

SHREWSBURY WHAT NOW?



by

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IMG

The miners' ballot and their almost certain decision to vote for strike action has once again changed the entire political situation. By refusing to retreat before the Tory Government's attack the miners can set the stage for a massive working class offensive.

Before Xmas the prospects for the government looked bleak. They faced possible national strikes by the miners, engineers and engine drivers. A joint offensive by these three sections would have smashed Phase Three and brought the government to its knees. The jailing of the Shrewsbury Three should have ignited a massive strike wave far greater than that unleashed by the jailing of the Pentonville Five. But the Tories felt confident that the jailings would produce no such effect. The failure to wage a consistent national campaign from the very moment that the charges were made ensured that the movement was unprepared. The equivocations and stalling of the AUEW leaders had also emboldened the government giving it confidence that a national engineering strike was not on the agenda.

LEADERSHIP RETREAT

Instead of taking advantage of this absolutely favourable situation the leadership of the working class retreated in disorder. Despite the Trades Union Congress being officially on record against Phase Three, the meeting of Union General Secretaries and Presidents held on 16 January, pleaded with Heath to make the miners a special case. They humbly assured him that other unions would not cite the miners' pay award as a precedent. Scon Scanlon was pleading with the government and the engineering employers for a settlement within the terms of Phase Three. The Amalgamated

Engineering Union decided to defer any action over their wage claim until the situation returned 'to normal'. Despite an immediate response by the ASLEF rank and file to the provocations of Richard Marsh, within 24 hours the union executive had climbed down. No wonder Heath remained unmoved by the pleas of the union leaders. Their capitulations had in fact only reinforced his conviction that a 'tough line' was the way to win. A national shut down had been averted. A breathing spell if not a victory had been gained for Tory brinkmanship.

Meanwhile action over Shrewsbury remained at the level of pious protest and declaration, certainly as far as the official movement was concerned. The vital thing would have been to have made an immediate response to the jailings. That was the critical time to have acted. Instead the Communist Party in particular mobilised people to pressurise the union executives with the aim of forcing them to take action. It is important to understand however that when you are trying to build a movement to make the bureaucracy act, it should always be explicit in the aims of that movement, that in the event of the union leaders failing to act then unofficial action must and will be taken. It was quite clear that UCATT and the TCWU had no intentions of organising strike action. The only alternative then was to make a quick response to the jailings by organising strikes where possible in the building trade. Flying pickets could then have been organised from these strikes, aimed at closing down other jobs and conducting a massive propaganda campaign on this issue. This was the only way at that stage to secure the mens' release. Simply to mobilise people to pressurise the union executives, and

to make the whole campaign dependent on that alone was the road to disaster.

SO-CALLED NATIONAL INTERESTS

Thus, despite its weak material position, the ruling class was able to utilise its ace card - the political weakness of the British working class leadership. Dragging out the sacred cow of 'national interests' it presented its crisis as one of the entire nation's responsibility. Its move to the three day week was a gigantic political bluff. Its aim was to inflict economic hardship on sectors of the working class and create discomfort for pensioners, housewives and whole groups of the middle class. It hoped that this would turn these groups against the miners. It also hoped to push the impending wage struggles onto the sidelines - Scanlon quickly obliged them in this respect - and threw workers onto the defensive. Of course they also wanted to stockpile coal to be in a better position to fight the miners. Their orchestration of the theme of law and order found an immediate response. Knowing that the laws are made by their class, assured by the fact that it is their courts and judge who dispense whose laws, and confident that it is their police who implements them, the ruling class have a natural and touching affection for law and order.

They had no need to be concerned. Wilson assured everyone that he had 'never encouraged the breaking of the law in his life.' Scrambling with indecent haste to get into the queue, Prentice, Callaghan, Murray and a whole host of trade union leaders prostrated themselves before the Tory offensive on law and order, declaring their undying faith in British justice. The Shrewsbury Three locked-up in her

Majesty's jails, having been found guilty of breaking those hallowed laws, must have been highly encouraged. They happen to have first class experience of the law! It is highly unlikely that they have the same reverence for them as their union leaders.

CONSPIRACY ACT

It is worth examining the treatment that Des Warren and his mates received under the 1875 Conspiracy Act. Also seeing what enormous power this gives the capitalist courts for framing working class militants. Under this piece of naked class justice it is not necessary to know the names of those who committed the alleged offence. In the event of any so-called indictable offences being committed, the organisers of the picket or demonstration can be made responsible even though they may not have even been present at the time. A classic phrase used by Judge Mais during the trial of the six was: 'It can be a conspiracy by inference of all the circumstances.' This means that if you were in the bar having a beer when the picket was discussed and accidentally overheard the conversation, perhaps then making some comment, they can then do you! Even the suspicion, not the actual proof, that you engaged in a conspiracy, can gain you a conviction.

Now it would be hypocritical to deny that there was a conspiracy at Shrewsbury. In fact there was an unprecedented conspiracy - directed at the men in the dock. The conspiracy began with the decision of the West Mercia police to prosecute the original 24 men. This was the same police force which removed a shotgun from a scab who had actually threatened pickets with that gun. Ironically, the police

forgot to charge him. This was the same police force who told one building employer that he could have as many police as he wanted to protect his site against pickets. The same police again, who saw scab labour hurling stones at pickets but never got around to charging those scabs with intimidation or the use of dangerous and offensive weapons. The prosecution could not take place without the approval of the Director of Public Prosecutions who no doubt chatted the matter over with the Home Office, which just happens to be under the control of Robert Carr. The local police would hardly have felt that they were jeopardising their career prospects as there is a long impeccable record of the High Sheriffs of Denbighshire being related to the McAlpine family - a total of nine in fact! The state not wanting to appear stingy, even in these times of economic hardship, spent £500,000 on the trial of the first six, and there are 18 more to come.

HAD TO ACT

Why was it necessary to go to such extraordinary lengths to 'fix up' these workers? The decision to prosecute was as stated a national decision and flowed logically from the policy pursued by the Tory Government over the entire past period. Ever since the present government came into office it has been faced with one absolutely vital and urgent task - how to defeat the working class. But this is a task that it has not been able to accomplish. Smarting under the defeats inflicted by the miners in 1972; remembering the humiliation of having to release the Pentonville Five and re-calling the blows inflicted by the building workers that year, the government has had to prepare a counter-

offensive. It has clearly recognised that the biggest obstacle to their offensive is the independent initiatives of the rank and file. What enabled the miners to win in 1972 was the use of the flying pickets - pickets used on a mass scale. What throttled the sites being run by 'lump' labour in the summer of 1972 was again the use of flying pickets. The strike-breaking thugs employed to beat the Chrysler strike at Coventry in 1973 were defeated by the use of mass picketing. Saltley and Longannet were flash points in the history of the working class struggle in Britain. They were open challenges to the right of the state to use its forces to strike break. They showed that the state could not implement its laws, nor use its police forces to enforce those laws, providing the working class had enough forces to force the police off the picket lines. Worried by its deteriorating economic situation - as that eminently respectable journal the London and Cambridge Economic Bulletin, laconically comments: Britain must now accept high unemployment or very high unemployment - the Government had to act. The ruling class face a real economic crisis, aggravated not by some world fuel shortage but by big increases in the price of oil. The recent rise in oil prices is for Britain indistinguishable from an increase in taxation of £1.5 billion. Against this is the backcloth of Britain's annual account deficit of £3 billion. Only £800 million of this is accounted for by last October's rise in oil prices. Increases since will add another £1.2 billion to this chronic deficit. Solid capitalist journals like the Economist gloomily predict an annual rate of inflation of between 15 to 20 percent and the editors of the London and Cambridge

Economic Bulletin claim 'a neutral budget now would precipitate Britain into a big recession, and a tough budget would precipitate it into a super-slump'. The choice for the government is simple: the working class must pay for the capitalist crisis. This is why they introduced Phases One, Two and Three. This is why they must break the power of the working class and particularly its power to win strikes by the use of pickets. Above all it must change the relationship of forces in favour of the ruling class and it cannot do that without crushing the self-initiatives and self-organisation of the class. It is because such a serious and worsening crisis exists that the working class must reject the nonsense of the so-called national interest. The working class must use the weakness of the capitalist class to launch a counter offensive. It must ensure that it enters the next period with a well organised, highly combative and much more politically conscious movement. It must also ensure that it uses its full strength to inflict every possible defeat on the ruling class. It must aim to demoralise that ruling class, to humble its police force and to make its reactionary laws unworkable.

The harrassment and persecution of pickets has two purposes. Firstly to stop strikers both shutting down their own industries and cutting off supplies to and from other industries. By moving the picketing squads to other industries this not only raises the issues of solidarity but actually involves other workers in struggle raising their understanding of the wider issues involved. Further- more this tactic outflanks the conservative trade union leaders who only want to fight on the ground established by the government and the state. Secondly, it is aimed to intimidate other workers from taking similar actions.

They want to make them feel that jail faces them if they act like the Shrewsbury men.

MINERS STRIKE

The threatened miners' strike is of tremendous importance. Last time the miners won by extending their struggle and imposing an effective blockade on the power stations. The situation now for the ruling class is even more desperate. A defeat for them would be catastrophic. Their incomes policy would be torn to shreds. Their political credibility would be drastically devalued. The danger of their overthrow is real.

The stakes are high. The Tories are therefore preparing accordingly. The Special Patrol Groups, used with such brutal effect at places like St Thomas' Hospital in the hospital workers' strike last year, are being strengthened and put on the ready. As Peter Chippendale writing in the Guardian on 28 January says: 'Police will have thousands of men available to deal with any picketing trouble if the miners vote for a strike.' He goes on to say: 'The police plans have been ready for some time. They followed discussions about the 1972 pit strike, the building workers 'flying pickets' and the confrontations at Neap House Wharf, near Scunthorpe, between dockers and transport drivers.' The Daily Telegraph writer Peter Birkett admits that 'Police equipment for dispersing angry crowds varies from force to force, but most possess a limited amount of CS riot gas, riot shields and batons.' A Special Intelligence Bureau will operate from Scotland Yard under the control of Deputy Assistant Commissioner John Gerrard. This was suggested by Robert Carr and worked out in conjunction with Sir Robert Mark.

NEED FOR SOLIDARITY

What must be demonstrated is that the miners are the spearhead of the struggle of the entire working class against the Tory wage freeze. We must not treat them as a 'special case.' Let us be under no illusions that given the present crisis for capitalism even the most miserly awards available under Phase

Three are to be continued under Phase 4. Heath has already stated that in his opinion Phase Three 'is too generous'. The Economist says that 'to go on governing, Mr Heath must quickly introduce a new, and considerably tougher, Stage Four.' It goes on to argue: 'One way to a tougher Stage Four might be to call for a six month's pause in which no Stage Three increases were paid even to those who have already got them.' Therefore the working class has a vested interest in the victory of the miners because its own future is at stake.

It is precisely for this reason that the Tory Government and the state will make every attempt to crush the strike. This means that the battles around the power stations, pits and docks are likely to be even fiercer than those at Saltley and Longannet. Every assistance must be given to the miners in these confrontations. The maximum forces within the working class must be rallied to the miners side. In every area picketing squads must be set up to stop the movement of coal and fuel. Whenever the police try and break up picket lines thousands of workers must join the pickets and turn them into a human wall that the police cannot, and dare not try to move.

The opportunity to build a real mass movement in defence of the Shrewsbury 24 was not taken up before the trial. But once again picketing has become, and will become even more so, a central issue within the working class. This brings the issue of effective picketing, and the defence of pickets, before the attention of masses of workers and makes it a practical question for them. It will undoubtedly give us an excellent opportunity to mobilise new and wider layers of support for the Shrewsbury Three. At the same time it will be taking place when the miners have thrown the government back on to the defensive thereby creating an entirely new and much more favourable political situation.

ACTION BY BUILDING WORKERS

A building strike still remains the essential question. What is needed is to give that strike explicit links with the miners

strike. This means strikes on the building sites giving concrete practical assistance to the miners such as using the striking workers to help the miners pickets. The strikes should also place right to the fore the demand for the release of the Shrewsbury Three. At every level, both national and regional, the NUM and the building trades unions should enter into joint agreements for the creation of common picketing pools. They should fight for national strike action to be waged for the release of the Three and for the the release of any miners pickets imprisoned for picketing activities. Such activities can give a lead to the rest of the working class on Shrewsbury and demonstrate in the clearest possible way how to defend mass picketing.

GENERAL STRIKE

The question of picketing is only one of the many links that must be forged with the miners. The Tory Government, acting as the open agent of British Capitalism, has conducted a determined struggle to reduce real earnings, raise rents, attack social services, cut down on public expenditure and attack the trade unions. A defeat for the miners would lead to an intensification of these attacks and a big set-back for the working class in general. What is required is a massive solidarity movement around the miners strike - a movement that takes up the demands not just of other workers, but the struggles of tenants against the Housing Finance Act, the issues of rising prices and pensions, the demand for equal pay and the matter of student grants. The need to turn the miners strike into a general strike is imperative. This is the way to smash the Industrial Relations Act, force the repeal of their reactionary legislation and mobilise the full strength and combativity of the working class for the future struggles.

Such a struggle demands the formation of Councils of Action. These bodies, as the name suggests, should have as their task the local organisation of all forces of the working class. These are the only type of bodies that can effectively unite the full