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THE POSTAL WORKERS
AND THE
TORY OFFENSIVE

Paul Foot

Richard

Harrison

1971

Introduction

The postal strike of 1971 was by a long way the biggest industrial dispute in Britain since the war. It lasted exactly the same number of days as the next biggest — the seamen's strike of 1966 — but there were more than four times as many workers on strike. In terms of days lost and numbers of strikers, no other dispute can compare with it.

The strike lasted for 44 days, during all of which more than 90% of the members of the Union of Post Office Workers remained on strike without strike pay. Yet, at the end, they went back to work without even the promise that they would receive any greater pay increase than they were offered at the outset. Despite desperate attempts to cheer his members up, the union's general secretary made it plain that he would have preferred, if possible, to continue with the strike. The Press, the employers and the employers' Government could scarcely contain their glee at the humiliation of 200,000 postal workers. Gutter cartoonists and gutter politicians joined in the triumphal dance over what they imagined was the corpse of the postal union.

This pamphlet is written within a fortnight of the end of the strike. It is written for the tens of thousands of postal workers who are still suffering from shock at the calling-off of the strike.

Why did the strike take place? Why did the union collapse? Above all, how can workers everywhere who seek to improve their wages and conditions insure against a similar disaster? These are the questions which this pamphlet tries to answer.

Part 1. The Post Office

The Post Office is the oldest nationalised industry in the country, and the biggest. It employs more than 400,000 people (more than any other single concern), and ever since letters circulated has been responsible to the Government for the "carriage of mails". From the outset, it developed a tradition of "public service". Every citizen has the statutory right to delivery at his address of letters correctly addressed and posted to him, and in promptness, regularity and efficiency the British postal service is the best in the world. Similarly, the telephone service, which was incorporated into the Post Office, is incomparably more efficient in Britain than in countries like America where the telephones are in the hands of private enterprise.

Yet the Post Office, like other alleged "public services", operates inside a society where the powerful men are the rich men. The way in which the Post Office works, therefore, is biased in favour of industry, commerce, banking and the civil service — anywhere, that is, where the interests of rich and powerful men are immediately identifiable.

Revenue from the postal services, for instance, comes to the Post Office by way of stamps. Firms and industries which post large quantities of letters do not buy stamps. They can buy franking machines which are regulated by the Post Office. If they post more than 5,000 units at a time, they can get the local post office to do the franking for them *free of charge*. One Post Office union secretary told me that four men out of 25 at his sorting office have to be detailed off on overtime every day to deal with this job, for which the customer does not pay a penny.

Even more interesting is the system whereby the Post Office offers a rebate to firms which post in bulk.

The amount of the rebate, laid down in the Post Office Guide, is as follows:

Units posted	Rebate
4,501 to 4,999	all free over 4,500
5,000 to 22,222	10% rebate
22,223 to 24,999	all free over 20,000
25,000 to 234,375	20% rebate
234,376 to 249,999	all free over 187,500
250,000	25% rebate

The Post Office Guide goes on to list conditions for the rebate. The packets, it says, must be identical, and they must be sorted into towns and counties "as required by the local Postmaster".

The words "as required by the local Postmaster" are crucial, for the collection and sorting of rebated post is settled in local "deals" between local postmasters and firms. Most firms which do big postal business will make sure that they get on excellent terms with the local postmaster, and end up with handsome bargains on their postal costs.

One UPW union official told me:

"Not 1% of the rebated post is sorted, and even if it is sorted it makes very little difference to our work. We still have to break open the parcels of post and check every address. Sometimes the sorting is *more* difficult when it is sorted by firms beforehand."

Before 1968, these rebates applied only to "printed paper and samples", which, of course, included a mass of business post. But after 1968, when the two-tier post was introduced, the old "printed paper and samples" category was dispensed with. The rebates then applied to *all second class post sent in bulk*. This meant a huge increase in the rebate (or subsidy, to use a better word) with which the Post Office "helped out" the growing army of firms which were posting in bulk. Many firms found it extremely fruitful to save up their less urgent post for one day a week, and thus claim a much larger rebate from the Post Office.

What is the extent of the rebate? Unhappily, but not surprisingly, rebate statistics are "not available" to the public, even if they are ever collated (which is doubtful). The long annual report

and accounts of the Post Office carries no facts or figures about the extent to which industry and commerce are subsidised by the rebate system. Similarly, the Prices and Incomes Board which looked at Post Office charges in 1968 made no inquiry into how the Post Office gets its revenue, or how it might increase its revenue by stopping a gratuitous and unnecessary subsidy to firms. All the Post Office will say is that "about a third" of its postal traffic is metered, and that the bulk of the metered traffic is subsidised. From a big sub-post office in North London, I got rather different figures for deliveries in a typical week last year:

	Metered	Ordinary stamped
Letters	194,111	188,819
Packages	36,716	18,131
Total	<hr/> 230,827 (53%) <hr/>	<hr/> 206,950 (47%) <hr/>

Thirty-five million letters are posted in Britain every day. Since there are less than 35 million adults in Britain today, it is clear that most letters are not sent by sweethearts, or soldiers on overseas duty, or even by grannies on the kiddies' birthday. They are sent by Littlewoods, Barclays, the *Daily Telegraph*, ICI, and so on.

The complete lack of official statistics forces us to guess at the extent of the subsidy which the Post Office hands out to pools firms, mail order firms and big business year by year. If a third of the letters posted are subsidised to the tune of some 20%, the extent of the subsidy is in the region of £18m a year — rather more in fact than the Post Office estimate of the cost of the full Union of Post Office Workers claim for its members on the postal side. If the figure is even remotely right, it means that the "losses" sustained by the postal side of the Post Office in any one of the last 10 years could have been wiped out if the rich men's subsidy had been abolished. And this does not take into account the tremendous losses to the Post Office from not charging so many firms for franking their mail.

There is another area of subsidy which is also impossible to measure because of the refusal of the Post Office authorities to collate (or publish) statistics. When the Post Office was part of the civil service, the civil service mail was heavily subsidised. This subsidy was carried on after the Post Office Corporation was set up outside the civil service! It is impossible to tell how great is the subsidy on the millions of letters, cards and parcels sent out by the civil service, but it would be enough to pay a few thousand postmen a decent wage!

The change-over from a civil service department to a "fully-fledged public Corporation" started soon after the election of a Labour Government in 1966 and was completed in October 1969. During this period, "business standards" were applied to the Post

Office, and this meant, inevitably, a fantastic increase in bosses and bosses' underlings.

In 1966, 11,300 million letters were handled by the Post Office. In 1969 the figure was almost exactly the same. In a series of vicious productivity agreements, the number of postmen had been cut from 101,063 to 100,991, postmen higher grade from 21,250 to 20,809 and counter-men in the post offices from 22,183 to 21,584.

In 1966 there had been 9,889 Post Office administrators. In 1969 there were 12,300. Supervisors increased in the same period from 9,974 to 11,295. The richer the gravy, the more people there were to lap it up. There were 31 Post Office directors in 1966 — and 51 in 1969. All of them are getting a minimum of £6,600 a year. As a branch secretary wrote to his union magazine *The Post* (March 29, 1969):

“In my own area since Modified Postal Services we have acquired a further two assistant district postmasters, two chief inspectors, two assistant superintendents, and have lost one superintendent. We have been concentrated, de-concentrated, satellited, de-satellited. We have been two-tiered and semi-two-tiered and all this time the top brass have been increasing like sex-mad rabbits.”

Postal workers, and others who use the Post Office, were a little bemused as to the value of this burgeoning of bosses. The bosses' financial forecast in 1970 (after the union's last wage increase) resulted in a shortfall of £52m. Third-rate public relations and managerial incompetence led to early failure both of the “two-tier” postal system and of the Giro. As for “mechanisation” (the main excuse given for the increase in management), there is still only one fully mechanised office — at Croydon. Even at Croydon, the new machines have led to dreadful difficulties, not least the increase in damage to mail. “The machines tear up the letters something terrible”, a Croydon postman told me. “We used to have one man to repair damaged mail. Now, with the machines, there are three, working overtime patching and sticking up ripped-up letters and cheques.” Mechanisation elsewhere is being held up because many of the special codes sent out to the public by the Post Office contain seven digits, while the machines to deal with them are made to deal with six digits. Fifty-one directors have since been puzzling over an awkward dilemma. Should new codes be sent out or should the machines be changed? Either expense, of course, will be blamed on the postal workers. The directors don't get £6,600 a year for nothing!

Yet the postal side has long since ceased to interest the mass of Post Office Board directors. They are increasingly fascinated with the telecommunications division, where profits have been rising to astonishing proportions:

	66/67	67/68	£m 68/69	69/70
Postal Service				
profits (loss)	7	6	- 12	- 26
Telecommunications				
profits	38	33	26	61

The increasing army of bosses in the telecommunications division are drawn almost exclusively from private enterprise. Jobs are swapped year by year between the Division's Equipment Department and the boardroom of Plessey (which supplies most of the equipment). When the Post Office left the civil service and became a Corporation, there was some pressure from his supporters on Mr. John Stonehouse, the Labour Government's Postmaster-General, to sweep away the "time-honoured" restrictions which prevented the Post Office manufacturing its own equipment. Stonehouse withstood the pressure. "Render unto Plessey the things that are Plessey's" was his argument. Although the Bill contained the "ultimate" power for the Post Office to manufacture its own equipment, this would only be used, Mr. Stonehouse explained, "where it became obvious that supplies would not otherwise be available".

The new big businessmen in the Post Office telecommunications division and their friends in industry outside are goggling at the fantastic increases in telephone profits. Unlike postal services, 74% of whose costs are in paying wages and salaries, telephones need less and less labour (only 47% of their costs are labour costs). What a tragedy it is, moan the businessmen in the Post Office, that these enormous profits are wasted in a Public Board — are ploughed back into telephone machinery or used to prop up a loss-making postal service. If only, oh, if only these highly profitable services could be put in the hands of private enterprise!

These sentiments were voiced enthusiastically by the Conservative Opposition during the passing of the Post Office Bill through Parliament early in 1969. Mr. Kenneth Baker, one of the brightest stars in the Conservative firmament and a personal protégé of Mr. Edward Heath, moved an amendment to Clause 7 of the Bill:

"to give the Corporation authority to offer for sale to the public either by way of equity shares or loan stock any part of its telecommunications services".

"The Party of which I am a member", said Mr. Baker, "believes that the role of the public sector should be limited and reduced wherever possible".

What Mr. Baker meant, of course, was as follows:

"The Party of which I am a member is run for the sake of rich and greedy businessmen who are longing to get their fingers on the telephone loot."

Mr. Baker's amendment was pressed to a division (and lost),

but when the Conservative Party was returned to office in June 1970 (Mr. Baker was thrown out at Acton, but returned a few months later in safe Marylebone) the robbers came out of their caves and demanded the hand-over of the telephones. At the Conservative Party conference in Blackpool in October 1970, Mr. Geoffrey Finsberg, new Tory MP for Hampstead and a prominent member of the Telephone Users Consultative Council (an organisation run almost entirely by and for businessmen), made a rousing speech pointing out the "opportunities for enterprise and initiative" in the telephone service. His speech was greeted with a roar of applause, and Mr. Finsberg has since been named as a possible chairman of the Post Office Board.

The Board, meanwhile, whose public relations staff, needless to say, had increased by some 20% in four years, remained silent. Nothing was said in defence of the "public interest" of the Board's operations against the "private interest" of Finsberg & Co. Ltd. For the truth is that most of the men on the Board in charge of telecommunications have no objection to the wholesale transfer of the telephone service to private enterprise. They would be assured plum jobs and substantial shareholdings in the new private telephone companies. The attitude of the Post Office Board towards Tory demands for private enterprise telephones had nothing to do with the "public service" tradition of the Post Office. Public service to them meant an unprofitable postal service, especially cheap for businessmen, run by a nationalised industry, and profitable telephones run by themselves. Such priorities, needless to say, ignored one rather important group of people — the 400,000 who worked in both sectors of the Post Office. These people had for more than 100 years been treated by the Post Office with consistent cruelty and contempt.

Part 2. The Union

The UK Postmen's Association was formed in the wake of the legislation of 1871 and 1875 legalising trade unions. It was swiftly pulverised by the "impartial" Post Office administration. The leaders of the executive were arbitrarily sacked. Tom Dredge, the most militant of the founding executive members, was only allowed back to work on condition he apologised for past activities and promised to do nothing so horrible in the future as to "incite" his colleagues with evil talk about better wages and conditions. Dredge finally agreed to the conditions, and the Association collapsed.

The Postmen's Union was then formed in 1889 under the militant leadership of engineers and dockers drafted in from the "new unionism" movement. At once, the union demanded a withdrawal of the departmental rule that postmen were not allowed to meet outside office hours to discuss their grievances. The department replied with a direct negative, and prepared to fight. Union leaders were harassed with petty charges of indiscipline, and a reserve force

of unemployed were carefully rehearsed as blacklegs. The department was also able to split the postmen by carefully fostering and bribing members of different, splinter associations, especially the Fawcett Association of sorters. When blacklegs were forcibly removed by union members on July 10 from Mount Pleasant, 100 unionists were instantly dismissed by the Post Office and the attempt to get the rest of London postmen to come out in their support was bungled. Most of the men publicly washed their hands of the union, and the department consolidated its victory with widespread victimisation.

It was not until after the First World War that the various splinter unions in the Post Office were amalgamated into the Union of Post Office Workers. In the militant atmosphere of their amalgamating conference in 1919, the delegates to the new union declared their faith in trade union principles and voted overwhelmingly for the setting up of a strike fund. They were reckoning without the deep-seated anti-trade union feelings among postmen, especially among the better-paid grades. The strike fund was put to ballot, and was carried by only 48,157 to 35,411 (with 23,400 abstentions).

The Post Office administration responded by cherishing the federations of smaller unions which had refused to join the UPW. Hysterical anti-trade union propaganda was openly circulated among their workers by the Post Office management. The strike fund was held up as proof of the evil intentions of "anarchist agitators" who were intent on destroying the "impartial" traditions of the Post Office.

The campaign was successful. By 1921, the 100,000 membership at the amalgamation conference had shrunk to 72,000. In September 1921 the union executive decided to suspend the strike levy fund indefinitely. As a result, there was no strike fund in the union for more than 40 years. And then it was too late.

Throughout, the union was plagued by the ambiguous status of its members. Many members still regarded themselves as uniformed civil servants — "a cut above" the proletariat. The Post Office bosses did everything they could to foster this image. In 1927, the Conservative Government passed a Trades Dispute Act which banned the postmen's union from affiliation to the Labour Party or to the Trades Union Congress. The union was therefore forced into isolation for 20 years until the Act was repealed by the post-war Labour Government (the 1929-31 Labour Government left the Act on the statute book). In the same year, the bosses arbitrarily increased the staff side of the Whitley Council covering the industry by two — both members representing tiny "secessionist" associations. As a result, the UPW walked out of the Whitley Council, only to return five years later on the Post Office terms.

Despite consistent growth, consistent absorption of smaller organisations and acceptance back into the TUC and Labour Party after the war, the union continued to be dogged by the myth of

“ respectability ”. Many of its older members had been recruited from the Services and had been taught to obey commands. In rural areas, district postmasters liked to play soldiers with their troops and in many places postmen had actually to parade for morning inspection!

As a result, the union leadership remained firmly committed to “ moderation ”. Ron Smith, its general secretary for most of the post-war period, could always be relied upon to cast his union’s votes in favour of Labour’s “ safe ” right-wing leadership. The branch rules and structure, many of which were written in the post-war period, paid scant regard to the rights of the members to participate in the union affairs. The Croydon branch rules, for instance, allow for only two meetings a year! Although the structure of the union was formally democratic (the executive is dominated by lay members elected every year, though about a third of it consists of full-time officials: all officials are elected on a branch block-vote system, but, once elected, they are there for life). The activity in the union was left in the main to a few local activists, who often ended up in the union leadership.

Meanwhile, wages and conditions were gently discussed, and as gently agreed under the paternalist aegis of the Civil Service Pay Research Unit.

The cosy atmosphere was abruptly broken by the Selwyn Lloyd pay pause of 1961. The Tory Government, desperate to control their own pre-election boom, decided to wield the hatchet on their own workers. Meetings were delayed, established negotiation procedures altered and promises broken. For 18 months, postmen watched in despair as the wages of industrial workers and white-collar workers in private industry soared above theirs, and the official machinery which had given them pittances year by year was ignored by the Government. By the summer of 1964, Ron Smith had lost control of his union. In protest against the Government’s refusal to allow them substantial increases, the Post Office workers started an unofficial work-to-rule and guerrilla strikes up and down the country.

Ron Smith and his executive were forced to call a one-day official strike. A mass rally was held in Trafalgar Square, and, on July 26, the Government caved in. A wage increase reckoned much later by the Prices and Incomes Board as 15% was granted.

The postmen had learned a simple lesson. Their biggest increase in post-war history had been won because some of them took the initiative and hit the Post Office and its customers where it hurt most — in the pocket.

Soon afterwards a Labour Government, trumpeting slogans about “ fairness for the workers ” and “ Incomes Policy ”, was elected. The Post Office workers loyally responded to the Government’s appeals for “ voluntary restraint ”. Pay awards for postal and telephonist grades in 1965 and 1966 were held strictly below the required norms. In both years the UPW “ won ” 3½% increases

(PIB Report, p. 20). Their award in 1967 had to be delayed due to the 1966 wage freeze, and when it was paid it was much lower than the workers had expected — 7%. The situation was little less than drastic, as even the Post Office recognised. The Prices and Incomes Board Report on postal charges, published in March 1968, had this to say:

“In the view of the Post Office, the pattern of settlements has inhibited its efforts to recruit and retain labour on the postal side by ensuring that Post Office wages have always lagged behind those in other occupations.”

With the cheek which characterised so many PIB reports, the Board then recommended annual increases of 3½%!

This must have been a joke, for even on the Board's skimpy information the Post Office workers were having it very rough indeed. The Board found severe labour shortages in London and the Midlands brought on by the disgracefully low wages and poor conditions. “During the last three years”, it reported (p. 23), “overtime has accounted for about 20% of the Post Office's expenditure on pay for main postal grades. The Post Office estimate that about one-sixth of the overtime is worked at double rates. To qualify for double rates, postmen have to work more than 60 hours a week, indicating that considerable numbers are working this amount”. (Sixty hours is eight and a half hours a day *every day in the week.*) The PIB's remedy for this appalling situation was to increase the hiring of part-time women workers!

Added to all this, and not apparently noticed by the PIB or the Government, was the system of “incremental scales” whereby young telephonists and postmen joining “the service” were used as little more than cheap labour. At that time the rates of pay under these scales were as follows:

Age	Basic pay for a 43-hour week					
	Postmen			Telephonists		
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
15	6	10	0	5	16	0
16	6	17	6	6	5	0
17	7	11	6	7	0	0
18	9	15	0	9	1	6
19	10	11	6	9	17	6
20	12	4	0	10	15	0
21	14	14	6	12	4	0
22	15	17	0	12	14	6

The Union of Post Office Workers' leadership, meanwhile, had taken a turn to the left with the election of Tom Jackson to the general secretaryship in place of Ron Smith, who had inevitably joined the Board of the British Steel Corporation as labour director. Jackson and his executive hoped to push on with much bigger increases for their members than had been suggested by the PIB, but very quickly they were entangled in the “voluntary incomes

policy" which was being enforced by the Labour Government in a far from voluntary manner. Jackson's annual report to his union's Jubilee Annual Conference at Bournemouth apologised gloomily:

"To say that the year under review [ending December 31, 1968] has been a difficult one would be an understatement, either in relation to members' difficulties, or in relation to those of obtaining increases against the background of Government criteria which provide substantially less than a modicum of flexibility."

A claim for postmen had been lodged in the late summer of 1968 and deliberately delayed at Ministerial level until late in November. Eventually, the UPW accepted a 4% increase, 1% of which was "in respect of measures already introduced".

Tough productivity strings were bound around this unwelcome package, which, as Jackson admitted in his report, "occasioned some resentment and dissatisfaction". Telephonists, still lagging even behind postmen in pay, had been forced to accept a miserable 5½% plus heavy productivity concessions.

Neither was the following year, ended December 31, 1969, as Jackson wrote for the union's 1970 Conference, "one of spectacular increases". Under the Central Pay Claim, covering most grades in the union, telephonists had picked up a further 7¼% in separate negotiations, but the postmen (representing half the union) were kept to the minimum 3½%. Jackson and his negotiators had accepted this further humiliation only on condition that they would return and ask for more as soon as the Post Office became a Corporation in October.

With the constitution of the Corporation, the last semblance of civil service "paternalism" and "respectability" vanished from the Post Office. The Board was a tough, bureaucratic business management. The new chairman was a former merchant seaman, miner, doctor, steelmaster and tycoon called Viscount Hall. Other Board members included a deputy chairman of Rolls-Royce and, inevitably, a former general secretary of the Union of Post Office Workers (duly) knighted. The union found Lord Hall susceptible to demands for a substantial increase to make up the ground lost over previous years. Hall was warned that the workers were in militant mood, and demands for industrial action to back the claim were pouring in from branches all over the country. "Viscount Hall", reported the *Daily Mail* on December 23, 1969, "wants to avoid a strike at all costs". Hall duly told the Government that he had no intention of outfacing his workers so early in the life of the Board.

The Labour Government, by the time they came to adjudicate on the UPW claim in February 1970, were in a more friendly mood than they had been for four years. The struggle against the unions, highlighted by the White Paper "In Place of Strife" the previous summer, had been dropped in favour of conciliation. A General Election was in the offing. Workers' votes had to be ensured. On February 12, the Cabinet approved the entire UPW claim, which

averaged increases of some 12%. "We got all we asked for", said Jackson, triumphant (*Guardian*, February 13, 1970).

He was, however, in for a shock. On the ballot vote of the union's branches, acceptance of the offer was approved by the slenderest of majorities. Among postmen, there was probably a majority for rejection. If there had been any doubt in the minds of the union leadership about the militancy of their members, it was now laid to rest. The postmen, after nearly 50 years of apathy, were spoiling for a fight to improve their wages and conditions. The increases of early 1970 had, they made it clear, compensated only marginally for the losses in 1968 and 1969. The basic pay of the postmen was still little more than £16 a week. Overtime was still monstrously demanding. The incremental scales were still a scandal. A 21-year-old telephonist outside London was still working a 41-hour, six-day week for £10 10s. For 20 years or more postal workers had trod water. Now they were determined to surge forward.

Part 3. The Strike

On October 29, 1970, the Union of Post Office Workers, under instructions from their annual conference the previous spring, lodged a claim for a wage increase of 15% or £3 a week, whichever was the greater. The claim was only one of a number of substantial claims submitted by unions still smarting from the long years of squeeze and freeze, and from several months of runaway inflation which had pushed prices up at an annual rate of 8%. Very soon, the claim was shown to be in line with what other workers were getting. A Committee of Inquiry under the "hard-line" negotiator Sir Jack Scamp recommended straight increases of 15% for local government employees who had been on strike for several weeks. The local government workers had conducted a skilful campaign of guerrilla strikes, and the Scamp Committee considered their claim sympathetically. Soon afterwards, the miners, under some protest, and after only marginally failing to give a two-thirds majority to sanction a national strike, accepted a "no strings" offer of 12%.

These two increases in the public sector infuriated the Conservative Government, not one member of whose Cabinet had less than two former directorships or less than two houses to live in. The Government determined to fight their own workers if necessary to the death to bring down the general level of wage increases. To this end, they found a useful ally in the joint-deputy chairman of

the Post Office Board, Mr. A. W. C. Ryland.

Ryland had worked his way up through the Post Office bureaucracy with assiduous zeal. By 1953, he had risen to the heights of Deputy Public Relations Officer. For 10 years he had worked exclusively on the telecommunications side, and had learned a lot about the profitability of telephones. In 1963, for instance, he headed the Post Office study team to the profitable Bell Telephone System of Canada. Ryland knew more than any other member of the Board that the success of the Board would be assessed by one criterion: profitability.

Ryland started to prepare for a possible strike in the Post Office long before Lord Hall, or even the UPW leaders, had given it serious consideration. In the summer of 1970, for instance, he addressed a conference of telephone managers in Windermere in the Lake District.

He announced that the Prices and Incomes Board target for "return on capital" in the telecommunications division of 8½% had not been reached. He had, he said, without explaining in detail why, arbitrarily raised this target to 10½%. There was, he went on, a need for a thoroughgoing "drive to profitability", and, accordingly, there was "very little left in the kitty for wages".

Soon afterwards, the attention of Post Office managers and supervisors was drawn by Head Office to a thereto unheard-of document entitled: Post Office Civil Emergency Manual. The document set out detailed proposals as to how the Post Office should work in conditions of flood, famine, pestilence . . . and industrial action. Instructions were issued that the "drill" laid down in the document, involving the setting up of "control centres" and "emergency stations", should be followed to the letter during the power workers' work-to-rule which started on December 8—not because that action disrupted postal services, but "as a rehearsal for later on".

All this met with some opposition, notably from Viscount Hall. Hall, who was enjoying himself hugely travelling round the world on expensive "surveys" of telecommunications and postal problems, was not at all happy about a confrontation with his workers. He took the old-fashioned view that well-paid workers provided the best service, and he was bold enough to tell his Minister, Mr. Christopher Chataway, what he thought.

Lord Hall was intensely unpopular with the Government. Public boards, they considered, should be chaired by obsequious Tory toadies like Mr. Ryland. On November 24, after some intense argument about the Board's attitude to the UPW claim, Hall was summarily sacked by the Government, and Ryland became "acting chairman".

The sacking of Lord Hall was not lost on the postal workers. They had no brief for Labour tycoons, but they realised the real reason for this dismissal. To the astonishment of the Government and the union, lightning protest strikes broke out in many large post offices, especially in London.

The power workers started their work-to-rule on December 8. The action caused instant chaos. A week later, the power men's unions called off the action after a promise from the Government that their claim would be investigated by an independent court of inquiry. The unions insisted, and the Government agreed, that the workers need not be bound by the inquiry's findings.

Watching the situation, Ryland decided to delay his reply to the UPW claim as long as possible. If he could hold things until the Wilberforce Commission reported on the power workers' claim, public opinion, he reckoned, would swing towards him. But the UPW, wise to this ruse, insisted on a reply. On January 8, the Board offered 7% — less than half the claim. The offer was rejected with contempt. On January 14, the offer was increased by a wretched 1%. Once again, the union rejected it. On January 20, the entire membership was called out on strike.

Everyone, including the union leaders, was astonished at the enthusiasm of the workers' response to the strike call. There was no question of strike pay. The union had started a small strike fund only three years previously. At the beginning of the strike, the fund totalled £334,000. The most this money could finance was a "hardship fund" for those strikers (such as single men) who had no income while on strike. Even so, the fund could only last for a maximum of three weeks. Yet the response among postmen was almost unanimous. The Press, notably the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, immediately ordered all its reporters to "Hunt the Blackleg", but were hard put to it to find a chink in the strike. Of 100,000 postmen, less than 700 reported for work. Among telephonists, the response was less enthusiastic. In big industrial areas, they came out. In rural areas, where many of them were the part-time "pin money" workers advocated by the Prices and Incomes Board, they tended to stay at work. The Daily Bulletin run by the UPW Headquarters reported that in cities like Dundee and Newcastle all telephonists were on strike. The Post Office claimed from the outset that more than a third of the total number stayed at work throughout the strike.

On Day 4 of the strike, the UPW Strike Bulletin warned: "Monday may be a crucial day in our campaign", and urged their members to stay out on strike. The warning was unnecessary. Astonishingly, as the days and then the weeks went by, the strikers became more determined and more solid. The mass meetings and rallies throughout the country, led by a rally in Hyde Park every Thursday, became progressively better attended and more militant.

On Day 9 (January 28), the Strike Bulletin sent a message from the executive: "WE ARE PRIVILEGED TO BE YOUR ELECTED LEADERS. YOU ARE MAGNIFICENT! KEEP IT UP!" Each bulletin recorded hundreds of donations, most of them tiny. At this stage, the only donations from trade unions were from individual branches. It was not until the 21st day of the strike that the bulletin could record a donation from the Transport and General Workers Union headquarters — of a puny £7,500 — to

the hardship fund, and not until the 31st day that SOGAT Division "A" coughed up £10,000. Many other unions affiliated to the TUC did not contribute at all.

There were other even more serious signs that the solidarity of the leaderships of other unions was not all it was made out to be. On Friday, February 12 (the 24th day of the strike), Mr. Johnny Nuttall, a member of the Transport and General Workers Union in Clay Cross, Derbyshire, reported as usual for work as a lorry-driver for a small firm of Sheffield road hauliers called J. A. Hendersons. He was detailed for a run to Hull and to Beverley, and he noticed that attached to the delivery notes were two envelopes, addressed to the firms he was to visit.

Such envelopes had never been part of his load before, and Mr. Nuttall complained to the management, explaining that he could not possibly be expected to carry letters for anyone while the postmen were on strike. He was instantly suspended, pending negotiations. He then contacted Mr. Ray Thorpe, the T&GWU area organiser in Nottingham. Mr. Thorpe listened to his case, spoke to the employers and was very sympathetic to Mr. Nuttall. He was, he explained, not convinced that this delivery was not genuinely connected with the job. Nuttall replied that never in two and a half years had he had to deliver such an envelope, but still Brother Thorpe was not convinced. From his vantage point in his Nottingham office, he decided that he was unwilling to instruct the other drivers not to work while the employers insisted on their carrying mail. He intended, he explained, to do nothing about it.

Then Tom Swain, MP, intervened. Nuttall was reinstated. Returning to work, he found three more letters attached to the delivery notes. Once more he refused to drive. At least nine of the 15 drivers indicated their willingness, if instructed by the union, not to work under such blackleg conditions. But Thorpe refused to move. Nuttall was sacked, and the other drivers carried the mail.

"I rang our regional organiser, Brother Mather, in Birmingham", Johnny Nuttall told me. "He took the same lukewarm attitude as Thorpe. He kept saying that our union cared most for our members, and that our members would be in trouble if they all did what I did." Johnny Nuttall has been out of work for five weeks since the episode and his opinion of his union leadership, including Jack Jones (his general secretary), who knew all about the incident, is not printable.

What happened to Johnny Nuttall happened all over the country, although in most places were were few lorry-drivers (or railway workers) with Johnny Nuttall's courage. BRS drivers carried mail all over the country without any real effort by the T&GWU to stop the practice, in spite of all sorts of commitments by brave union leaders at meetings in central London.

Nevertheless, the solidarity of the postmen caused no little consternation at the Post Office Headquarters at St. Martin's-le-Grand, where Ryland and his henchmen had imagined that the trickle of

postmen returning to work would rapidly turn into a flood. Not that the Post Office itself was suffering. On the contrary, despite the daily reports of massive Post Office losses in the Press, the Post Office was minting huge profits during the strike. The loss-making postal services were closed down. Only a tiny amount was being paid out in wages. At the same time, there was a huge increase in the highly profitable use of automatic telephones (86% of the telephone system is on STD, which uses very little labour). The Minister for Posts pooh-poohed suggestions that the Post Office was making profits during the strike, but when the strike was over the figures proved him wrong. The Post Office had lost £24.8m in revenue, and had saved £26m in unpaid wages (*Daily Telegraph*, March 5, 1971).

Encouraged by such figures, Ryland decided on the 18th day of the strike to announce his plans for even bigger profits in the future. He issued a Press statement (on February 6) indicating that, as a result of the strike, future Post Office services would have to be pruned. The parcel post, he warned, would have to be abolished. So would many rural deliveries. So would the practice of delivering mail twice a day.

Five months previously, Mr. Ryland had opened a new parcel sorting office at Peterborough. He spoke in glowing terms about two new parcel centres at Cardiff and Southampton. "We are building", he trumpeted, "Britain's parcel network of the future".

Now, however, he was using a strike into which he had provoked his workers as an excuse for cutting out the parcel service altogether! Needless to say, the bitter and devastating UPW reply to Ryland's announcement released to the Press the next day was totally ignored by the "objective" national newspapers.

Yet, for all Mr. Ryland's dreams of still more profits (and less service) to come, by late February the strike began to bite deep into the pockets of industry and commerce. As the UPW Strike Bulletin complained day by day, the real effects of the strike were blanketed by a "conspiracy of silence".

The damage was not only to banks, newspapers and mail order firms (whose turnover had doubled in 10 years to £560m a year, and had expanded by 10% a year compared with 3% for the rest of the retail trade). Industry itself, and particularly industry with connections overseas, was hard hit by the strike, and worse hit as chances of a settlement receded. For the first two weeks, correspondence could be put off, on the understanding that some day it would move again. But as the strike was increasingly solid, industry became increasingly disturbed. The Association for Small Businessmen reported that "the strike has become a major threat to thousands of small businessmen. Many of them are being propped up by lenient bank managers who have extended credit to cover the strike" (*Financial Times*, March 3, 1971).

Not only small businesses but some of the bigger ones started to warn the Government that the losses caused by the strike could not

be sustained for ever.

None of this appeared in the Press or on television. The myth was bruited around that the strike was having "little effect" on industry. The internal bulletins of the City of London (the *Business News* supplements and the *Financial Times*) announced blandly: "No Problem."

The reason was that the men who run big industries and banks have been properly brought up. One major principle has been drummed into their heads from early childhood: *Never discuss family problems in front of the servants.*

In this instance a group of cheeky servants (Post Office workers) were refusing to work. They had to learn that such insubordination would do them no good, and that no one cared. Total silence about real problems had to be scrupulously observed.

The union, however, was not concerned by these tricks of the capitalist trade. The solidarity of their members was ensured. The damage caused by the strike was indisputable. Contemptible offers from the Post Office (such as Ryland's suggestion that an extra 1% in "productivity" money could be added to the 8%) could be rejected summarily.

The real problem was the survival of those strikers who had no money at all. Members covered by social security payments were likely to stay out as long as necessary. The rent was paid, and there was something to eat. For the others, however, the hardship fund was crucial. And the hardship fund was running out. The hundreds of small donations made little or no difference. The union's own money, by the third week in February (the fifth of the strike), had long since been spent, as had the bankers' overdraft. The hardship fund (about £100,000 a week) had to be sustained, or the strike would begin to crumble. This was the union's Achilles heel, which was promptly pierced not by the employers or by blacklegs but by the Trades Union Congress General Council.

Part 4. The Sell-out

On Day 30 of the strike (Thursday, February 18), the union's Strike Bulletin reported:

"FLASH! Tom Jackson and his team have gone to the TUC to speak to the TUC's Finance and General Purposes Committee."

The result of the meeting was reported in *The Times* the following day:

"The UPW, in deep financial difficulties as its strike enters the fifth week, yesterday collected £250,000 in loans from other unions. *It has been promised a similar sum* by the TUC next week to keep the strike alive."

And the *Guardian* of February 20 carried a huge headline:

"TUC WILL NOT LET POSTAL UNION BE CRUSHED"

"The Government is deeply concerned about the apparently growing support among trade unions for the Post Office workers.

. . . TUC leaders, who met Mr. Carr for talks about the dispute, took a courteous but firm line and left him in no doubt that they were not going to abandon the postal workers.

"They are understood to have emphasised that they would not stand by and see the Union of Post Office Workers crushed by financial pressures and reminded the Minister of the loans which the TUC was gathering from other unions on behalf of the UPW. The amounts have totalled £250,000 this week, *and the same amount is likely to be forthcoming next week.*"

The following day, Sunday, February 21, 140,000 trade unionists rallied to the call of the TUC to demonstrate against the Industrial Relations Bill. Eight years previously, TUC general secretary George Woodcock had told the Congress proudly that they had "long ago left Trafalgar Square" for the committee rooms in the corridors of power. Now the movement was back in Trafalgar Square fighting for its very life.

The most popular man on the demonstration was Tom Jackson, the most popular delegation that of the UPW. TUC general secretary Vic Feather sought out Jackson and pulled him to the front of the plinth to shake him by the hand. Chairman Sid Greene, the best-dressed man in the movement, told the crowd:

"The whole trade union movement is backing the UPW."

When Jackson spoke, however, there was an element of scepticism in his response:

"If we are defeated, it will not be for lack of resolve. It will not be for lack of guts and determination. It will be for lack of funds.

"Sympathy we can get by the bucketful. We have the generous wholehearted support of the public. What we need now is money — and fast!

"The TUC has supported the idea of workshop collections. This is your fight. Our defeat will be your defeat. Our victory, your victory.

"We have been forced by circumstances into the van of the trade union movement. We did not ask for this honour, but we will not let you down. Don't let us down."

This was the first sign that the TUC had supported the idea of workshop collections. There was no sign, however, that the collections were being enthusiastically organised by the leadership. At any rate, such collections could not be substituted for the big grants the union needed to keep its hardship fund going. Workshop collections could never provide enough money fast enough.

A further problem dogged the UPW executive. The money collected by the TUC the previous week had been paid in interest-free loans.

To some extent, this was a fiction. Many unions have rules restraining them from making large payments outside the union. And in many instances (though by no means in all) repayment would not in practice be demanded. Formally, however, the money was on loan, and the UPW's bankers, already demanding the title deeds of the union's headquarters as security for its huge overdraft,

were beginning to complain about further commitments.

The crucial meeting of the strike was that of the General Council of the TUC on Wednesday, February 24. All that week, the newspapers had been full of the TUC support for Jackson and the TUC's determination not to allow a defeat of the postmen.

At the meeting, Tom Jackson spelt out his dilemma. The TUC must back their pledges of support and their rhetoric with cash, or the strike would crumble. There were, he said, hopeful signs. Employment Secretary Robert Carr had been visited by the mail order firms, the Association of Small Businesses and by the Confederation of British Industry, all of whom were pressing for an end to the strike, which was rapidly becoming intolerable.

To Jackson's horror and astonishment, his colleagues on the General Council started to mumble about "problems and difficulties". There was, they said, no money available by way of grant. They might be able to rustle up another £100,000 in interest-free loans. Jackson told them again that further loans would not be allowed by his bankers, and reminded them again of their commitment the previous week to a further £250,000. Even £100,000 grant could keep him going another crucial week. The heroes of Trafalgar Square the previous Sunday fell silent. The mighty militants had turned into mice. A hundred thousand pounds in loans out of the millions of union funds and tens of millions in union investments was all they could afford.

When Jackson left the TUC that morning, he must have known that the game was up. He could not continue the hardship fund the following week without selling his union headquarters. The following day, the UPW rally in Hyde Park was the biggest yet, swelled by tens of thousands of Post Office Engineering Workers who had staged a token strike in solidarity with the UPW. Jackson kept a brave face, as though nothing serious had happened. And the demonstrators went home confident that their struggle would continue.

The axe, however, fell fast. On Monday, as news of the end of the hardship money filtered through, the numbers returning to work increased sharply (though still only a tiny minority of the total).

By Tuesday, Jackson was outlining his line of retreat to the executive. On Wednesday (March 3) the entire executive, having agreed to surrender by 27 votes to four (with the Communists on the executive supporting Jackson), travelled to the Department of Employment and concocted a formula for calling off the strike. A "committee of inquiry", they agreed, would look into the Post Office claims. The three-man committee would consist of one nominee from the union, one from the management and a chairman agreeable to both. The chairman would have the right, in the event of disagreement, to impose a settlement. In sharp contrast to the setting up of the Scamp Committee of Inquiry into the "dirty jobs" strike, the union would recommend an immediate return to work before the committee was even constituted. Unlike those of the Wilberforce Committee, this committee's findings would be

binding. This was marginally different from the arbitration which Jackson had been refusing for 10 weeks. But no one had any doubt that the Post Office would have settled for such an inquiry in the first week of the strike.

The rally on Thursday, March 4, was a very different affair from its predecessors. Many postal workers could not believe their ears, and shouted their disillusionment at their leaders. As the executive recommendations went to the ballot, branch after branch recorded the dismay and militancy of the rank and file. In almost every urban branch, there was a substantial vote against the executive proposals, and in some branches the majority voted to stay out. A mass meeting of more than 2,500 UPW members in Liverpool, for instance, voted two to one against going back to work.

The real blame for the collapse of the strike must be placed on the TUC General Council, first for not providing the funds when they were needed, and secondly for not organising the other unions in dispute with the Government to co-ordinate their efforts with the postmen. The railwaymen's and the teachers' union leaders knew well enough that the defeat of the postmen would lead to substantially smaller settlements for their members. Why then did they not hasten their negotiations, and join the fray? Why at least did they not press for the necessary funds to be made available? Why did not the more militant trade union leaders, notably Jack Jones of the T&GWU or Hugh Scanlon of the AUEW, openly break from the General Council line and make available the funds which they could so well afford?

Above all, why did the General Council retreat from a position which it seemed to have occupied in some strength?

The answer was half-available to readers of the South Wales morning paper, the *Western Mail*, on Friday, March 5, headed: "POST PACT KEY FOR TORY UNIONS DEAL".

"The virtual collapse of the postmen's strike", wrote George Gardiner, that paper's Lobby Correspondent, "has opened the way for a new deal between the Government and the unions.

"If the TUC is willing to support the principle that in future all unions in dispute should go to arbitration, before considering strike action, I understand the Government is prepared to amend its Industrial Relations Bill when it comes back to the Commons on Monday week."

The parts of the Industrial Relations Bill which most offended the bureaucrats on the General Council were not those which penalised unofficial strikers, nor those which outlawed sympathy strikes, but those which restricted the closed shop. These restrictions, the leaders feared, would cut off important funds to the unions. The weaker unions like USDAW and the G&MWU would lose tens of thousands of members presently kept in union membership by closed shop provisions, often with the agreement of employers. At all costs, the General Council wanted Clause 5 (about closed shops) altered. The Government had made it plain that they

might make concessions on Clause 5 if the TUC would restrain its members from going on strike.

For some time, Vic Feather had been seeking a meeting with the Prime Minister to discuss such a deal as well as other matters like unemployment. The *Daily Mirror* on March 2 ran a front-page article entitled *End This Angry Silence*, in which it attacked the Prime Minister and the unions for not "getting together".

The Tory Government was dangling possible changes in the Industrial Relations Bill as a carrot to prompt the TUC to immediate action on the postal workers' strike. What was the point, Heath's representatives asked Feather, in talking about the TUC restraining strikes at a time when one of the biggest unions in the country was "paralysing the nation" by refusing arbitration? Only if the post strike was stopped on terms of arbitration would the Government talk to the TUC.

These arguments carried much weight with the "committee room" bureaucrats in the TUC who had resented not being asked to Downing Street since the Tory Government was elected. Here at last was a chance to get into a committee room with the Government again. With such a prize, who cared about Tom Jackson and his Post Office workers?

Indeed, the more crusted of the General Council reactionaries welcomed an excuse to sell the postmen down the river. They were terrified by the prospect not of the postmen's defeat, but of their victory. For if the postmen's strike had forced the Government to concede substantial wage claims, what fantastic class forces would be unleashed in all the other unions? How would the diehards in the General Council hope in such circumstances to exert the "control" over their members to which they had become accustomed? How would they be able to stop them from engaging in open conflict with the Government, the employers — who knows, the whole structure of society? Such thoughts struck terror into the kind hearts and coronets who make up the TUC General Council. And when the Government issued its ultimatum: *No talks while the postal strike is on*, the mind of the General Council was rapidly made up. Tom Jackson and his 200,000 postal workers would have to go to the wall.

They could rely on Jackson not to expose their double-dealing. At no time after the fateful meeting on February 24 did Jackson openly attack the General Council or any member of it for knifing his union in the back. An open appeal to the rank and file of the unions, with the real facts of the sell-out thoroughly exposed, would have won for Jackson, if not the necessary funds, at any rate the continued support of his rank and file. Yet Jackson chose to keep mum, to take the blame for the decision, and to retain his seat and his friends on the General Council. The despair and disillusionment of his members is so much the worse for his failure properly to explain to them the real reasons for the strike's collapse.

On the evening of March 3, several hours after the UPW execu-

tive had gone to the Department of Employment to lick the boots of Mr. Ryland and Mr. Carr, Mr. Victor Feather blandly called a Press conference at Congress House. He had, he said, sent a letter for delivery to 10 Downing Street asking Mr. Heath for "early talks between the Government and the TUC on the worsening economic situation".

"Previously", wrote the *Daily Telegraph* Industrial Correspondent the next day (March 4), "the TUC has offered to discuss wage restraint if the Government would first undertake to drop the Industrial Relations Bill. Now, although killing the Bill remains the TUC's hope, it is no longer adopting such a rigid approach which would make fruitful discussions virtually impossible".

The reply from Downing Street was almost instantaneous. Mr. Heath paused only to discover from his Minister of Employment that the post strike was all but over. He then picked up the telephone, got through to Congress House and courteously assured Mr. Feather that he was only too willing to talk to the General Council.

The following morning the front page of the *Daily Mirror* carried two headlines. "POST STRIKE IS OVER", it shouted, and then, next door, in smaller type: "HEATH BREAKS THE ANGRY SILENCE".

Peter Jenkins of the *Guardian* is by no stretch of the imagination a revolutionary socialist. He is, however, in close touch with Tom Jackson, and he knew what had gone on at the General Council.

"The trade union movement", he wrote on March 4, "made warlike noises. It edged towards a confrontation with the Government; but when it came to the point, it at once thought better of it and quickly drew back. The trade union movement was shown to be lacking not only in will but also totally in strategic sense. The lessons of that unedifying spectacle will not be lost on other trade unions, on public opinion or on the Government".

Part 5. The Lessons

The immediate effects of the collapse of the post strike will be felt by other workers in the public sector, such as railwaymen and teachers. Union leaders who allowed the Government to take on the postal workers in an isolated struggle are now using the defeat as an excuse to lumber their own members with wage increases that will not keep up with rises in the cost of living. The rank and file in these unions must make sure that the postal workers' strike is the last in which the Government divides and rules in this way. They should demand the building up of a "Public Sector Alliance" of different unions to wage a unified fight back.

For postmen, the immediate results of the collapse will be even more serious. Whatever is gained or lost at the committee of inquiry, Ryland (who must surely be promoted as Post Office chairman) will seek to use the strike's aftermath to cut down on postal services

(and workers). His eyes are fixed on Sweden, allegedly the home of "progress" and the "Welfare State", where postal services have been progressively slashed over the past decade. There is only one postal delivery outside the commercial centre of Stockholm. Rural deliveries and collections have been cut back to almost nothing. No parcels are delivered. Meanwhile, the telephone service is expanding at a rapid rate and making huge profits for the firms which feed off it.

All Ryland's statements during and after the strike commit him to a Swedish policy which could mean massive redundancies among postmen, quite apart from the slashing of the "public service", especially to those (the majority) who cannot afford telephones.

For the trade union movement in general, the Post Office dispute is a major setback. An arrogant and offensive Government, composed entirely of wealthy businessmen, will now attempt to ride roughshod over the demands of workers elsewhere.

They will not find it easy. The TUC General Council sell-out of the postmen can be compared in its cynicism to their sell-out of the miners in 1926, but the General Strike of that year was the last gasp of a working class locked out and bullied for half a decade. Today, the strength of the workers' anger is much more powerful. The refusal among workers to be pushed around by the wealthy is stronger now than ever before in history. The Government, in spite of its victory over the Post Office workers, will not find the workers submissive to a class assault of the type which they are contemplating. The spirit of postmen, and of workers everywhere, is far from broken.

How can that spirit be preserved, and expanded? Certainly not, as the post strike shows, by "leaving it to the executive" or, even less, "leaving it to the General Council". Rank-and-file postmen have learned the hard way how trade union leaders, when it comes to the crunch, are prepared to make squalid deals even with reactionary Governments in order to "pacify" their own members. The Union of Post Office Workers' Conference at Bournemouth this spring will be a lively affair, and already branch rules throughout the country are being re-written to allow more participation and control by the rank and file.

There is a more attractive doctrine, however, which has also been exposed by the post strike. In the four years from 1966-70 during which a Labour Government carried out policies of which any Tory Government would have been proud, many workers lost hope in politics, or political solutions. They have imagined since that militancy and solidarity in their unions will be enough to win their battles. Any attempt to link their strike with the struggles of workers elsewhere, in Britain or in the world, has been suspected as politics, which has become in many workers' minds another word for opportunism or careerism.

Unfortunately, however, the assault on the workers, as the post strike so clearly proves, is becoming more and more political. The

tiny group of rich and powerful men who control industry and property are determined to defend their class superiority from incessant demands by the workers. *They* have organised politically, through their representatives in the Conservative Party, to pick off each group of workers, isolate them, humiliate them and break their spirit. *Their* struggle is not isolated in individual industries or factories. *They* operate as a tightly-knit group of politically motivated men. And the fight against their operations cannot be won by isolated acts of militancy, however prolonged and however heroic.

The reaction from workers, if it is ever to succeed, must also be political. That does not mean voting every five years for a Labour candidate. It means linking different struggles, and pointing out the common enemy in each of them. It means binding the fight in this country with similar fights abroad. It means mobilising people into a permanent political counter-offensive against the Tories and the class they represent.

For more than 25 years workers have been told by their political representatives that the capitalist system works and that all that matters is to work it efficiently. Now, after 25 years of full employment and capitalist expansion, the system is as decadent, as corrupt, as unfair, as violent, as ridiculous and contemptible as it ever was. The humiliation of the postmen and the part played in it by the TUC General Council is only a start. Things will get worse for the workers unless they can build for themselves a new political instrument capable of breaking through the thin crust of contemporary capitalism and creating a society where the wealth which workers produce is used for them, not against them.

Join the International Socialists

Send to : I S 6 Cottons Gardens London E2 8DN

Name

Address



