an end to the Tory rule in Britain."

There it was, in sharp contrast. The philosophy and policy of the right-wing and that of the left. Who were the traitors and who the patriots? Who was acting in such a manner as to wreck the Labour government?

There were people who left the Communist Party in the cold war period and there are others who have left it since. Many of them, genuine and sincere people, found themselves unable to stand up to the anti-Communist intimidation. Some have since, and still do, express the belief that the Labour Party is more democratic. They remain as left-wing fighters in that party.

Yet, through all the experiences of Labour in office, surely the lesson still has to be learned that the left in the Labour Party is still not strong enough or, powerful enough, to get the democratic change that will prevent a Labour government from repeating the policies which lead to defeat and a return of the Tories. That position is likely to remain until there is a sustained, determined and successful effort to break down the barriers which still prevent people like Leo McGree from exercising their democratic rights as trade unionists to represent their organisations at Labour Party forums and conferences.

The oft repeated cry from people like Eric Heffer that the Communists should disband their Party and join the Labour Party is in defiance of political logic. The 'Elephant and Mouse' analogy bears little relationship to the facts of life. Neither Party can be happy with their individual membership figures and it is in the interests of both and that of the working-class

and its allies that the bans be broken.

The Attlee government moved on from the subservience to America to introduce wage freeze policies. A wholesale attack was made on Nationalisation and such was the character of the Labour government's Nationalisation programme that the attack succeeded in convincing the majority of the people that it did not work. Nationalisation became a dirty word. The Labour government of 1945-51 introduced some vitally necessary and important social reforms. Its greatest failure was that it helped to place in the hands of the ruling class and the Tories powerful ideological arguments which were and are still used to discredit the ideal of Socialism in Britain.

From the early days of Trade Unionism, through the struggles of the twenties and thirties, the war years and immediately after the war, the very idea that a Trade Unionist could also be a Tory was unthinkable - a joke. Of course, it is a different Trade Union Movement now in many respects. The 12 million members represented at the TUC includes new, important sections which previously stood aside from or were opposed to Trade Unionism.

The bitter "manual workers against the employers and the staff" struggle is changing rapidly, for the staff is now "part of the union". Other professional, technical and managerial sections, civil and other Public servants are able to provide vital information and ammunition to the whole movement, not to mention ideas and perspective. They are also increasingly militant.

But there are also organised Tory Trades Unionists. During the 1978 TUC conference at Brighton, Tory Shadow Minister, Prior, addressed a meeting of Trade Unionists at which some seventy, attended, including about thirty who were wearing delegates' badges. Prior was delighted with the response. There are Trade Unionists, from rank-and-file level up to Executive, deeply involved with organisations like Common

Cause, Truamid, Aims for Free Enterprise and other such organisations backed by employers and some probably by the CIA.

Trade Union elections are no longer the property of the members of the Unions alone. Employers, the media, Fleet Street hatchet men and clandestine organisations, like Common Cause, which is run by ex-military intelligence types, all join us. Much of this had its roots in the cold war era of the fifties, one of the worst periods in the history of the Labour Movement ( Common Cause was Founded in 1951 ).

The Attlee government's betrayal of its programme: "Let Us Face The Future", and the return of the Tories led to bitter recrimination within the Labour Movement. The Left versus the Right battle developed certain characteristics, and it would be ludicrous not to admit that there were many errors of judgment by the Left and a hardening of sectarianism. There were instances when the Left in the Unions adopted the tactics of the Right in the struggle for leading positions with disastrous results. The Right-wing concentrated on banning Communists, and those to whom they applied the McCarthyite tag of 'fellow travellers'. Small wonder then that the Tories were able to stay in office for 13 years, and whether it was a case of Labour winning in 1964 or the Tories losing is still debatable.

## Chapter 11.

### International Viewpoint: Clashes at the T.U.C.

The plot to remove Leo McGree from office failed and he continued to give the kind of leadership for which he became loved and respected by workers throughout the country and particularly in his native Merseyside, and hated but often respected by his enemies. He was one of the leading Communist figures who recognised the dangers of the time and who urged the need for unity. Naturally there were occasions when his patience snapped under the pressures and his attacks became hard and bitter, but his humour always shone through to save the day. His clashes with the dominant Right-wing leadership of the TUC were the highlights of the conferences. He always presented the arguments of the Left on the major political questions of the day no matter how difficult the circumstances or how strongly the current of opposition. He was also a master in negotiations on the bread-and-butter issues and a consistent campaigner for trade union advance and improvement. This was shown in his speeches on the need for trade union amalgamations and against sectionalism. The employers and the media conducted a sustained attack on shipyard workers over the "who does what" problem. McGree never failed to point out that the responsibility for this problem lay with the employers and the way in which they had developed the industry under their capitalist system. He knew the answers and how difficult it was to convince workers and the unions involved to accept them. The most important thing was to develop unity among shipyard workers at ground level and especially through the shop stewards' movement and Leo was always encouraging this development.

It is the political battles he fought at the TUC which are remembered most by all who knew him. At the 1950 Brighton conference he spoke against British

involvement in the Korean war. Facing a hostile conference he began by refuting the claim that the fighting in Korea was being undertaken under the United Nations' flag:

"Under the United Nations Charter, Article 27, it is clearly laid down that all major decisions must be carried by no less than seven votes and must secure the support of the five members of the Security Council. The aggression by America took place before the Security Council met, so Truman faced the United Nations with a fait accompli and they only secured six votes as an endorsement of American aggression. The seventh vote was cast by the representative of Chiang Kai-Shek, who at the moment is in Formosa sheltering from the wrath of the Chinese people. Let me put another question. If it is true we are fighting in Korea under the United Nations organisation, then we take it General MacArthur is the commander-in-chief of the United Nations forces. If that is so, who gave MacArthur permission to visit Formosa and have military discussions with the discredited and corrupt Chiang Kai-Shek?"

McGree continued:

"In the document issued by the General Council they state that the occupation forces of the Soviet Union and the United States withdrew from Korea at the same time. This is absolutely wrong. The Soviet occupation forces left Korea six months prior to the departure of the American forces and what is more, America left at the disposal of Syngman Rhee 500 military advisors for the purpose of preparing the invasion of Northern Korea, and for the specific purpose of turning the whole of Korea into an armed base for an American war on the Soviet Union."

He went on to point out that America had also established an Air base in Britain in 1948: "for the specific purpose of bombing Soviet cities. ... I say in conclusion that we cannot permit our boys to die in



Korea to replace Syngman Rhee in control."

Replying to the discussion was Walter Padley of the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers. Padley had managed to perform one of the greatest feats of political gymnastics ever recorded. In 1943 he was a leader of an organisation called the Revolutionary Communist Party. Its main concern was to oppose the war against fascism on the grounds that the workers should seize the opportunity to overthrow the capitalist system. Now, here he was, fully in support of the sending of British working-class lads to fight in Korea and of denouncing the Socialist countries. Once again the Right-wing won the day and the Korean war continued with TUC support.

McGree faced worse opponents than Padley. One of his chief adversaries was Arthur Deakin. He was the General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union when that Union was regarded by many as the most reactionary in the country. He once brought a new low-level to the TUC debates when, from the platform, he took off his coat and threatened to fight a delegate. He introduced a ban on Communists holding office in the Union which was to last for twenty years. He was one of the fundamental reasons for the term "unofficial strike".

When travelling to the Isle-of-Man for the 1953 conference he spotted Leo McGree just as the ferry was entering harbour. He said to Leo: "If I had known you were on this boat, I would have had the gravest doubt about reaching this side". "If I had known you were on this boat, there would have been no doubt at all - you wouldn't," said Leo. At that conference McGree spoke in support of a resolution calling for unrestricted trade, including trade with the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries "We want Britain to be independent and free to trade with any country she desires," he said, "Including Spain?" chipped in Deakin. "Could you not control yourself for a minute" asked McGree. "Not with you in front of me", snapped

Deakin. "He is like O'Brien's cat. He has no rudder", said Leo.

At the 1954 TUC the big debate was on West German rearmament. The TUC leadership was in favour of this policy. The resolution stated:

"Congress ... urged the speeding-up of complete plans for effective Western defence which will enable Germany to bear its share and at the same time to give adequate assurance to the European nations and to all sections of German democracy that their contribution will be used to assist the United Nations to establish the framework of a general and lasting peace."

At the same time the new rulers in West Germany were removing the war history from school text books. All references to the Nazi atrocities and the evil deeds of Hitler were later wiped out of every West German school book.

Big Jim Campbell, the militant leader of the National Union of Railwaymen, who was later to die tragically in a Moscow car accident, moved opposition to the rearming of either East or West Germany. He asked the General Council to take all the necessary steps to put pressure on the Labour Party and the Tory Government to press for a peaceful solution to the German problem and a unified Germany. McGree spoke in favour of the NUR motion: "I listened this morning very attentively to Sir Vincent Tewson ... He intimated that it was a very dangerous situation and we were in danger of losing our freedom. I ask Congress: Is there a delegate present here who is under any illusion whatever that the rearmament of Germany is for our protection ?

"At the moment the jails are being opened and the Nazi criminals are being released - not because they are sick or because they are old or because they have completed their sentences, but they are being released

by the American warmongers for the purpose of organising once again German militarism ... We are today being confronted with the proposal to place the most modern instruments of warfare, including the atom and hydrogen bomb, into the hands of the very people who systematically organised the pinpoint bombing of London, Coventry, Merseyside and elsewhere.

"We are under no illusion as to what is the object of this new German army, because the leaders of that new German army, Adenauer and Kesselring, have been very specific about it ... They are out to regain their German empire and that can only be done at the expense of the democracies as far as Europe is concerned ... You cannot secure for peace by preparing for war. There is no question at the moment of the Soviet Union or the Eastern democracies threatening this country ...

"One can visualise the spectre of Hitler's gory hands scratching from the depths of Hell and patting Dulles, Eisenhower and Adenauer on the shoulder saying: 'Well done, thou good and faithful servants, thou has served thy master well.' In this country it would be a complete tragedy if Congress were to speak, as we do, on behalf of the organised workers, and were to place arms into the hands of the avowed enemies of democracy."

The General Council had a narrow squeak when the vote was taken. There were 3, 622, 000 votes against their recommendation and it went through by only 455, 000. The NUR composite motion was defeated by 468, 000 votes.

The mid and late fifties produced the most traumatic period in the history of the Socialist movement. The rift between China and the Soviet Union developed and all Communist Parties became involved in intense internal debate.

The events in Hungary and the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party brought an upheaval in all Communist Parties. In Britain there were resignations and calls from a section at a Party Congress for the Party to be disbanded. It was a time when great courage was required to be an active member of the Communist Party. On the question of Hungary, the Party stood firm. Despite any errors of the Hungarian Communist Party or anything connected with the revelations of the Twentieth Congress, what occurred in Hungary was counter-revolution. Anti-Communist hysteria was whipped up by the media and seized on by the Right-wing of the Labour movement. At the 1957 TUC at Blackpool the General Council recorded their actions over Hungary in a complete ban on all trade with the Soviet Union. The matter was due for discussion on the Wednesday afternoon. Of the Communist Party members who were delegates, someone had to speak up for the Party's position. The task was given to Leo McGree. Imagine the situation. There was overwhelming opposition to the Party throughout the country. There was no doubt about the reception McGree would get from the conference. When the time came, Leo went to the rostrum to deliver his speech.

"I want to make it abundantly clear that I am not speaking on behalf of my delegation," he began. "I come to express the view that paragraph 166 will not help the trade union movement. It only re-states a view on the Hungarian events which has already been heard from spokesmen of political reaction. Those who have studied the paragraph would agree that it would be endorsed by MacMillan, Dulles, Adenauer and even Franco. In an industrial dispute no trade unionist would accept uncritically the viewpoint put forward by an employer. Why, therefore, should we accept this in relation to Hungary ?

"Furthermore, the paragraph completely ignores widely-

known facts such as the role of Horthy officers, the entry of thousands of counter-revolutionaries over the Austrian border and the whole white terror in Budapest. The paragraph makes no reference to the camp of subversion organised by the United States agencies in Eastern Europe and the officially sanctified and financial Radio Free Europe which has at its disposal 29 transmitters and a Free Europe Press which boasted that it had 40,000 plastic balloons and 300 billion propaganda leaflets sent to Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia since 1954."

"Do the General Council suggest for a single moment that this is due in order to assist Socialism? There are plenty of press photographs, news reports and news films available to show what really happened in Budapest last October. Red Flags were torn down, Socialist books were burned on the streets, there was hounding of the Jews and white terror and slaughter of men, women and children indiscriminately."

"Have such things been seen before? Yes: They are sign-manuals of Horthy, Hitler and Franco. They are the hallmark of fascism and not of popular rising-up movements. This isn't the first counter-revolution struck at the people of Hungary. In 1919 the capitalist armies overthrew the Socialist and Communist government. At that time it was the pretence that the aim was a more democratic government, but the same Social Democratic government lasted but a few weeks and it was followed by many long years of Horthy's fascist dictatorship and white terror."

"There are a number of capitalist writers who record the same thing happening in 1956. May I quote the 'DAILY MAIL' editorial of October 25 which described the events in Hungary as 'counter-revolution'. Noel Barber wrote that he had been dining with men who, for years, had plotted this revolt. On October 29 the 'DAILY TELEGRAPH' wrote of a 'militant revolution

planned long ago and superimposed on a student demonstration."

"I say that the General Council are not justified in writing as though there is only one view with regard to the events in Hungary. Yet the validity of the General Council's criticism of the Soviet Union's action depends entirely on the character of the events. Surely, those of us who consider that it was a conflict between Socialism and counter-revolution take the viewpoint that the Soviet government was correct to respond to the call for help by the Hungarian government. The defeat of the counter-revolution not only served Socialism in Hungary, but also saved the cause of peace in Europe."

The hall was a scene of pandemonium. Delegates booed, jeered and shouted their objection as the President tried to regain order. The President was Sir Thomas Williamson, CBE, and his voice rose above the din. "You may profoundly disagree with what the delegate has said, but he has a right to say it."

The speaker following McGree was Bob Edwards, MP, representing the Chemical Workers' Union.

"I think it would be a great tragedy to our British Labour movement", he droned, "if the speech we have just listened to were the only record of the debate at this Congress on the revolution, the justifiable revolution, of the Hungarian workers ... This was a fundamental challenge of decent working people in Hungary. It did a great thing for the proletariats of the world. It proved that 1984 is not inevitable ..."

When McGree resumed his seat he was pretty low. Edwards' attack did nothing to lighten the gloom, but Dave Bowman, the livewire National Union of Railwaymen delegate, did a lot to redress the position. When Edwards had done, Bowman took the rostrum. "At the NUR annual general meeting held two months ago

it was decided to accept an invitation to send an NUR delegation to the USSR and that delegation will leave in a few weeks' time."

"The Hungarian argument is a thing of the past. The only people who raise it now are the Tories and even then only in desperation when their hypocrisy has been answered with reason. But the misconception about Hungary lingers on. The seeds sown by the press, the General Council and the Communist rene-gades have blossomed into beautiful misconception."

At that moment Leo McGree and Dave Bowman were in a position of isolation in the conference but there was much respect for their courage.

When the General Council sent out their circular several unions and organisations fell in line. The Transport and General Workers' Union, the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers and the Confederation all called off trips to the Soviet Union. The National Union of Mineworkers cancelled a visit to Poland. But even before the circular, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation and the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council had decided to snub the Russians.

At the 1978 TUC there was again discussion on the Soviet Union. Genuine concern over current events in the Soviet Union was expressed by people like Bill Sirs of the Iron and Steel Confederation and Geoffrey Drain of the National and Local Government Officers' Association. But they were not anti-Soviet and there was a magnificent reply to the discussion from Jack Jones; balanced, reasonable and helpful.

On the other hand there was Frank Chapple of the Electricians and Plumbers. Predictably, he was anti-Soviet, anti-Communist. But he was in a worse position of isolation than McGree and Dave Bowman had faced and it is unlikely that anybody will remember what he said. Coinciding with the Hungarian events the world faced the grave danger presented by the



Suez plot. When the Americans failed to support the actions of the British, French and Israeli governments, the Tory cabinet began to fall apart and Prime Minister Eden was forced to resign, although 'officially' he went sick. Leo McGree had played his part in the movement against the Suez war, addressing mass meetings and organising trade union opposition on Merseyside. During this period he was constantly being badgered by a local reporter about the Hungarian situation. One day, the reporter rang Leo and asked "Have you resigned?" He meant from the Communist Party, of course, but Leo pretended not to have understood this. "Resigned? I am not a member of the Tory cabinet" he replied.

At the 1960 TUC Leo displayed his tenacity and skill in using the agenda to raise important matters that were not due to be discussed. 1960 was the year of the great 'unofficial' strike by Britain's seamen. It was a strike that was to lead to big changes in the Seaman's Union, which at the time seemed indifferent to the conditions of its members. Leo had always had a special interest in the plight of the seamen, who had long suffered the worst form of industrial relations in the world under the Merchant Shipping Act. That year, the TUC was lobbied by striking seamen from Liverpool. Leo was determined to raise the question of seamen's conditions and their strike but faced the problem that there was nothing on the agenda remotely concerned with this matter. He scanned the agenda and found a paragraph dealing with the question of whether the building of a new Cunarder should be given government aid. When the appropriate paragraph of the General Council's report was reached, he went to the rostrum and began to speak on aid for the Cunarder. Deftly, he then switched to the question of seamen's conditions and the Merchant Shipping Act. He was in full flow before the Congress President woke up to the fact that Leo was straying far from the subject, but Leo had the bit between his teeth and was hammering home his message. It took quite a



struggle for the President to get him to quit the rostrum, but not before Leo had done his duty to the Liverpool seamen present and all their colleagues.

Some six years later the seamen were again on strike, this time 'officially'. The events of that period are a story that deserves separate treatment, but it is worth recalling that it was during this strike that Prime Minister Harold Wilson made his infamous remark about a "tightly knit group of politically motivated men". Nobody seems to have asked Wilson what it was that motivated him but one of the men he was referring to at the time was a protege of Leo McGree - Joe Kenny of Liverpool.

The early sixties saw a revival in the fight against the real enemies of the labour movement, the employers and their government. At the 1962 TUC, McGree lashed the Tory government over pensions and the run-down of the mining industry. Mines were being closed and coal was being stock-piled at a time when old people were going to bed to keep warm because they had no fuel. During the winter of 1961-62 many old people had died of cold, said McGree.

"This is in a period when we have more coal than we can sell. The plight of the old-age pensioners is such that they cannot even afford to buy a shovelful of nutty slack."

When the Common Market debate opened up the Labour Party and the TUC General Council were dithering all over the place, reluctant to come to any decision. McGree told the conference: "There was a song which was very popular during the war entitled 'Why are we waiting ?' I think we ought to be singing that to the General Council today, urging them to come down off the fence. Because I warn them that if they do not, there will not be marks on their backsides but that the iron will enter their souls." This remark was not lost on Congress. The Chairman of Congress was Harry Douglas, General Secretary of

the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation.

In 1963 the big topic was streamlining of the unions. The famous cartoonist Low had long since depicted the TUC as a lumbering cart-horse. The General Council gave credence to that image. They were governing too many unions and there was an urgent need for streamlining. McGree pointed out that there were 25 million workers eligible to belong to a trade union, but only eight and a half were affiliated to the TUC and these were members of 176 different organisations.

In 1964 he continued the battle for re-organisation: "You cannot face the problem of the present era of automation in the spirit of the hymn 'You in your small corner and I in mine.'" It was at this conference that he made an attack on the huge profits reaped by the Ferranti group on the disastrous Blue Streak missile programme. He said: "There was a mail train robbery where people got away with £2½ million. From reports I read in the press of the commando-like precision, split-second timing and the master-brain behind this venture, I should have thought that when the robbers were apprehended they would have been recommended for the Duke of Edinburgh award for initiative. Instead of that they got a vicious sentence of thirty years. The Ferranti brothers are still around. I agree with the Lord Chief Justice when he demands from magistrates and judges a more uniform sentence for crimes of a similar nature. I do not know whether the Lord Chief Justice wants the mail robbers out or the Ferranti brothers in."

## Chapter 12.

### Local Politics in Liverpool.

With such emphasis on the work of Leo McGree in the trade union movement it would be natural for people to think that he had little time for other day-to-day political activity. This was not so. He was active in all the rank-and-file activities generated by shop stewards' organisations and especially by Liverpool Trades Council, which has always displayed the ability and willingness to involve the rank-and-file in powerful movements, bringing pressure on the leadership of the trade unions and on governments.

Leo was also active within the Communist Party. He served on the National Executive Committee, the Lancashire District Committee and the Merseyside Area Committee. He was in constant demand for appearances at public meetings and rallies and when given the job of taking the collection at these events he had the ability to get people to empty their pockets while they were laughing at his wisecracks. He it was who originated the warning to those who offer IOUs to collections: "Put your name and address on it and I will be waiting for you when you get home."

He fought for the policy of the Communist Party in elections, Parliamentary and Municipal. His first venture in this field was as early as 1929. He stood in the Scotland Division of Liverpool in opposition to Thomas P. O'Connor of the Irish Nationalist Party. It is said that the only time O'Connor ever spoke in Parliament was at an earlier time. In 1926 he opposed the General Strike. Now McGree was opposing him. But there was one snag. The Party could not raise the £150 deposit. On nomination day McGree took the completed nomination forms to the Town Hall and handed them to the Lord Mayor. They had until noon to get the £150 but they failed to do so. O'Connor was

declared the winner, unopposed. A report in the local press the next day read: "The only incident at the nomination was the failure of Mr McGree, the Communist, to get nominated against TP who therefore got a walk-over. Mr McGree made a dramatic intervention. He exclaimed: 'I raise an objection to the obstacles placed in the way of working-class candidates by demanding £150 which prevents us .....'" The report went on to say that McGree had been removed from the hall.

In 1931 the Communist Party again contested the seat, but this time they managed to raise the £150 deposit, though the effort to do so was so great that it detracted from the campaign itself. The result was:

D.G. Logan (Labour)	- 15,521
E. Errington (Tory)	- 10,280
L. McGree (Communist)	1,524
F. Abraham (Ind)	99

McGree did not stand for Parliament again until 1950 when the Labour candidate then was Harold Wilson who, at the time, was President of the Board of Trade in the Labour government. The constituency was Huyton, then a new Division.

Wilson had previously been the MP for Ormskirk and nobody was sure what would happen to Huyton. In Liverpool at that time there were 40,000 unemployed and a good deal of disenchantment with the government. The Labour Party was just beginning to grapple with the questionable 'art' of modern type gimmickry in electioneering. They introduced a song to the tune of Galway Bay: "See that Huyton goes the Labour way". Wilson told a press conference that the Labour Party was derived from "Christian and not Marxist sources" and 'boasted' that he had never read Marx except for the first page of 'Das Capital'.

McGree's candidature was presented in the press thus:

'In Huyton, the fourth figure in the contest, the Communist Mr. L. McGree, a joiner by trade, now occupied as a full-time official, who is a well-known figure to political audiences on Merseyside. His principal themes will be the extension of Anglo-Soviet trade and the application of the Communist Party's policy to the alleviation of unemployment problems throughout the Liverpool area. He has achieved considerable notoriety at TUC conferences for his speeches in opposition to the platform on these topics."

Anybody who has attended the count in an election will agree that there are different kinds of tension and worry while the votes are being counted. There are generally only two front runners. Labour and Tory. Their reactions are almost wholly personal. It is "I am winning" or "I am losing" with the emphasis on "I". For the minority candidates, and especially the Communists, it is: "How are we doing?" At the Huyton count Wilson was worried, his furrowed forehead betraying his anxiety. The result was announced:

H. Wilson	(Labour)	21, 536
S. Smart	(Tory)	20, 702
H. G. Edwards	(Liberal)	1, 905
L. McGree	(Communist)	387
Labour majority		834

Relieved but shaken, Wilson was white-faced as the announcement was made. As the returning officer finished giving the figures, McGree said in a loud voice: "I demand a recount".

Leo also contested local elections on a number of occasions at Edge Hill and the North Scotland ward, but without success as far as winning a seat was concerned.

## Chapter 13. Demonstrations Against Unemployment:

Toward the end of the thirteen years of Tory rule great mass movements began to develop, once again on the question of unemployment. Once again it was the North that was suffering most. The North-West, particularly Merseyside, and the North-East were the worst hit areas. The government tried the political gimmick of presenting Lord Hailsham as the country's job finder. It was an insult to the intelligence of those who were suffering unemployment. Merseyside took the lead in the great movements which began to develop in this period in the fight against unemployment. At midnight on November 5, 1962, seven hundred Merseyside workers travelled to London on what became known as the Scousers' Special from Lime Street Station. They marched to Parliament to demand action over the plight of some 40,000 workless in their region.

Now, some 16 years on, it is appropriate to recall what Leo McGree had to say about the problems facing not only Merseyside, but the whole country at the time, to compare the situation with today and ask "How much progress has been made by the governments which followed that of 1962?"

In an article for "Labour Monthly", Leo wrote:

"One-third of the jobless of the whole of the North-West is on Merseyside. There are 80,000 officially designated slums and over 4,000 building workers on the dole.

Some 6,000 shipyard workers are without a job. These figures give a brief picture of the position, but no one can give the correct figure of those who 'got out', migrated South. This was the reason we marched to London, accompanied by police and TV cameras, so that in every part of Britain

people could hear the slogan 'We want work'. We have a great shipbuilding yard at Cammell Lairds, Birkenhead, and some of the most modern docks for shiprepair. Five years ago this yard had an order book of 7 million tons. Today, apart from twelve months work for the Admiralty, no orders have been placed.

Having spent £15 million on modernisation, they are now, for the first time in history, building ships without a customer, and are selling ships 'off the peg'. They are advertising standardised vessels at 15 per cent to 20 per cent reduction for cash. We are selling ships like soap powder 'Buy your tanker this week - 4p a ton off.'

In his article, Leo remarked that Cammell Lairds had decided that the Russians were important people to be well in with and were preparing to go to London to see a Russian trade delegation. He wrote:

'Well, well. The sky is black with birds coming home to roost. In 1954 the Russian government requested the shipbuilders of this country to build them 95 ships, but because of the Yankee Battle Act, this order was refused. Today, more ships are built in foreign yards for British shipowners than are built in this country. So much for patriotic British shipowners.'

Then, from the Tyneside a call came for a mass lobby of Parliament to be held on March 26, 1963. The call came from the region's Trades Councils and North-East Labour Councillor, Harry Luxton, was appointed chairman of the lobby committee. He declared: 'Our aim is to make this the biggest demonstration of trade unionists seen in Britain since the thirties and we hope to make it the last needed on unemployment.'

Merseyside was the first to respond. McGree threw his full weight into the campaign and the Liver-



pool Trades Council went into action. The Labour Party in Liverpool and the Communist Party joined in the work of ensuring a big Merseyside contingent on the lobby. The Building Trades Federation called a meeting of shop stewards and collections were called for on all building sites in the area to cover the expenses of those taking part in the lobby and to assist unemployed workers to go to London for the event. Dockers, transport workers, shipyard workers and engineering workers all began to campaign for the lobby.

The movement began to spread throughout the country. Miners, railwaymen, workers from Northern Ireland, from Scotland, Wales were all preparing to descend on Parliament. The London Trades Councils took on the heavy responsibility, not only of organising support for the lobby but of making arrangements for the march through London for the big meeting which was to be held during the day and for providing hospitality to those coming into the capital.

It had been 27 years since the hunger marches had left Jarrow for London. Now, the Jarrow Trades Council decided that their delegates would go by train. The Labour Party women's section in South Shields issued a statement saying: "This is not a men-only demonstration. There are plenty of women who will have something to say about the effect of unemployment on the home and family once we get to London." On the eve of the lobby women working at Littlewoods Pools in Liverpool went on strike. At a mass meeting to discuss their strike tactics they voted unanimously to send a deputation to the lobby. By train, coach and car, the demonstrators began to arrive in London from early morning onwards on March 26. Around noon they formed up for the march to Parliament. It was a dull day with a constant drizzle of rain falling.

I marched with the Merseyside contingent, the largest of the 10,000 strong demonstration - though



that was the official figure given by the police and appeared clearly to be an underestimate. On the previous day I had had trouble with the sole of my right shoe. It had come away from the uppers and I had glued it back with Bostik. As we marched along, the rain that was falling produced a chemical reaction on the Bostik causing a foam-like substance to appear. A burly Liverpool building worker spotted this and cracked: "That's what becomes of drinking Wilson's Bitter."

There was a very strong police presence for the march and it had been made clear to the demonstrators that the law forbade any demonstration within one mile of Parliament. The organisers had agreed that when the mile barrier was reached the banners would be furled and the marchers would make their way to Parliament walking in groups and not marching. One of the leading sections ignored this and the first clash occurred with the police. Helmets went flying and a number of scuffles broke out. Order was restored and everyone made their way to Parliament to join the massive queue for the lobby.

The arrangements for lobbying Parliament on such occasions can never be adequate, but on this lobby the police adopted a heavy-handed manner which prevented people from having any choice to enter the House of Commons lobby to speak to their elected MPs. The lobbyists were beginning to get angry. Some managed to get inside and the North-West group of MPs had made special arrangements for room to be available where they could meet their constituents. There were some Labour MPs who adopted an off-handed attitude with comments like "You put the Tories in, what can we do until you get them out?" They were given short shrift from those who had travelled long distances to press their demands and were looking for support rather than strictures.

Outside the House things were getting ugly. At one stage the police closed the doors to the lobby and

this enraged the waiting crowd. A group of people made a charge for the entrance and one of them was hoisted up while he secured a red flag above the entrance. Scuffles broke out and then the mounted police charged into the lobbyists. There were fights and arrests. The lobby and what had happened became the major national and international news-story of the day and there were many subsequent protests over the police action. Some Labour MPs were furious about the affair and demanded a review of and improvement to arrangements for lobbies of this kind.

A week later, Leo McGree, taking the collection at a 'DAILY WORKER' 33rd Birthday Rally in Manchester, told the story of one of those to appear in a London magistrates' court on the day after the lobby. He was a Liverpool building worker who had been involved in a scuffle with a mounted policeman and was charged with carrying an offensive weapon - a milk bottle. McGree said the man told the court: 'I was taking the horse a drink.'

For the Tory government the writing was on the wall. The 1963 lobby was clear evidence that the time had come for them to go and an effective answer to those who deny the need for mass action outside Parliament as a means of forcing change.

Leo's last TUC was in 1965. In his speech there he dealt once again with the need for the reform of trade union structure. The movement, he emphasised, was calling for reorganisation of society. It could not therefore resist the need to reorganise itself.

People had different ideas as to the purpose of reorganising the unions but Leo spelled out his reasons clearly.

It should not be for Empire building, or merely to enable negotiations to proceed more smoothly and efficiently. The real purpose should be to concentrate the power of the working-class in order to get better

results from its increased pressure on employers and governments. "

It is that kind of growth and development that today is bringing forth such howls of anguish and panic from employers, their Tory spokesman and the media - surely a tribute to the correctness of Leo McGree's arguments.

The Tories had lost the 1964 election and, though Labour only just scraped in, the subsequent election of 1965 confirmed the Tory defeat. But the familiar pattern was to emerge once more. The new government's cry was that the Tories had left the country in a mess. Trade deficits, balance of payment problems and all kinds of economic difficulties faced the nation. Again there was pressure from America and International financiers, and the one big question was put that had been put to Gaitskell and then to Harold Wilson as leaders of the opposition during the thirteen years of Tory governments: "What will you do about the unions ?" There was a left movement in the unions causing alarm and despondency in the ranks of the employers and their pundits. The question was to be answered later with the attempt to shackle the unions with legislation. 'In Place of Strife' the forerunner of the Tory Industrial Relations Act, was the rock on which the Wilson government was to founder.

## Chapter 14. Retirement:

Before that was to happen the time came for Leo McGree to retire. He left office in January 1966. Stan May, one of his building union colleagues, wrote in the Builders' Standard: "This outsize character with gifts of magnificent oratory and uproarious wit has well-dominated the trade union scene in Liverpool for nigh on thirty years." But Leo had done even more than this. He had given hope and inspiration to all on the Left by his courage and humour in the most difficult circumstances. I well remember my father, older than Leo and a tough old foundry worker, crying tears of emotion at Leo's courageous speech on Hungary at the TUC. "What a man, what a fighter," was all he could say, but it was after all an appropriate tribute.

The Labour movement on Merseyside held a retirement social for Leo in Liverpool. Unknown to him a fund had been set up and Merseysiders and others had been contributing. His Secretary, Ruth Rimmer, took charge of the fund and recalls how many envelopes would arrive with donations from many quarters, some from people who could hardly afford the sixpences or shillings they were enclosing. At the social Leo was presented with a Vauxhall car, a Grundig television and a cheque from the Building Unions. The car, said Leo, would be used for the work he intended to continue on behalf of the movement. His rich experience and knowledge of the Labour Movement was still very much in demand and he was often called upon to speak at rallies and meetings.

His death on May 18, 1967, was a great shock, coming so soon after his retirement. Only his family and closest friends knew that he had been seriously ill for some time. The funeral took place at Anfield Crematorium on Tuesday, May 23, 1967. As the time approached, workers left the building sites, shipyards

and other workplaces to join the funeral procession.

From inside the small Chapel, the oration, delivered by John Gollan, General Secretary of the Communist Party, was relayed by loudspeaker to the huge crowd in the grounds outside. Recalling some of Leo McGree's outstanding contributions to the cause of Socialism, John Gollan concluded with the words of Harry Pollitt, Leo's great friend:

"It is heartless to deny the sadness caused by death, and the tears that drop into the open grave are tears that sully no courage nor have to manhood anything of shame. Yet, since death must come to all to whom life has come, while it would be cruelty not to sorrow, it would be cowardice to break into despairing and useless repining. Death has no terrors for the enlightened. It may bring regrets at the thought of leaving those we hold dearest on earth, but the consciousness of a well-spent life is all sufficient in the last sad hour of humanity."

Some ten years after Leo's death, and following a long period of diligent research, a group of enthusiasts in Liverpool succeeded in finding the grave of Robert Noonan, the author of "THE RAGGED TROUSERED PHILANTHROPISTS". It was an unmarked paupers grave in a Parish cemetery under the shadow of Walton Jail. Now a monument stands on the spot, a tribute to the man whose book continues to inspire young and old alike in the ideals of Socialism.

Noonan died in 1911, but the work he began was continued by others, including Leo McGree. From Noonan's Painters' Society and other craft unions in the building industry there developed the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives and the links with other unions in the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, the Trades Councils and the TUC.

Leo McGree's work and his contribution to this and to working-class history is also an inspiration.

Now, the building unions have been brought together into one amalgamated body: The Union of Construction Allied Trades and Technicians.

As Noonan's dream of Trade Union organisation and advance was to be realised, so have McGree's efforts at bringing greater amalgamation and unity also been brought to fruition. It is a continuing story of achievement and advance. There is much more to be done. New, complex problems face the trade union and labour movement and the trade unions are now a more powerful force in society.

On October 4, 1978 I went to the Manchester University Theatre to see, once again, a production of "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists". It was good to hear the message of Socialism put once more in such clear, simple terms. It was even better to see the theatre filled with young people. Perhaps now is an appropriate time for the gap between Noonan's days and the present to be filled with a production based on the period in which people like Leo McGree made their contributions to the working-class movement.



Leo McGree lived among and devoted his energies to the working-class of Merseyside. From a period after the first World War until his death in 1967 he occupied a unique position in Liverpool, beloved by thousands of working people and respected by many employers.

When he died, it seemed the most natural thing to publish some account of the many campaigns and activities in which he was engaged.

But to do full justice to this in cold print proved a very difficult task and this attempt by Jim Arnison with the help of two previous scripts by the late Tom Spence and by Roy Jones and with his own characteristic journalistic flair is as near as it is possible to get.

Possibly those of us who knew Leo and remember his flashing wit and dead-pan expression, his courage and consistency are asking too much to expect our memories to be fully conveyed in print. If younger generations of trade unionists gain inspiration from reading this account of Leo McGree's life and work - this will have served the cause that he held dear all his life.

It is fitting that UCATT should be so closely associated with this book and the Trade Union Movement and all who knew Leo owe a debt of gratitude to UCATT's North West Regional Committee for having agreed to back the project and particularly to Regional Secretary, Eric Hughes for his enthusiasm and effort in bringing it to fruition.

**£1.00**