

# SHREWS -BURY!

the next  
stage

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## INTRODUCTION

For the first time the issue of the charged Shrewsbury 24 building workers is becoming known in a big way in the working class movement. The conference of nearly 900 delegates in Liverpool on the 29th September, the opening of the trial of October 3rd and the solidarity strikes by Liverpool dockers and many building workers has broken through the barrier of silence created by the press. But, as anyone in the 24 will tell you, that is only half the battle. The conspiracy charges still exist, the threat to picketing still remains, the trials go on. So how do we make sure that Shrewsbury and any similar future attacks are defeated?

## THE LESSONS SO FAR

The Shresbury campaign started when the working class movement suffered some set backs. The gas workers and the hospital workers had not beaten Phase Two, and the miners and the Ford workers had voted against strikes. The TUC had called a one day strike on May 1st but had failed to follow it through with real action. Workers who did challenge Phase Two were isolated. The TUC leadership continued to negotiate with the Heath in an apparent effort to unload months of hard won working class victories achieved through the miners strike and the freeing of the five. While they talked, prices rose and the standard of living of the working class quietly slid back to pre-1971 levels.

As the trade union leaders chatted amicably with Heath a sharp struggle was beginning factory by factory to prevent the employers gaining from the 'victory of the Government in Phase Two, or chipping away at the organised strength of the rank and file of the working class. Baxter's, Bason Rascoe, Timex, Gardeners, Glasgow Gas and the first Chrysler dispute were just the main struggles in a constantly

increasingly ruling class pressure on union organisation and working conditions. In every single one of these cases convenors and shop stewards were victimised and the standing working conditions were challenged.

Meanwhile, the state took up an attack on the offensive weapons developed by the working class in the 1972 struggles. In particular they decided to crush the tactic of flying pickets which had won the miners strike. To carry out this attack they dug up the 1875 Conspiracy Act which had already been tried out in the frame up trials of Irish militants and the so called 'Angry Brigade'. Under these Acts you do not have to do anything at all to commit a crime. All you have to do is talk about something. The Tory Government knew that the Flying Picket would be used by the workers in any attempt that started to defeat the Pay Laws. But to make the attack, the Tories had to choose carefully. A test case was rigged, in an isolated and generally disorganised area; Shrewsbury. Shrewsbury, the talks, and the attack in the shop floor were all part of the same problem. Everyone knows, from Edward Heath to Hugh Scanlon, that this coming winter will either see the biggest working class struggles for fifty years, culminating even in a general strike, or inflation will massively cut back the standard of living of the working class. Despite the wage freeze of Phase Two, prices are rising at 10% a year and food prices at almost double that. With tax taken into account wage rises of 20% or more are necessary even to keep in the same place in your standard of living. The Government has offered 7%, in other words it intends to cut the standard of living of almost the entire working class. Only a massive attack by the working class will drive a hole through Phase Three. The Tories are trying to head off that offensive and to split it up, deprive it of its most effective weapons. This is why the Government is still so interested in the talks with the TUC, and is carrying out the attack at Shrewsbury.

So far the response of the trade union leadership to Shrewsbury, as on the talks, has been that of seeking 'respectability'. One leader, on being asked how the struggle of the 24 should be conducted, replied, 'Comb your hair, brush your teeth, and make sure you wear a suit'.

This scab 'forgets' that every single right the trade union movement has ever won has been gained by struggle against the law, and not by 'respectability' within it. When the Pentonville Five were arrested a mass movement towards a general strike soon forced their release. The lack of response on Shrewsbury not only meant the trials went on, but encouraged the police to go ahead and arrest 5 more building workers, and two camera men in Birmingham.

The attack on the pickets has been stepped up still further since then. In the Footprint tools dispute in Sheffield, the 'Special Patrol Group' of the police attacked a mass picket and arrested the district secretary of the AUEW and 5 other workers. And still the bureaucrats are prepared to talk. They won't give a lead to defend pickets. They are not interested in Shrewsbury, or Footprints. The mass flying picket took the control of the strike out of the hands of the bureaucrats. George Smith learned that during the building strike. They are suspicious, and in some cases hostile to the tactic. Anyway, the trade union leadership was interested in peace. To do that they had to isolate the militants. And to do that they talked with the Tories to win icing on the wage freeze cake, to sell it to the rank and file.

#### NEW METHODS

But the rank and file have discovered other new ways of pushing its interests forward, not only the flying picket. In the course of the Shrewsbury campaign, a lot more were used. The local conferences that were set up show a method of drawing together militants and hammering out a policy despite any political disagreements.

The bureaucrats say they should lead the working class. But we cannot rely on them. And so, many militants set up local conferences to discuss the best way to defend pickets. In Sheffield and Rotherham, Edinburgh and of course Liverpool, thousands of rank and file delegates met and built the defence of the Shrewsbury 24 from scratch. Only now, when the rank and file movement is underway, do the trade union leadership give anything more than token support (it took five months hard battle to get that!)

But we are not the only ones who are developing new methods. The setting up of Special Patrol Groups, the arming of the police, represents big threats to our ability to fight. And we must organise against these people too. The police attack on Footprints is a taste of things to come. And it is no use defending your pickets seven months after their strike, in the courts, unless you are prepared to defend their picket line at the time. The strike can be won or lost by the time we all reach the court! But the police are not the only organisation which breaks picket lines. As the Mansfield Hosiery workers in Nottingham found to their cost, the racism of sections of the white working class meant the National Front were able to smash up the picket lines. This disgusting incident must never be repeated. We need an all out commitment by the Labour Movement to smash the Fascists. No racist should have a platform in the Labour Movement. The police have been reorganised; and so have the fascist groups. One of our tasks is to push all sections of the Labour movement (not just trade unionists) into action and organisation too.

Shrewsbury is an obvious attempt to set a political precedent. The Tory Government wishes to prepare the working class for this sort of attack as a regular feature of industrial life. To defeat these attacks we must learn the lesson of the Shrewsbury campaign so far.

First - we cannot rely on the bureaucrats. We must extend and develop the flying picket, and the local conferences. They are ways of organising which the rank and file have control of. In fact the best way to get the trade union leadership moving is to start the movement ourselves.

Secondly - we must organise to defend pickets on the picket lines, not just in the courts. To do this we must be prepared to defend ourselves from growing police attacks - and combat the racists who aim to split up and weaken our fighting strength.

Thirdly - the fight for the Shrewsbury 24 is part and parcel of the fight against the Tory Government's Incomes Policy. That means full practical support for any groups of workers who come into struggle against Phase Three. To defend their action, they will need to know, and operate on, the lessons of Shrewsbury.

## WHAT DO WE DO NEXT?

The situation has changed since the early days of the Shrewsbury struggle. Now the big pay claim of the Engineers and the Miners, and the rising struggle in the car industry, show clearly that the working class is moving into a new offensive. Talk of a General Strike is in the air again. This talk could become very real if the Miners and Engineers move into joint action. Victory however is by no means certain. The bureaucrats will try to head off any clashes by saying 'wait for a general election'. We need to drive home the lessons of Shrewsbury for the sake of the coming struggles. The campaign in defence of the Shrewsbury workers is key in that respect.

1. The first step is more industrial action to follow the strikes at the opening of the trial. To gain further support a whole series of things are needed. Firstly, regular demonstrations outside the court and regional demonstrations of support. Secondly, committees like those in Sheffield, Colchester, Brighton and other areas - to explain the struggle. Thirdly, the holding in many areas of local conferences, like the one in Edinburgh on the Shrewsbury trial and the defence of picketing. Fourthly, a campaign of pledges of industrial action if the Shrewsbury 24 are convicted. These demands could be particularly driven home at the next big national meeting of the Rank and File - the LCUU conference on October 20th.

2. We need to prepare now for the defence of pickets. The defence committees should make direct approaches to the Miners and the Engineers in their area with the aim of starting a picketing pool. This means getting the commitment of local trade union bodies to aid any group of workers in the area whose picket lines come under attack. The Labour Party is claiming to represent the interests of the working class these days! We should put them to some use. We cannot wait for some future Labour Government to legislate away the Special Patrol Group. We need what aid the Labour Party can give us now. We should call on local Labour controlled councils to organise the prevention of the use of such police in their areas.

3. Everyone in the workers' movement should be made aware of what has happened at Footprint Tools. Already sections of the Sheffield Labour Movement have mobilised to defend these pickets. We have to use Footprints as a warning, and as a call to action. All the Defence Committees so far set up should get a speaker on the events at Footprint Tools.

All these points are part and parcel of the drive to get a General Strike to bring down this Tory Government. Organising our defence puts us in the best position to attack. The work already done by the 24 different Defence Committees, up and down the country, bears witness to that.

- \* Build the Defence Committees in every area.
- \* Build up the support for industrial action, if the Shrewsbury Court does not retract.
- \* Get commitment for the defence of pickets in every area.
- \* Learn and apply the lessons of Footprint Tools.
- \* Fight for Labour Councils to organise opposition to the use of Special Patrol Groups in their area.
- \* An end to the Conspiracy Laws.

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The International Marxist Group were in the forefront of the Campaign for the defence of the workers in Shrewsbury, from the outset of the proceedings. If you are interested in helping us push forward the campaign, contact us at:-

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