

SOLIDARITY PAMPHLET 19, 10p

LABOUR GOVERNMENT VS THE DOCKERS 1945-1951





INTRODUCTION TO FIRST REPRINTING

(SPRING 1965)

The following article ('The Brotherhood of Man') first appeared in vol. III, No. 4 of the rank and file journal 'SOLIDARITY'. In response to a number of requests, we are now reprinting it. in pamphlet form.

There could be no better time for such a reprinting. The period between 1945 and 1951 was full of instructive lessons. Not only lessons for dockers, but lessons for all militants in industry and for all those who wish seriously to understand such questions as the real nature of the state and whether the Labour Party is, or is not, 'a working class party'. In whose interests did Labour rule during those crucial post-war years? In whose interests will it rule today? This is no abstract discussion. It is the problem which millions of working people will be facing during the next few months. It should not be necessary to go through the whole, bitter experience once again. Something can be learnt from the past. This pamphlet is a modest attempt to help in this direction.

The Labour Party is again in power. The ex-don from Oxford has now moved to Downing Street. Mr. Frank Cousins, once secretary-for-life of the TGWU is now a (non-elected) Cabinet Minister. Mr. Ray Gunter, once secretary of the TSSA is now Minister of Labour (at £7,000 a year, plus £750 MP's allowance). What will their attitude be to the working class, on whose backs they have climbed to power? In particular what will their attitude be to those sections of workers who may be driven by necessity to defend their conditions by withdrawal of labour?

The Labour leaders have lost no time. They have made their position quite clear. Before they even assumed office they were busy denouncing the rank and file workers on the London Underground who were refusing to work new schedules imposed on them by a coalition of management and union officials. Since assuming office their statements have been coming fast. The 'hundred days' have begun in style. Between increasing pay for policemen and reassuring the City that they too stood for expansion, the Labour leaders have found time to wave the big stick at workers only thinking of industrial action. One of the first things Mr. Gunter did was to 'talk tough' with the dockers. 'Unofficial action', he said, 'is a negation of the whole principle of collective bargaining and can only lead to anarchy. I strongly condemn such action which can benefit neither the men nor the industry to which they belong'.* In his first, nationwide television address the new Prime Minister sounded a similar note. 'We cannot afford', he said, 'barriers in the way of higher production or lower costs such as monopoly practices, or overmanning of jobs, or some costly demarcation arguments or the temptation to indulge in wildcat strikes.' **

* The Guardian, October 20, 1964.

** Daily Telegraph, October 27, 1964

What does it all mean? When Mr. Wilson talks of 'Britain' or of 'the nation', which nation does he mean? The Britain of those who own the means of wealth and manage the productive machine? Or the Britain of those who are pushed around from the first day of their working lives to the last? Or is he trying to tell us that their interests coincide? When he talks of 'overmanning of jobs', which jobs does he mean? The well-paid office jobs of his own enormous administration? The cushy jobs with which he buys the temporary loyalty of University 'lefts' and ex-trade union officials? Or the arduous and dangerous jobs of the miner, the docker, the steel worker, the spiderman, the engineer, the boilermaker, the building worker, the sewerman, the power worker and the refuse collector. Are these jobs overmanned, Mr. Wilson?

When Mr. Wilson speaks of 'overmanning of jobs', he means that he would like to see fewer men producing the same amount. His aim is an intensification of the labour process. Under capitalism, where the worker is robbed of a substantial proportion of the wealth he produces, an intensification of the labour process can only mean an increased rate of exploitation. Does Mr. Wilson really believe that workers don't sense this, even if they can't always put it into words? Does he really believe that they will willingly participate in their own super-exploitation?

When finally Mr. Wilson refers to the 'temptation to indulge in wildcat strikes', who does he take his listeners for? Does he really imagine that workers strike for the sheer fun of it? Does he think a strike is a 'temptation' to be resisted, like naked women, gambling or the demon rum? Surely this is taking puritanism a bit too far, even for Mr. Wilson. Doesn't he know that workers only resort to strike action when they have become convinced that no other effective method of struggle is open to them? Doesn't he know that strikes are so often 'unofficial' because the men have become convinced that the 'official' union apparatus is now something that divides them and that it has become an obstacle to any real struggle for an improvement of their day-to-day conditions in production. At best the unions today only shadow-box with the employers - and even this only on questions of wages. In exchange for wage increases (which the employers can well afford anyway) the union leaders are ever ready to trade away the hard-won rights of their members in production. That's why so many wage offers come to us these days with strings attached to them. 'More money if you give up this right!' 'More money if you give up that right!' 'More money if you allow us to speed up production, or introduce more mobility of labour!' 'More money if you allow us to exploit you a little more!'. No wonder the rank and file are beginning to see through it - and through 'their' union officials who participate in the whole messy business.

The dockers will present the new Labour government with its first major headache in industry. Past experiences have not been forgotten by the older dockers. The lessons of the past must now be brought to the new generation who have started work in dockland during the last thirteen years. Already they are showing signs of seeing through the Wilson-Gunter doubletalk. The Labour government of 1945-51, despite its repeated use of conscript troops, could not crack this particular section of the working class. Mr. Wilson and his accomplices certainly won't crack it now.

INTRODUCTION TO SECOND REPRINTING

(SUMMER 1966)

The following article ("The Brotherhood of Man") first appeared in Vol III No 4 of the rank and file journal Solidarity. In response to a number of requests, we are reprinting it for the second time in pamphlet form.

There could be no better time for such a reprinting. The publication of the Devlin Report, and its proposals for 'modernising' the docks, and dealing with the 'wreckers' have made the docks again one of the front lines of the class struggle. The Labour Government has been in office sufficiently long to justify itself as a worthy successor of the Attlee Government. The ex-don from Oxford has moved into Downing Street; Mr Frank Cousins, secretary for life of the T&GWU, is now a (non-elected) Cabinet Minister; and Mr Ray Gunter, once secretary of TSSA, is Minister of Labour. They have voted themselves a £30 a week pay rise, and have lost no time in making it quite clear that they don't intend standing for any nonsense from the workers.

The Devlin Report has been greeted enthusiastically by Government, employers and trade union officials alike. A large section of the report discusses the causes of dissension and inefficiency, and comes to the conclusion that there is 'an irresponsibility peculiar to the docks' which is rooted in the casual system and the 'excessive loyalty which seems in its intensity to be peculiar to the docks and which although deriving from the casual system, has now become something to be reckoned with on its own'.

And how does Lord Devlin hope to overcome this excessive working class loyalty? He has several ideas. Primarily he sees it as an ideological struggle, and finds the trade union leaders are hampered in their efforts to induce a better sense of responsibility. The Devlin Committee was horrified to discover that since 1960, of the 421 strikes in the docks, 410 were unofficial. This isn't surprising, for as any docker knows from his own bitter experience, where it's a question of defending his living standards or conditions of work, the trade union official just doesn't want to know. The TU official is completely divorced from the everyday issues in the docks, he was not elected by the dockers, but appointed by the union bureaucracy. In their own interests the dockers have no alternative but to turn to their own rank and file committees.

These facts are beyond the comprehension of the Devlin enquirers. They see it all as a fiendish plot ('The Wreckers of the Docks') and feel that the 'unofficial activities of the Liason Committee have now reached a stage when they can hardly be taken too seriously'. The wilful ignorance of the Devlin Committee is truly pathetic. It is precisely the unofficial actions that are the most democratic, for the decisions are taken by the men themselves and not imposed upon them from above. The bogey man, Jack Dash, far from always being the inspirer of unofficial action, often finds himself outvoted by the men

themselves, demanding more militant action.*

That Devlin (or for that matter Gunter and Wilson) seriously believe that workers go on strike, sacrifice their wage packets, because an 'agitator' asks them to, is for most workers simply a laughing matter.

But some of the other suggestions in the report could turn out to be very serious indeed for dockers. Decasualisation itself is full of dangers - the dockers rightly see it as an attempt to get more work out of them. The proposals for mobility of labour from one employer to another are allied threats. And then there is the final recommendation that the government should itself step in and sort things out 'if it is necessary to act in order to ensure that an agreed plan is not wrecked by a minority'.

As the following pamphlet shows, Labour has a history of sending troops into dockland. Gunter has already shown he has little patience with workers who resist his government's plans for modernisation.**

The Labour leaders today have one slogan - EFFICIENCY. Make no mistake; that means the more efficient exploitation of the working class. The Devlin Report, and its immediate enthusiastic reception from the government, indicates that dockland is base No 1 from whence this efficiency drive is to be launched. We suspect the Labour rulers will not fare as well as they hope. Past experiences have not been forgotten by older dockers - their experience must be passed on to the new generation who have started work in dockland in the last 14 years. The Labour Government 1945-1951 couldn't smash the dockers, and we don't believe Wilson and his cronies will do any better.

* As for example the decision by 9,000 dockers to ban overtime and work to rule from Monday 16th August in retaliation for the 'disciplining' of 1,600 men. Jack Dash had merely proposed that the men 'appeal'.

** For example when ASLEF drivers on the Southern Railways were working to rule. Gunter on 22nd July bluntly warned them that if the issue was not settled by the end of the week, the government would intervene.

THE 'BROTHERHOOD OF MAN'

'The principles of our policy are based on the brotherhood of man.'

Clem Attlee,
July 26, 1945.

'I take the opportunity of making it quite clear that this Government, like any government as an employer, would feel itself perfectly free to take any disciplinary action that any strike situation that might develop demanded'

Sir Hartley Shawcross, Feb. 2, 1946.

Ray Gunter MP, Labour's 'shadow' Minister of Labour, has recently been writing in Socialist Commentary. He has been hinting at how a future Labour government would cope with industrial disputes. He proposes State Courts, with judicial power to settle disputes 'if the unions do not face the facts of life'. Gunter's proposals have been welcomed by big business as 'bold', 'imaginative' and 'far-sighted'. They have also given rise to pathetic little squeaks of dissent from sundry other trade union leaders, who doubtless feel that the cat should not be let out of the bag until after the General Election.

But all this is nothing new. There is the whole experience of 1945-1951 to go on. During this period the Labour Government was prepared to use every single institution of the capitalist State (Parliament, the B.B.C., the press, injunctions, the Courts, the prisons, the police and even troops) against the working people, whenever they took action into their own hands, in defence of their most elementary interests. They did this not once, but repeatedly.

All this may be new or surprising to many young people now active in the working class movement. It is therefore essential that the story should be told again - and as fully as possible.*

* In writing this article I have found the following sources most useful:

1) 'How Labour Governed: 1945-51'. Direct Action Pamphlet No.5, published by Syndicalist Workers Federation. Obtainable from Bill Christopher, 34 Cumberland Road, London E.17.

2) 'The British State' by J. Harvey and K. Wood (Lawrence and Wishart, 1958) and 'The Labour Government' by D.N. Pritt (Lawrence and Wishart, 1963). These Stalinist sources provide much useful factual information but tend to under-emphasize strike-breaking by the Labour Government between 1945 and 1948 (during which period the Communist Party was giving 'full support' to the Labour Government). Nor do these books mention the industrial role of the Communist Party during these years. This would require a study of its own.

3) The files of the Daily Telegraph and of The Times. These provide many shrewd assessments of industrial relations, as seen by the more sophisticated sections of the employing class.

4) The 1948 file of the Socialist Leader, particularly Wilfred Wigham's 'Trade Unionist's Notebook'.

LONDON DOCKS
AUGUST 1945

The Labour Government took office on July 27, 1945. Within a week it was to send conscript troops into the Surrey Docks, London, to help break a dockers' 'go-slow' which had been going on for ten weeks. An ominous beginning...

The dockers were demanding a basic rate of 25/- a day (as against 16/- they were receiving) and a revision of loading and discharging piece-work rate schedules. Even J. Donovan, National Secretary of the Docks Group of the TGWU, admitted that the dockers 'were in a worse position financially than the workers in industry generally', and that 'their basic rate represented a rise of only 23% during the war... the lowest of any industry'.

After a few weeks, unloaded cargoes began to accumulate and the go-slow began to have a very telling effect. An infuriated but helpless Daily Telegraph reporter described it quite graphically:

'In everything they did the men were unhurried in a way that looked deliberate. There was evidence that their actions were planned. True, the cranes were working and goods were passing from the dockside to the ship, but there was a leisureliness about the proceedings that made everything seem half-hearted.

'I soon learned the reason. At the moment bags of sugar were going aboard in slings. But it was pointed out that the slings were carrying only 4 at a time instead of the normal 12. Yet even the reduced number seemed to take just as long to be freed and the sling returned for more. Meanwhile the men on the dock below waited patiently until it came back, standing or sitting and chatting. Sometimes, after a load had been fixed and the crane had started lifting, a fault appeared to be observed. There was a call to the craneman and down it came again to have the hooks seen to.

'The men who brought the goods from the warehouses to the dock were equally leisurely in their movements. There were always several with nothing to do at all outside the ship.

'Any excuse appeared to be good enough as an excuse to stop work. There was a general stoppage for instance when I and my P.L.A. (Port of London Authority) guide approached. It was obvious we were the subject of discussion. The men were frankly suspicious. Only a day before a press cameraman visiting another dock was mobbed. The men became very ugly in their attitude and hurled epithets at him and the press generally. But for the protection of a dock policeman he might have been maltreated or at least have lost his camera.

'The effect of the 'go-slow' working, said a Port Officer, is not only causing ships to be held up in London Docks for weeks before they can be dealt with, but it results in losses to the contractors who are employing the men. Under normal conditions a gang of 13 men could load or discharge 200 tons of sugar a day. Now the tonnage seldom exceeds 50. They could deal with 125 tons of timber, now it is about 25.' (July 13, 1945).

On July 13, following a conference of dock employers and top union leaders, Mr. Butler, then Minister of Labour, issued an appeal to return to work. 'The unions have made it clear that men guilty of the go-slow method are doing harm to all members of the unions', etc, etc. This touching solicitude for the welfare of 'all members of the unions' may well explain why Rab is so suspect a figure to his fellow Tories!

The Butler appeal had no effect whatsoever on the dockers. The employers then used the big stick.

On July 17, 1,000 London dockers and stevedores were returned by the Port employers to the National Dock Labour Corporation's 'reserve pool of labour'. At the Royal Dock alone, 500 men were told they were being returned to the pool, with adverse reports. The men were ordered to leave the ships and were given forms on which - within 72 hours - they were to offer 'explanations' of their recent conduct. If these were not deemed satisfactory the men were threatened with dismissal or suspension.

According to the Daily Telegraph (July 19, 1945) the threat had a 'mixed effect' on the men. 'Many persisted in their delaying tactics'. A more interesting response was that four London dockers (T. Powell, C. Stebbing, Ted Dickens, and Bert Brice) went up to Liverpool to explain the case of the go-slow to dinner-time meetings outside the Alexandra and Gladstone Docks.

Union officials in London were meanwhile doing their nut, trying to get the men back to normal work. A mass meeting of dockers was held at the Poplar Palace, Mile End Road, on July 23. It was addressed by J. Donovan, (already referred to) and by T.W. Condon (London Area Secretary of the TGWU) and Dick Barratt, General Secretary of the NASD. The meeting was quite lively.

'One section had the fixed idea that a new basic wage must be guaranteed at once and were in no mood to trust to promises. They interrupted so much that the speakers left the platform'. Donovan in particular was given a very rough passage after he had 'warned his hearers that they were likely to lose their jobs altogether unless they relied on their leaders'. His resolution urging a return to work had been 'drowned in cat-calls'. A manoeuvre was then attempted. Condon proposed an amendment 'urging the claim for 25/- to be prosecuted with the utmost vigour and celerity. A great chorus of "aye" followed. But another speaker in the hall made it clear that he and his friends would support the amendment and resume normal working only if the 25/- basic rate was guaranteed at once. A hurried conference on the platform followed and Mr. Condon asked the meeting if they would go back and leave the union officials to negotiate. There was an almost unanimous "No". Asked if they would go back and work as they had been doing recently, the answer was "Yes". "Then the meeting is closed and will not resume" was Mr. Condon's reply and the crowd filed out.' (Daily Telegraph, July 24, 1945).

The meeting showed quite clearly the will of the men.

That same evening the Ministry of Labour announced that 'No avoidable delay can be permitted' and that all necessary steps would be taken 'to ensure expeditious handling'. The Daily Telegraph explained that 'in industrial circles' this was interpreted as meaning that the Government was prepared to bring in the troops. Without batting an eyelid it stated that the proposals drafted the previous week at the Ministry of Labour by representatives of the Port Emergency Committee, the London Port Employers and the TCWU 'were considered fair by all except the recalcitrant dockers' (i.e. by everyone... except by those to whom they applied!).

Threats of disciplinary action had failed. The trade union bureaucrats had proved incapable of controlling the men on behalf of the bosses. The ruling class was now determined to break the go-slow at any cost. Several methods were used.

On July 25 it was widely reported that troops had been brought to London from the North East and would be available for discharging and loading ships if the go-slow dockers persisted in their tactics. On July 26 it was claimed that 'trained Army dockers and stevedores of the Royal Engineers and Pioneer Corps were standing by in barracks in the London area, awaiting an order to move to the Surrey Commercial Docks'.

The employers then began to resort to lock-out tactics. Dockers stated that the mates of ships where they had been told to work had received orders not to raise steam in the winches. Attempts were made to get the dockers to do piecework. Day rates, to which the men were entitled, were refused in many instances.

On July 26 the results of the General Election were announced. The Labour Party was in with a tremendous majority. That same evening, Clem Attlee addressed a mass rally at the Central Hall, Westminster. 'The principles of our policy are based on the brotherhood of man' he announced.

On July 31, five days later, 600 'brothers' (in uniform) were ordered into the Surrey Docks and began discharging such vital 'foodstuffs' as timber and resin. Mr. J. Donovan gave the operation his reluctant blessing. 'It is regrettable that troops should be there' he said, 'but we realise it is essential that ships should be discharged'.

The Government had changed. The 'Red Flag' had been sung in the House of Commons. But the policy decided on and planned by one set of rulers was smoothly carried out by the next.*

On August 2, the Daily Telegraph reported that 1,000 London dockers and stevedores who were persisting in go-slow tactics were to be 'disciplined'. 'Negotiations, warning by the Government, advice from union leaders, the introduction of troops and firm promises of full discussion of

* On August 6, as a further illustration of the 'brotherhood of man' the first Atom Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Tens of thousands of 'brothers' were incinerated. The decision had been discussed a few days earlier at the Postdam Conference, which had been attended by Mr. Attlee.

the men's grievances had failed to influence the dockers. The Dock Labour Corporation has thus been compelled to take disciplinary measures'. On the same day 150 men at the Free Trade Wharf were also returned to the 'labour pool'.

The response of the dockers to the introduction of troops was immediate.

'Tally clerks and lightermen at the Surrey Commercial Docks, London, stopped work yesterday when troops began to unload ships for the second day in succession. Royal Engineers and Pioneers were discharging cargoes of timber, sugar and resin from seven ships ... When the stoppage extended to the clerks, whose job is to check outgoing cargo, troops were hastily instructed in tally-keeping'. (Daily Telegraph, August 2, 1945)

Certain difficulties were encountered. 'Barges were moved by the troops who had been loading them. But the craft need pumping and will be difficult to move if left long at the quayside. During the morning seven soldiers met with accidents and were taken to hospital. Regular dockers and stevedores stood about the entrance to show they were available for work. Military police were on board in each ship and on each quay, presumably as a precaution'.

On August 4 the appointments were announced of J.A. Isaacs as Minister of Labour (£25,000 per annum) and of J.J. Lawson as Secretary for War (also £5,000 per annum). In the same week many dockers who had been involved in the go-slow were refused attendance money, despite the fact that lock-out conditions had prevailed on a number of ships. A prolonged Court case followed which was lost by the men.

The struggle continued for another ten days. The combination of military action, the press ballyhoo, the suspensions and the forfeiture of attendance money eventually broke the backbone of the dispute. A ballot was held among London members of the NASD. It was decided to end the go-slow.

The Labour Government had shown its true colours. It had won its first victory over the working class.

NATIONAL
DOCK STRIKE

In SEPTEMBER 1945, another dock strike started this time in Birkenhead. The portworkers were asking for an increase of 9/- on their basic daily wage of 16/-. Even when working a full week many were getting less than £5.0.0. per week (if there was no work they got just over £3.0.0. 'signing-on' money).

By early October this strike had spread to Liverpool, the Tyne, the Tees, the Humber and some of the London Docks. Later it spread to Glasgow, Leith and Avonmouth. At one stage over 43,000 dockers were out. The dispute lasted till November 5.

The Labour Government sent 21,000 conscript troops to break the strike. George Isaacs, Minister of Labour, proclaimed that 'the action of the strikers cannot be defended'. He refused to meet their leaders. So arrogantly did he behave that a Labour backbencher, David Kirkwood (Dumbarton) was to ask in Parliament: 'Why should not Ministers come down off their pedestals when it was a question of dealing with the working class? This has been the lot of the workers right down the ages'.

The final settlement was for 19 shillings a day.

SMITHFIELD

1946

On April 8, 1946, six hundred provision workers at Smithfield Market came out on strike against an award by the Joint Industrial Council. On April 15, troops were sent into the market, as blacklegs. Three thousand meat porters struck

work in sympathy. This was to establish a pattern that recurred again and again. The use of troops doesn't break a strike - it ensures its extension.

SOUTHAMPTON DOCKS

In JULY 1946, Southampton dock workers came out on strike. These dockers had not taken part in the dock strike of the previous autumn on the ground that 'it would bring discredit to the

government they helped to elect'. The Labour Government showed no gratitude. It sent troops in to unload cargoes.

ROAD HAULAGE

STRIKE

On January 8, 1947, over 20,000 drivers, including 400 at Smithfield, were involved in a road haulage strike. On January 13, the Labour Government sent troops into Smithfield Market. Thereupon all meat and provision workers came

out in sympathy. The blackleg labour made a right old mess of the market!

1947 : THE MINERS

The year 1947 saw considerable restlessness develop among the miners. Nationalization had not proved the panacea they had been led to expect. Many local disputes arose and as usual,

when there are conflicts, absenteeism increased.

The union officials and the National Coal Board joined hands in denouncing the men. The 1947 Annual Conference of the National Union of Mineworkers was addressed by that well-known pit-face militant Lord Hyndley (Chairman of the National Coal Board, Managing Director of Powell Duffryn, Director of Guest Keen and Nettlefold and of Stevenson Clarke's, ex-director of the Bank of England, etc, etc.). Union bureaucrat Will Lawther thanked him and, speaking about absenteeism, proclaimed: 'No one is more sick than we are of these fellows who provide absurd and ridiculous alibis for their conduct. We say to you and your colleagues: Go ahead and take

whatever action is essential to meet the position. We are confident that in doing that you will have the wholehearted support of the great majority of our membership'. Never before had the union bureaucracy so openly incited management to take action against the men.*

In August 1947 a strike broke out at Grimethorpe Colliery and soon spread to most of the Yorkshire coalfield. It was in protest against an attempt to impose an increased working stint. The Socialist Leader (September 13, 1947) put the issue quite squarely:

'The miners at Grimethorpe are digging $13\frac{1}{2}$ tons of coal per man per shift, working in seams that average 45 inches high. The rate of payment is 2/2d. per ton, which approximates to £7.0.0. per week. The present price of coal to the housewives of London is £5.4.0. per ton.... The National Coal Board wants the men to dig more coal. The men answer that this is an impossibility.

'To be told by gentlemen whose only manual labour consists of carrying briefcases to meetings and conferences that they must attempt to mine more coal before their case will even be considered is not calculated to make the average miner at all kindly disposed to the Labour Government or its hirelings.

'Mr. Horner, Secretary of the NUM, has now openly condemned the miners and keeping strictly in accord with the Communist 'line' on this dispute (which is to sit on the fence) discreetly stays away from the centre of trouble and goes about his business as if all is well.'

The National Coal Board, which had replaced the private owners to hallelujahs from all the 'left', then showed its true colours. It claimed damages against 40 Grimethorpe miners under the Employers and Workers Act of 1875! When it's a question of digging the statute book for anti-working class legislation, the Tories clearly have no monopoly.

In Barnsley Magistrates Court, on December 19, 1947, the miners were found 'Guilty'. Damages of £304 were granted against them. This was to be withheld from their wage packet, at the rate of 10/- a week, as from January 16, 1948.

A few weeks later (March 18, 1948) two miners were each fined £39 at Neath County Court for taking part in a stay-down strike 'trespassing on National Coal Board property'. So much for the myth that property forms determine the class nature of a given regime!

* Those who claim that the trade union bureaucracy, in some distorted way, still 'represents' the working class should remember episodes like this. So should those who claim that the Labour Party is a working class party 'because it is based on the trade unions'. The Labour Party, it is true, is still largely based on the trade union bureaucracy. But this bureaucracy 'represents' the workers about as much as a screw 'represents' the prisoners.

THEY'RE STOKING
THE BOILERS AT
BUCKINGHAM PALACE

On MARCH 15, 1948, thirteen hundred Ministry of Works employees, engineers, boilermens, liftmen, etc. struck in protest at delays in settling a wage claim. Three days later troops were sent to stoke boilers at Buckingham Palace. The shop stewards thereupon decided to call out all engineering grades if troops were not withdrawn. They were. This little episode should be remembered. We suggest a new definition of Labour Party socialism: using conscript labour to keep the Monarchy warm.

THE ZINC OXIDE
STRIKE

In JUNE 1948 London portworkers claimed the usual special payment for handling zinc oxide. There were delays and some men refused the job. Eleven dockers were then suspended for a week, without pay, by the National Dock Labour Board and their guaranteed week suspended for 13 weeks. On June 14 a spontaneous strike broke out against these vicious sentences. The strike later spread to Merseyside. It lasted 16 days and at one stage involved nearly 32,000 dockers.*

The capitalist press made some extremely shrewd assessments of what would happen. The Manchester Guardian Weekly (June 24, 1948) commented: 'It is plain from the way the strike has spread - within a week, in the face of every discouragement from officials of their trade union, the numbers out have grown from 1,500 to 15,000 - that there is fairly widespread discontent with the way some parts of the scheme are working. So broad a movement would hardly have sprung from so small an occasion if there had not been already a big head of pent-up emotion looking for an outlet before the incident of the zinc oxide cargo gave it one'.

* Of the capitalist dailies only one, the News Chronicle (June 21, 1948), sought to discover the real causes of the strike. It interviewed Conn Clancey, one of the 11 suspended dockers. The gang, Clancey explained, had been loading a ship with zinc oxide from canal barges. 'There were 3,000 hessian sacks of the stuff, weighing 50 tons. We had done about 700 sacks and were getting very dusty and dirty. Down the hatch it was impossible to see. The stuff penetrates everything. It gets in your nose, mouth, eyes and hair and turns one blue'. (This is the cargo of which Clem Attlee had said, in a nation-wide broadcast: 'It happened to be a little dirty').

'Eventually', said Clancey, 'we asked if there was a rate laid for the job. While enquiries were made we went back to general cargo work. It was a job for the View Committee. They said 3/4d. a ton was a proper rate. We were suggesting 5 bob although we expected to come down a bit. Another View Committee came next morning and we went on loading the zinc oxide. They still made it 3/4d. so we said there was no alternative but to talk it over with 'the men on the stones' - the other dockers. They voted we should finish the consignment and then have the matter looked into.

'We went back and finished the job that afternoon. Everyone thought the affair was finished but in the morning I had a letter saying I was suspended. The penalty was like a smack on the ear when the fight was over. We finished all the zinc oxide. There was no time lost. While there was work to do we worked.'

The Times (June 29, 1948) proclaimed that the dock strike was 'a challenge to be resisted as resolutely as the threat of attack by a foreign power'.

This is exactly what the Labour Government did. It drafted freshly conscripted troops into the docks. On June 29, it proclaimed a State of Emergency. The 'party of the working class' used the Emergency Powers Act of 1920. This was a vicious piece of class legislation (for the other side) which had been introduced at the end of World War I by the Tory-dominated 'hard-faced Parliament'.

The intimidation worked. The solidarity strike ended before His Majesty's 'socialist' ministers really got down to churning out further 'emergency' legislation. This Tory Act, incidentally, is still on the statute book. It provides handy dictatorial powers to any government seeking to cope with any kind of mass working class activity, particularly any kind that might challenge established society. It was recently renewed (by a strange coincidence just before the go-slow in the power industry) in a slightly amended form, which gives the government still further powers for the use of troops.

DOCKERS AND THE
CANADIAN SEAMEN'S
STRIKE

MAY 1949 saw the most vicious piece of strike-breaking in the whole history of the Labour Government. The Canadian Seamen's Union was involved in a strike against wage cuts. On May 14, the 'Montreal City', which had been worked across the Atlantic by a blackleg crew provided by the International Seafarers' Union,* arrived at Avonmouth. Dockers refused to unload the 'black' ship. On May 16 the employers threatened to penalise the dockers for this refusal. This brought out all Avonmouth dockers, in a lightning strike. The employers then said they would hire no labour for other ships until the dockers handled the 'black' ship. The strike had become a lock-out.

On May 22, 600 Bristol dockers came out in solidarity with the Avonmouth men. Three days later lockgate men and tugmen in Avonmouth also came out in support, refusing to handle ships until the Avonmouth dockers were allowed to work again. They were promptly suspended. On May 27, the Labour Government sent troops to unload a banana ship in Avonmouth. Crane drivers promptly refused to work alongside the troops.

The same day a 'black' ship was diverted from Avonmouth to Liverpool. Merseyside dockers refused to handle her and 45 of them were suspended. One thousand Liverpool dockers then joined the strike. On May 30, 1,400 more dockers in Liverpool came out. The Avonmouth men instructed their 'lock-out Committee' to seek support from other ports.

* An organization affiliated to the American Federation of Labour and having very few members on Canada's Eastern seaboard.

On June 2, troops began unloading all the ships lying in Avonmouth dock. About 11,000 dockers had by now joined the strike. On June 6, merchant seamen manning the 'Trojan Star' refused to sail her out of Avonmouth because the lockgates were manned by troops. Other seamen also joined in. On June 14, the Avonmouth dockers returned to work. But the struggle had meanwhile flared up in London where employers refused to hire labour for newly arrived ships unless the 'black' Canadian ships 'Argomont' and 'Beaverbrae' were unloaded. By July 5, over 8,000 London dockers were on strike.

On July 7, troops were moved into various London docks to unload ships. Drivers of meat haulage firms and fruit and vegetable firms said they would not carry goods unloaded by troops.

On July 8, the Labour Government announced it would proclaim a State of Emergency on July 11. The only effect was to ensure that Watermen, Lightermen, Tugmen and Bargemen also joined in. Over 10,000 dockers were now on strike. On July 12 the Government started pouring blackleg troops into the docks. Another 3,000 dockers came out. The Executive of the Lightermen's Union told their members not work alongside the troops.

The Labour Government had got itself into a thorough mess. It now started issuing Emergency Regulations. It set up an Emergency Committee, headed by a former Permanent Under-secretary at the Home Office, Sir Arthur Maxwell, to run the docks. It is not known if Sir Arthur was later issued with an honorary membership card from Transport House ... for services rendered.

By July 20, over 15,000 men were on strike. They only returned to work on July 22 when the Canadian Seamen's Union, having obtained certain concessions, withdrew their pickets from certain ships and announced that they were terminating their dispute, so far as Britain was concerned.

POWER STATIONS
BELFAST AND LONDON

On SEPTEMBER 16, 1949, men in Belfast power station came out on strike. Troops were immediately drafted in. On December 12, 1949, one thousand men struck work at three London power stations. Troops were immediately sent in. A further 1,600 men at Barking Power Station then came out in protest. New agreements were rapidly negotiated.

THE EXPULSIONS
STRIKE

In MARCH 1950, the TGWU bureaucrats expelled three dockers from the union because of the active part they had played in the Canadian Seamen's strike a few months earlier. A mass meeting of dockers was called by the Portworkers Defence Committee, an 'unofficial' rank-and-file body. On March 26, a ban on overtime was decided. The ban was temporarily withdrawn on April 3, but when, on April 18, the appeals of the three expelled men were rejected a protest strike started in the Royal Group. By April 21, 9,000 dockers were out. Mass meetings called for a ballot of portworkers to decide

whether the action of the union leaders should be upheld. On April 24, the Labour Government moved troops into the docks. It worked like a charm: a further 4,500 dockers joined the strike.

The London Dock Labour Board then made threatening noises. All those who didn't report for work by May 1st would 'have their registrations cancelled' (i.e. would be expelled from the industry). On April 29, a mass meeting decided to return to work and to fight the expulsions through the branches.

SMITHFIELD

AGAIN

On JUNE 24, twelve hundred meat drivers based on Smithfield Market came out on strike in protest against delays in settling their claims for a wage increase. On June 28, the Labour Government used troops to carry corned beef from meat storage depots to butchers (we'd have thought the troops would have been sick of the sight of the stuff). Later the troops were moved into the market itself. Nine hundred porters and market men immediately walked out, followed by provision porters, shopmen and poultry pitchers. Workers at several cold stores refused to work alongside the troops. By July 5, 3,400 men were out. Two days later 200 drivers employed by British Road Services at Brentford joined the strike.

A meeting of the unofficial rank-and-file body - the London Road Haulage Stewards Association - decided to call out all general road haulage drivers within 48 hours. The usual screams went up about 'communists' and 'agitators'. On July 10, having obtained certain promises from Deakin, the stewards recommended a return to work. On August 21, several leaders of the Smithfield strike were suspended from union membership by the Executive of the TGWU. On August 28, the Industrial Court awarded a wage increase of 8/- a week to all the workers concerned.

THE GASWORKERS

AND ORDER 1305

On SEPTEMBER 1, 1950, men at nineteen London Gas Works came out on strike in support of a wage claim of 4½d. an hour. (This had been presented in March, but the men had had no satisfactory reply). On September 4, the gasworkers returned to work but decided to put a ban on overtime and shift work until such time as the Gas Council had made a reply to their claim and this had been accepted by a mass meeting of the men involved. On September 14, the Gas Council and the union leaders 'agreed' on an increase of 1½d. an hour. Next day the men at Beckton Gasworks downed tools in protest and men in 13 other works followed suit shortly after. By September 20, some 1,500 men were out at 15 works in the North Thames Gas Board area and at 3 works in the Eastern area.

On September 26, Sir Robert Gould, Chief Conciliation Officer of the Ministry of Labour, wrote to the General Secretary of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions. Showing his concern for the predicament of the union bureaucracy he pointed out that the strike was

'a challenge to the authority of the unions'. Action followed. On October 3, naval ratings from Chatham barracks took over maintenance duties at Beckton and Bromley Gasworks and the Labour Government issued summonses against 10 of the strikers. It then arrested them under the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act of 1875 (sic!)* and order 1305.** 'Justice' was prompt. Within 2 days the workers had been sentenced to one month's imprisonment. They were given leave to appeal.

On October 5, a mass meeting in Hyde Park called for a nation-wide campaign to repeal order 1305. On October 9, an agreement was reached (no victimisation, withdrawal of troops, immediate negotiations on a bonus scheme) and the men returned to work.

On November 22, the Appeal Court reduced the sentences of imprisonment to fines of £50 each. A delegate Conference called at very short notice had, a few days earlier, been attended by delegates representing 194,000 trade unionists, 9 District Committees, 161 trade union branches, 5 Trades Councils and many important shop stewards committees. It had elected a committee to launch a national campaign for the acquittal of the ten gas workers, the repeal of Order 1305 *** and the disbanding of all police organizations set up to spy on trade unionists.

Some evil-minded people suggested that this developing movement of protest had had something to do with the decision of the learned Court!

<p><u>LABOUR PROSECUTES</u></p> <p><u>THE DOCKERS</u></p>

A major dock strike had broken out within days of the Labour Government assuming office. Another one was to see the Labour Government out. On FEBRUARY 2, 1951, 2,000 Birkenhead dockers came out on a wage issue. Within a few days the strike had spread to Liverpool and Manchester. Within

less than a week some 12,000 were involved, including 450 in London, who had come out in sympathy.

On February 8, the Labour Government tried out the tactic of selective prosecutions. It arrested seven of the dockers' leaders (four in London and three in Liverpool) and had them charged with 'conspiracy to incite dock workers to strike in connection with a trade dispute, contrary to the provisions of Order 1305'. The response was instantaneous. The same evening 6,700 London dockers were out in solidarity!

The Government's bureaucratic bungling then reached its peak. Order 1305 dealt with 'trade disputes'. But the present strike was primarily

* very sick!

** Order 1305 was issued on July 18, 1940, during the war 'for democracy'. The Minister of Labour at the time was that well-known spokesman for the working class: Ernie Bevin. He promised that the Act would be repealed at the end of the war. The Labour Government somehow 'forgot' to do so.

*** Order 1305 was finally withdrawn on August 14, 1951.

due to a dispute between the rank and file and the TGWU 'leadership', the latter having accepted a wage offer which the former judged unacceptable. The Government tried to wriggle round this one, by hastily slapping in additional charges such as 'conspiracy, otherwise than in contemplation or furtherance of a trade dispute, to induce dock workers to absent themselves from employment without their employers' consent'. Also 'conspiracy to obstruct dock employers in the conduct of their business by inducing dock workers to absent themselves'.

On April 9, the case came up for hearing at the Old Bailey. TGWU officials gave evidence against 'their' members. Sir Hartley Shawcross, Labour Attorney General, led the prosecution against the workers on behalf of the 'party of the working class'. 10,000 dockers were on strike. There were large, noisy demonstrations outside the Court. Thousands of dockers would stop work each day and assemble outside the Old Bailey - 'in deference to the brothers in Court'. The jury failed to agree as to whether there was a 'trade dispute' or not. The charge based on a breach of order 1305 (which implied that there was a trade dispute) therefore could not be sustained. But the jury didn't decide that there wasn't a trade dispute either. The other charges therefore could not stand either. The whole works were well and truly gummed up. The Labour Government had to drop the whole prosecution. It had been made to look not only mean and vindictive but also extremely stupid.

There is no doubt that this list could be lengthened. I hope to have shown however that when it came to dealing with workers in dispute the Labour Government acted exactly like every other government before it. Those who now tell us to 'vote Labour' should at least not kid themselves on this score. The leopard hasn't - and cannot - really change its spots.

READ

SOLIDARITY

THE (MORE OR LESS) MONTHLY VOICE OF THE
RANK AND FILE. THE INDUSTRIAL STRUGGLE.
THE ANTI-BOMB MOVEMENT. WORKING CLASS HISTORY.
SOCIALIST THEORY. SONGS, CARTOONS, ETC.

Don't leave it to the chance encounter. Take out a
sub. now.

FURTHER SOLIDARITY PAMPHLETS

THE GREAT FLINT SIT-DOWN STRIKE AGAINST GENERAL MOTORS 1936-7 by W.Linder. How to struggle ... and win. On the need for a new strike strategy. 10p.

CEYLON : THE J.V.P. UPRISING. The 'official' left in power puts down an insurrection and maintains a reign of terror. How Britain, Russia, China and the USA achieved unity ... to suppress an uprising. 25p

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT Vs. THE DOCKERS 1945-1951. Governmental strike-breaking with Labour in power. A reprint from Solidarity vol.III, No.4. 5p.

UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT. The Fisher-Bendix occupation, with some comments on factory occupations in general. 5p

AS WE DON'T SEE IT. The contemporary left scene ... and what we feel is wrong with it. 5p.

REVOLUTIONARY ORGANISATION. A reprint of articles which appeared in Solidarity vol.I, Nos 4, 5, 6, and of our 'Open Letter to I.S.' (1968). What is not to be done. The libertarian alternative. 5p.

SUBSCRIPTION TO SOLIDARITY

SOLIDARITY is a paper for militants - in industry and elsewhere. It attempts a total critique of modern society, and a systematic 'demystification' of its values, ideas, and forms of organisation. Discusses what libertarian revolution is all about.

Send £2 now to SOLIDARITY (London), ~~c/o 27 Sandringham Road, London N.W. 11,~~ and we will send you all forthcoming issues of the paper and pamphlets to that value.