

THE BULLETIN

FOR SOCIALIST SELF-MANAGEMENT

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RACISM AND THE LEFT

The strike of hosiery workers at Loughborough, the votes polled by the National Front at the Rochdale and Uxbridge by-elections, the constant hair-splitting quarrels over the Immigration Act: all these things have once again brought forward the issue of racism and the attitudes of the left towards it.

The Labour Party at a national level was involved in creating racist legislation when it was in power; its attitudes have not changed since, in fact they have worsened. The Communist Party has failed to take a lead or even participate in active opposition to the organisation of the National Front.

It has been up to groups like the International Socialists and IMG to tackle the issue. When the National Front organised demonstrations against the arrival of Ugandan Asian refugees, these groups joined in with black organisations to produce counter-demonstrations which were constantly bigger than the National Front's. Socialist Worker has paid a lot of attention to explaining about how racism divides the working class.

All this is very necessary, and their campaign is of the utmost importance. However, it only tackles the end results of the problem, not its roots. This is obviously an easy thing to say: it is much more difficult to actually attack the roots of the problem in practice. But we won't be able to do this until we are clearer in our own minds about racism - what it is and where it comes from.

First of all, we have to bear in mind that the far right - Powell, the National Front - are not simply dangerous in themselves, as agitators or as future political leaders. They are equally dangerous, in fact more dangerous, as decoys, as a sort of 'covering fire' for the present racism in government, in the mass media and education - this is the real racism of our times, and it is a hundred times more sophisticated and effective than the primitive inefficient fascism of its front-runners like Powell and the NF.

To tackle racism at this level, it is necessary not only to stage counter-demonstrations and to agitate, but also to make a revolution. That is the size of the problem.

But don't we also make things difficult for ourselves? The psychology of racism is based on the preservation of an 'in-out' mentality: either you belong or you don't. The same sort of psychology is present in revolutionary sects and groups with a closed organization and a strong central 'line': either you accept it or you're out. There are similarities: both mentalities tend to create myths and distort our view of the class struggle.

Until the left groups who carry the fight against racism into practice are able to see this - i.e. until they are able to carry out permanent self-criticism and rank-and-file criticism - they will always find themselves tackling the problem of racism at the tail-end when it is already too late.

Having said this, it must be added that left anti-racist activity has finally shown up the 'liberals' in our society for what they always were: this activity, inadequate as it is, should have the full support of all revolutionary socialists.

PAMPHLETS PUBLISHED BY THE FALLING WALL PRESS

Alexandra Kollontai: 'Women Workers Struggle for their Rights'
16p.

Alexandra Kollontai: 'Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle' and
'Love and the New Morality'
15p.

Maria Rosa dalla Costa and Selma James: 'The Power of Women and
the Subversion of the Community'
25p.

WORKERS' CONTROL IN THE MOTOR INDUSTRY: SOME FOOTNOTES

Issue no. 5 of THE BULLETIN contained an article, 'Workers' Control in the Motor Industry: Erosion or Expansion?'. Here are some additions and corrections.

Staff Status and the Abolition of Piece Rates

It is true on the whole that the deal giving salaried status to the Chrysler toolroom workers and the abolition of piece-rates at Longbridge have both eroded the power of the shop stewards, for the reasons set down in the article. But there are also some (merely) potential advantages - a deep change such as this is bound to have unforeseen consequences for the bosses as well. One that the article did not mention was that these deals tend to break down the distinctions between manual and staff workers. The staff workers may resist this, encouraged by their union officials (i.e. officials of ASTMS) that foremen, supervisors, etc., should have much better conditions than the workers under them - the union for the middle class. It is fairly common for white collar unions militants to have this class approach - keeping themselves above the working classes.

This has several results: (a.) There will surely be an extension of the practice where manual and staff workers are represented on a single works committee, as they already are at Longbridge. This is seen as a necessity, perhaps an unpleasant necessity. It is objective class solidarity but it isn't always seen that way by those taking part; it's seen more as a temporary alliance, which goes on and on - of course the longer it goes on for, the more likely they are to realise it should be a permanent partnership (b.) Consequently, more staff will recognise themselves for what they actually are: workers, standing in exactly the same relation to the owners as the men working on track. The latter, too, will be more inclined to look on the white-collar blokes as part of one united group. (c.) The broad result of this must be a development in class consciousness, which is a matter of knowing exactly who are your friends and who is your enemy.

Still, all this is unsure, and it does not alter the fact that the men who carried the deals through negotiated away a lot of their own negotiating power.

Employers' Concessions on 'Workers' Control'

The article said that future concessions would tend to be in the area of 'participation'. There has been a recent example of the limitations of this sort of thing. (We may be overemphasising how well thought-out the employers' ideas of participation are - for instance, the number of supervisory jobs, work study engineers, etc., indicates bosses are keeping a very tight grip of the workers - they aren't relying on the workers managing themselves.) A few years ago, Rolls Royce workers were allowed shares in the company - they participated to the tune of roughly £2,000,000. Now that the company has gone bust, the bankruptcy court has decided that the interests of the 'ordinary' shareholders come first: they will be given priority in getting compensation, and the workers will be at the end of the list. Don't bail out capitalism - it won't bail you out.

Each country has its own favourite 'participation' methods - workers on boards of directors in Germany, a fixed percentage of national income in Sweden. Progressive managements encourage participation on 'safety committees' etc., where it is in interests of workers and bosses that no one gets injured, or suffers damage to health. The 'worker-shareholders' paradise is France, where the system operates in most nationalised companies including Renault. The interesting point there is that shares are distributed free, but the number of shares issued depends on seniority and 'position in the company'. Work it out for yourself.

Absenteeism

The rebellion against 'turning into a vegetable' is not confined to the examples in the article (Ford UK and General Motors). The FIAT boss, Agnelli, had to announce at the Italian motor show that absenteeism in his factories was running at 15% - the equivalent of the entire Alfa Romeo workforce not turning up for work. Like the American unions, the Italian unions have had to take up non-wage issues - in their case it was particularly urgent, since 3 years ago they were almost replaced in the car industry by revolutionary shop-floor cells, and only recovered by making the shop steward system the basis of their own organisation. The revolt against line-speeds, the 'proletarian condition' at work, has forced employers (Volvo, Saab) and unions (FIAT, General Motors) to shift and adapt to what is a purely rank-and-file issue; but of course, this can be counterproductive as far as the rank and file are concerned, and it is certainly not enough. As the article says, British car-workers have a long way to catch up when they cannot even get their own shop-floor delegates to take the issue of mutuality on line-speeds seriously.

Internationalism

Workers' control in the motor industry cannot be discussed without Italian, American, Swedish, French examples automatically creeping in. The problems are international, so must the solutions be. The workers' movement as a whole will gain a lot if it studies and follows the joint meetings of British and Italian shop stewards in the Dunlop-Pirelli combine (the event of the decade?). It will gain less if it listens to Labour Party leaders protesting about the 'loss of national sovereignty' as the Common Market comes up, with capitalism nailing internationalism to its mast, just as it did with social welfare, the planned economy, and other twisted fragments of socialism.

Come to the 9th WORKERS' CONTROL conference at Nottingham at the weekend March 31st - April 1st 1973, in the Portland Building, Nottingham University.

Applications for credentials may be made to Conference Organiser, IWC, 45 Gamble Street, Forest Road West, Nottingham NG7 4ET. Tel. 0602 74504. He'll clue you in about accomodation too.

WORKERS TAKE OVER LARGE SHIPBUILDING FIRM

A letter was published in 'The Times' on September 4th 1918, from the British managing director of a large engineering and shipbuilding firm in Odessa, on the Black Sea. It went as follows:

"When the revolution took place in February 1917 we at once began to have difficulties with our employees. On the second day the men held meetings, and as a result they began to hold general meetings; the speakers at these meetings were as a rule extremists of the most rabid type, including some women, whose views were particularly 'advanced'.

At first we managed to work fairly harmoniously with the men's committees, but as time went on, matters became more and more difficult. They wanted to take the controlling part, and demanded accommodation on our premises, so that they could always hold meetings, sitting continuously if need be, eternally discussing first this question and then that, and doing very little work. There was one delegate, and one assistant delegate, and a shop-steward for each department. They were all getting the maximum rate of pay, but doing practically no work at all. Their duties as delegates took up all their time, at our expense. This maximum, it may be remarked, was something like three times the rate at which they had previously been paid, further, all piecework was abolished. The result, as might be expected, was a very marked diminution of output, and in the end it was only about a quarter of the normal standard.

We had referred the question of wages to the arbitration board that had been set up, considering the demands of course to be quite unreasonable. The board, however, decided against us and we had to meet the demands in full. The meeting habit was one that grew. At first they held their meetings after working hours, but this practice they soon abandoned. Meetings gradually encroached further and further upon working time, until most of the day's work consisted of meetings.

Matters went on like this for some little time, until news came of Kornilov's counter-revolutionary movement. To meet this, Red Guards were formed at Odessa, and a guard was placed over our works. This 'protection', however, had to be paid for. At the end of the first week of the Red Guard's existence, we were presented with a very long bill for the guards' services - day and night and overtime. The method adopted by them to enforce payment was simple and direct. Half a dozen of them came into my office, armed to the teeth - rifles, fixed bayonets and hand grenades ready for instant action. I was asked quite politely to sign a document authorizing payment. I went on making the best of things - I didn't know what would happen. When an individual Red Guard demanded payment at gunpoint for a Guard in another factory, I told him he could only have it if he had a signed order from the Workers' Committee. The same methods were used as far as I could ascertain in the rest of Odessa and the province ..

...
The next stage which followed the fall of Kerensky government was a demand that representatives of workmen should always be present at our board meetings. With this also we had of course to comply. As a matter of fact, the results of the presence of representatives of workmen's delegates were not at all disagreeable. They saw our problems and difficulties at close quarters, and were able to appreciate our point of view. As a consequence, when they left our meetings they tried to reason with their comrades. At first they were

attentively heard, but soon the majority of the men became tired of these representatives who would listen to reason at our board meetings, and elected others in their places, only to depose them in turn for the same reason.

We learned in due course of the decision of the Bolshevik Government to expropriate all industrial establishments. The manner in which our own board of directors was displaced was characterised by the same simplicity as had attended certain other measures. One of the sittings of the board was interrupted by the entrance of six workman's representatives, who informed us that they were taking possession of our works in accordance with a decree of the Bolshevik Government. They expressed regret, saying that their relations with the directors had always been smooth and satisfactory. But 'might is right'. Once again we had to bow to force that we had no means of resisting."

* * * * *

This document is very rich in suggestions. There are hints of the part played by women workers. There is the obvious point that management attitudes are, in some respects, eternal: the letter sends us into an almost timeless and placeless world - he might just as well be talking about Barrow-in-Furness as Odessa. The most striking parallel with what goes on today, however, is not in the writer's attitude: it is in the three-way relationship between the rank-and-file workers, their constantly recalled committee, and the management, with the committee working sometimes as a buffer, sometimes as a revolutionary body, sometimes both at the same time.

But historical parallels can be superficial and misleading. This document, which as far as Russia is concerned could be multiplied hundreds of times, is reproduced here simply to show that in the past, working people have dared to do what they often dream about and sometimes dare to do today.

Review: - "CLAIMANTS HANDBOOK FOR STRIKERS" (4th edition)

15p National Federation of Claimants Unions

This is rather more than a practical handbook on Social Security Benefits for strikers. It is an attempt to systematically educate the reader in the true nature of 'Social Security'. The truth of what is being said is tested by the reader in practice.

Lesson 1. Strikers must organise at grass roots level to claim benefit - not be 'given advice' by TU officers (or Claimants Unions come to that). The approach of the book differs from the attitude of opportunist political groups who wish to fight claims so that the workers will be 'grateful'.

Lesson 2. Trade Union Officials cannot be trusted - by the nature of their job they collaborate with the authorities.

Lesson 3. You make the rules, not them.

Lesson 4. Social Security is an instrument to control workers and the only alternative to this is a universal welfare state with living incomes as of right,

This is making the whole thing sound rather dry, but that is just what this pamphlet is not. The handbook takes us through the maze of issues - written assessments, basic rates, discretionary payments, emergencies, loans, single strikers, monthly-paid workers, unofficial strikes, lay-offs, means-testing, appeals tribunals, harassment, Social Security Acts - in an entertaining fashion. The cartoons will surely go down in history as being among the most deeply biting for many a year. The front cover is the original 'crest' - a slightly distorted version of the royal one. The symbol of the workers bashing the Royal Crest is the theme of the whole book - that the working class is up against the whole apparatus of the state fair and square, not engaged in a mere economic struggle. All these points are made with hardly a hint of Marxist jargon. The fact is that a visit to the S.S. office tells a worker more about 'the role of the state' than a dozen woolly leaflets.

The book has undergone some changes since its first printed version just after the defeated P.O. strike and the changes reflect solid experience. Things that have been demonstrated since then are - that organised strike-claiming is both possible and highly profitable; that single strikers can get regular payments of at least £4 a week, only the determination of the strikers is needed - significantly the most successful were the South Shields miners. Also there are ways of getting round the 1971 SS Act, notably by not paying out strike pay or by Unions refusing to divulge payments to members (as happened in Newton-le Willows GEC sit-in). Every edition has been an almost immediate sell-out because of the large strikes of 1971-72. Now 20,000 have been printed by the Bryant Colour work-in but there hasn't been a large strike since! So get some while stocks last! Price 15p (3½p postage). Discounts of up to 50% are offered to Trade Union and Socialist groups from NFCU Publications, c/o Newtown Claimants Union, 19 Rea Tower, Mosborough Crescent, Birmingham B19 3AU.



Wal Trottington