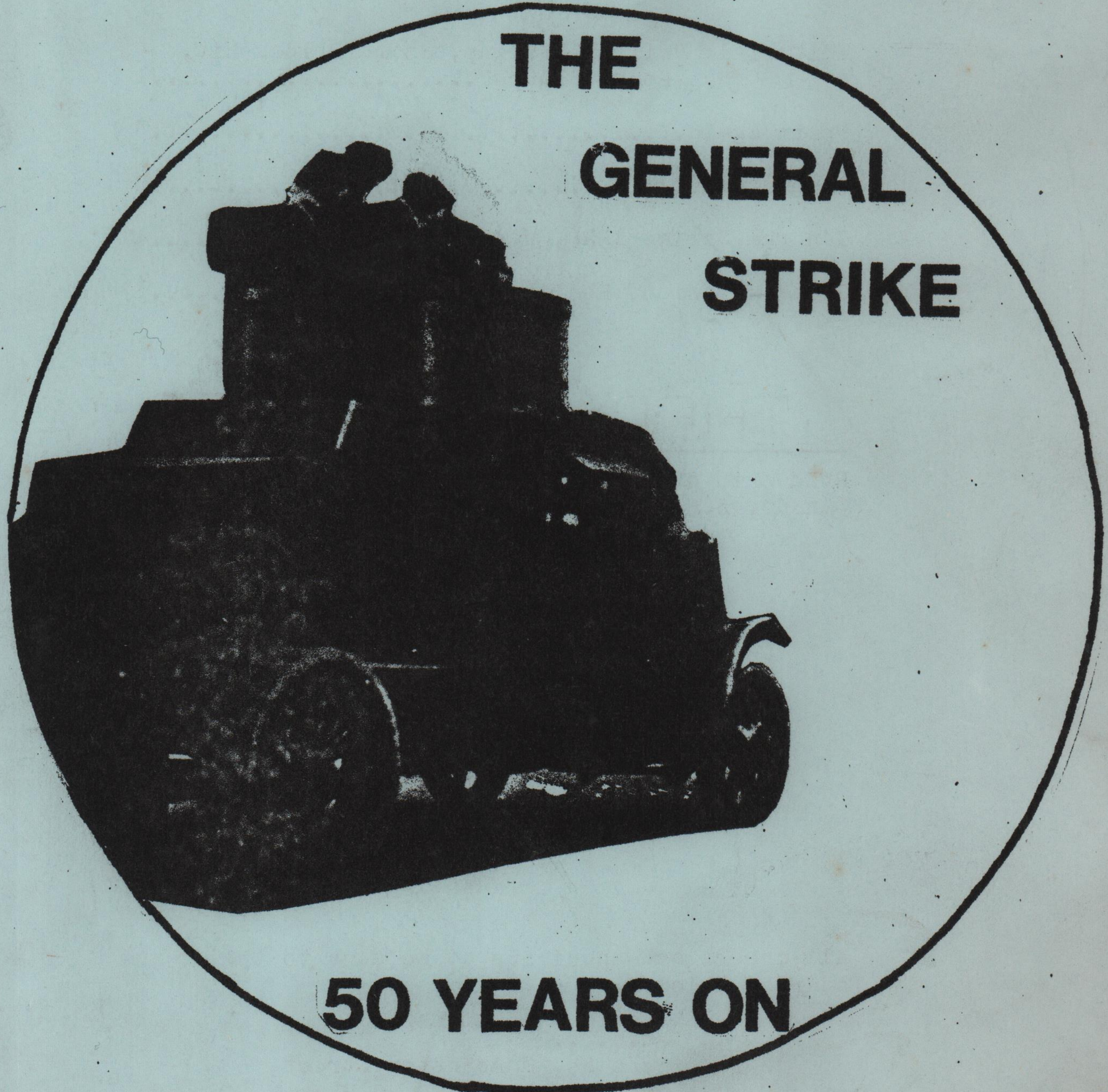


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WORKERS VOICE

The paper of the Communist Workers Organisation:

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INSIDE ———

- ★ China: Myth or Reality
- ★ Shop Stewards today
- ★ Upsurges in Spain

10p/25c

April/May 1976

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EDITORIAL

"WILSON RESIGNS, SHARE PRICES HIT, POUND SLUMPS"

Headlines like that really ram home the meaning of Wilson's resignation. The capitalist class really thought they had someone in charge who could pull their fat out of the fire (with increased taxation, cuts in public spending, withdrawal of subsidies), and now he's gone. But they need not worry, whatever the uncertainty about the change of personality at the top everyone is agreed that the policy will remain the same. Even before the press had had time to get the news out, the union leaders were issuing calls for 'unity' and support for the Labour government.... 'support' that is for more austerity, 'support' for cuts in the social services, 'support' for a new round of wage cutting (you surely didn't think that the new wage norm will be anything like as 'generous' as £6 ?) 'support' for more unemployment. There is nothing left for them but to hang together like a house of cards.

For the first time since the war the illusion that the Labour Party is somehow 'for' the workers is being shattered on a grand scale. The pretence of 'full employment', a rising standard of living, decent housing, is revealed in all its rottenness. Capitalism cannot provide any of these things. The vision that the Labour Party holds up in front of the workers is as false as their promises.

On the shop-floor workers increasingly find that it is the unions and stewards who urge 'peace' and compromise, who pursue a policy of 'not rocking the (Labour Governments) boat', who urge moderation in the National interest. Managements, increasingly confident that they will be backed the government and the unions, are beginning to push for greater and greater concessions on manning levels and for increased output, greater rationalisation of their plant--- which must inevitably mean more closures. Against all this not a whimper from the unions (after all it is their policy).

The longed for upturn in the economy might have arrived for the capitalist class in so far as the conditions for investment have improved and inflation has slackened. But any new investment can only be achieved out of the decline in the living standards of the working class. It comes directly out of dearer foods (with the ending of food subsidies), higher rents and rates, higher school meal charges, higher taxation and inevitably cuts in the dole for the increasing numbers of unemployed. So for a new generation the word 'depression' is likely to have a starkly realistic meaning. In this situation the response of the workers has not yet taken any specific organisational form. We have seen and will continue to see sporadic wildcat outbursts (such as for instance are affecting the motor industry on Merseyside, the Midlands and South Wales at present). But none of these for the moment will lead workers to create forms appropriate to the struggle for Communism--- eg. mass assemblies in continuous session and delegated strike committees. Nor will this movement

adopt a consciously political orientation with attempts by workers to link up across factory and industry boundaries in sympathy or solidarity action. Attempts which, in embryonic form since the modern working class came into existence, have been the beginnings of soviet or workers' council power. Such a struggle is not on the immediate agenda but the crisis is moving events in this direction and narrowing the room for choice between the two classes that modern society has given birth to. Sooner or later such a clash will come.

For the moment we can only insist that workers must increasingly come to realise the practical necessity of their own independent struggle via democratically elected and run strike-committees. We urge this course of action not simply because we think democracy in itself is a 'good thing' but because it is the only effective means of waging the struggle by involving the vast majority of workers. The days when strikes could achieve anything with simply a small self-perpetuating strike committee negotiating with individual managements whilst the bulk of the workforce stayed at home wallpapering the back bedroom waiting to be called back to work by the newspapers or television, are long since gone.

The impasse that at the moment faces those minorities of workers who have begun to realise the changed situation will fade as the crisis advances and more and more workers are forced into struggle not just against individual employers but against the state. With the generalisation of the struggle also comes its deepening. As past experience has shown and the experience of countries where capital is weaker (eg. Argentina, Spain) also shows, economic strikes give way to political clashes with the police and other forces of repression, which in turn provokes workers to create organs more appropriate to their needs until eventually the question is posed, "Who shall rule?" The state with its repression and its inability to grant even the smallest of workers' demands? Or the workers themselves through organisations they themselves created and control?

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SPAIN AGAIN

In WORKERS VOICE I6 we included an editorial on the situation that faced the working class in Spain following the death of Franco. The recent intensification of the class-struggle there demands further comment.

In the last month over 600,000 workers have gone on strike in every major industrial centre (Madrid, Barcelona, and the Basque Provinces). Officially seven workers have been killed and at least fifty wounded by police attempts to break up peaceful demonstrations. Another 100,000 workers have had to be placed under military discipline to keep them at their jobs. None of this has prevented a situation where already twice as many man hours have been lost through strikes this year than in the whole of 1975 (itself one of the highest points of class struggle in Spain in the seventies).

Why has this strike wave come now? Is it simply due to Franco's death? Is it because the workers want liberal democracy or the rule of the Communist Party? Most of the strikes have been in the Basque Provinces, so is it because the Basque workers are supporting the Basque nationalists?

The answer to all these questions is "no". Whether Franco had died or not the strike wave would have still come, though its repression might have been more brutal. Franco's prisons, firing squads and torturers did not give the Spanish ruling class peace. He was never able to stop the class struggle by these means. In 1951, at the height of his power 300,000 workers were on strike (and like today were put under military orders) and since 1972 Spain has seen some of the most advanced forms of the class struggle. A general strike in 1972, the takeover of a town in 1975, and most importantly, the emergence of huge factory assemblies which controlled the strike in place of the usual 'elected negotiators'.

Similarly these strikes are not the product of Communist Party or Nationalist influence. The workers are not supporting the programme of any Bourgeois faction either of the state-capitalists or the nationalists. The strikes are nothing else but the workers response to the effect of the world capitalist crisis in Spain.

The Spanish workers, like the rest of the international working class were quiet in the 50's and 60's because they had seen increases in their standard of living, but today in Spain, as elsewhere, production is stagnant, unemployment has increased 80% and the rate of inflation, at 16.5%, is equal to Britain's. This is the background to the rediscovered ferocity of the Spanish workers.

To try to hold back the workers the present Spanish Government has tried to use both carrot and stick at the same time. Killings, wage freezes and calling up strikers into the army on one side, whilst allowing massive wage settlements of 30% and tolerating the hitherto illegal trades unions on the other.

This tolerance has not been a matter of choice for the Spanish rulers but one of necessity. In this situation of economic crisis the workers have come face to face with the Spanish State. What the state now needs is what all capitalist countries need, an institution to negotiate between workers and bosses, to confine the class-struggle and to try to get the class to put its faith in bureaucrats and 'elect-ed' officials. Through these the Spanish state will integrate the struggle of the class into manageable channels and attempt to prevent the formation of organs that challenge its very existence.

This will be no easy task for the Spanish ruling class as the workers have already struck against the Workers Commissions (the 'illegal' C.P. controlled unions)

(In both 1972 and 1974-5 the workers showed how they were beginning to see through the way in which unions function as part of the capitalist state. Their response to this was to form huge factory assemblies, a clear step nearer to a working class alternative to capitalism.

A mass assembly is a step forward because it cannot be 'beheaded' by the arrest of its leadership, and it keeps the struggle within the control of the class (as opposed to allowing it to be taken over by the unions). But this is only a first step. The successful outcome of the class-struggle can only be achieved by the unification of the class across the boundaries within which capitalism tries to contain it. This not only means that workers in different crafts and factories but also in different regions and countries will unite. If the revolutionary class in any area remains isolated for any more than a short period of time then as in Russia in 1921 and Spain in 1936, they will be defeated. The struggle for Communism is for all or nothing.

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The General Strike. (Continued from page 14)

repeated. After the strike they were bound closer to the state than ever with the establishment of a National Industrial Council, a conciliatory body whereby union leaders and employers could settle disputes without any recourse to nasty strike action. In a gentlemanly way the pay cuts and redundancies of the later 20's and 30's could be agreed upon.

For the class the general strike can never be the way forward. Imposed as it is by unions acting to contain the struggle for the capitalist state, it only reflects the weakness and demoralisation of a defeated working class. Today, as the working class continues to fight the attacks of capital, any generalised strike activity will not be the result of a union bureaucrats call for 'action', but the response by the working class to deepen and generalise their own movement in order to take it into a higher level. However, this will not be a general strike as in 1926, but a mass strike produced by the need to unify the struggles of the class against the state. In this sense:

"The mass strike does not produce the revolution; the revolution produces the mass strike." (Rosa Luxemburg).

SHOP STEWARDS

INTRODUCTION

In the past the capitalist press and media took pains to portray shop stewards as troublemakers, agitators, 'politically motivated' and as almost singlehandedly responsible for the long term decline of the British economy. Shop stewards are still one of the favourite targets of the Colonel Blimps and other backwoodsmen, but the more intelligent members of the ruling class have always realised the necessary role in the functioning of capitalism of the shop stewards. As the integration of the stewards has become more apparent to the workers on the shop floor the rift between the stewards as a body and their 'members' has grown. Unfortunately at this stage many workers still hope to find a steward who will not 'bend' to management; a steward who can act just like the 'good old days' of 'money militancy'; a steward who can get concessions from management for them.

Our criticisms of the stewards movement aims to show that this is an unrealistic attitude. We aim to show that workers never could rely on any stewards body (no matter what the integrity of the individual concerned) to solve their problems and that on the contrary the stewards movement is one of the vehicles which the state has used to channel the workers struggle into the bounds of safety for the capitalist system. We also hope to show that no workers movement can advance without first confronting and overcoming the resistance of the stewards and the unions and that this step in itself constitutes the beginnings of the struggle for communism.

In the period of capitalism's decadence it is impossible for workers to win and hold onto meaningful concessions in any particular struggle. In the present crisis wage increases, when they can be got, are quickly swallowed up by increases in rent, rates and the cost of living generally. Manning levels and conditions are continually eroded and workers sometimes find that their whole industry is threatened with extinction, eg. TV tubes and motor-cycles. More and more and larger and larger sectors of industry go to the Government because they can no longer carry on the process of capital accumulation. In this situation the state, acting in the general interest of the capitalist class as a whole, is forced to rationalise. It attempts to shut down some industries and redistribute investment to keep the rest going. In doing this it cannot avoid attacking the working class. Wages have been limited by the state, money for investment is conditional upon increasing productivity or reducing manning levels. At the level of society as a whole the state is cutting back its expenditure on education, hospitals, transport, food subsidies so that more has to be paid for necessities. All this so that manufacturing industry can get enough investment to keep going (and even this will not be enough). Now it is becoming obvious to the class that their struggle cannot be resolved by simply bargaining over wages and conditions. More and more the struggle is with the capitalist system itself and the capitalist state in particular.

The stewards movement first came into existence as a result of the

changes in the economy due to the first world war. They came about to resist 'dilution' of skilled workers and initially were part of a wave of working class unrest provoked by the capitalist war (the highest point being the Russian Revolution). However the stewards in Britain mainly in the engineering industry never resolved any of the fundamental questions that faced the workers movement at that time. They were never able to oppose the war in a class conscious way. The highest point of their movement was their ability to prevent skilled workers from being mobilised. After a series of un-coordinated strikes in the various shipbuilding and engineering centres the movement was shattered by the post war depression of 1921 and the end of the revolutionary wave. Throughout the 1920's when the workers movement was largely on the defensive the stewards movement all but ceased to exist except for the Communist Party's minority movement which attempted to turn militants back towards the unions. 2

With the outbreak of the second world war the stewards came back into existence not thrown up by the struggle of the workers -- but corresponding to the needs of state capital in Russia, the C.P. encouraged stewards to participate in joint production committees (this was especially true in the aircraft industry where the stewards produced their own magazine "The New Propeller"). The modern stewards movement dates from the second world war period and came about not as an independent creation of the workers own struggle but as a deal between the C.P. on the one hand and the capitalist state (and Lord Beaverbrook as minister for aircraft production in particular) on the other. During the war period and after up till 1951 strikes and other forms of industrial action were illegal (order 1305) and yet the stewards movement was able to continue in existence and even to grow. This was because it was playing a necessary role of disciplining the workforce. Thus the integration of the stewards is no new thing.

In contrast the workers struggle knows many ups and downs, periods of 'victory' and 'defeat' and within these movements workers create organisations which stand or fall with a particular struggle, eg. flying pickets, mass assemblies, elected strike committees. These permit the full development of the struggle. They are part of the process whereby the workers come to consciousness of their role in society and how this society might be overthrown, and as such they do not exist permanently under capitalism. Contrary to this experience the stewards movement does exist permanently. It derives its strength not from the self activity of the workers over whom it stands but from a joint managerial/union apparatus whose authority it has come to represent.

This is an inevitable recognition of what has happened to the old workers' movement in the period of capitalism's decline. We do not say or advocate smashing the stewards movement now. If this were to happen in isolation from a generalised movement of the workers, and the state remained intact the stewards movement or something like it would be resurrected because it does a job that is vitally necessary under capitalism.

Capitalism functions by robbing the workers everyday of a portion of what they produce, by only giving back in the form of wages sufficient for the workers keep and that of their families. The wage is a contract between the boss (the owner of capital) and the worker (who only owns his ability to work) and this contract must appear to be 'freely' negotiated between the two, otherwise the whole process

of capitalist accumulation and the production of commodities stops. The stewards job is to ensure acceptance of this contract by the workers. This is exactly the experience of the Italian workers after the 'Hot Autumn' of 1969, when the trade unions were totally discredited. The bosses, after they had recovered from the workers' outburst had to coopt 'delegati'--(shop stewards)--to do the negotiating over time rates, speeds etc.

The steward is thus the policeman on the shop floor whose job it is to ensure industrial peace. The interests of the workers lie in smashing state power and ending this exploitative relationship by taking production from the boss and using it simply for the needs of the community. The interests of the capitalists lie in maintaining and continuing this domination of the workforce, by maintaining the wages system. The position of the steward in this position cannot be neutral - because he is tied to negotiating a wage rate he is part of the system of exploitation. His position is identified with that of the capitalist. This is why the steward ends up against the workers - not because he has sold out or a traitor, but by the very logic of his position. By accepting the wage labour system the steward accepts the values and behaviour of the capitalist system. Thus a book for management has analysed the role of the stewards in industrial conflict:

'The extent to which the conflict of interest is constructively regulated and peacefully channelled depends broadly on how well the values and behaviour of both sides conform to a mutually acceptable standard'.

(Shop Stewards, Goodman & Whittingham, Pan Management Series p186)

In the capitalist system there can be only one mutually acceptable standard, that of the bosses themselves.

FROM STEWARD TO FOREMAN

During the post war boom of the 50's and early 60's when there were a large number of individual wage deals, managements had to deal directly with the stewards and other shop floor representatives rather than local union officials. Increasingly both due to the complexity of payment systems and the disputes they gave rise to, the stewards replaced the officials at the lower end of the trade union hierarchy. The end result of this process, far from being 'workers control' or any other fantasy of the various leftist groups, was that the stewards came to represent the power of the union over the workers on the shop floor.

An illustration of the reality of this situation is given in this quote from a report by George Cattel, formerly managing director of the Rootes group, to the Industrial Society in 1970 on the effects of the piecework system:

'I shall always remember the words of the convenor of shop stewards in the assembly plant, - "You and I will get on all right so long as you regard me as the General Manager of Main Track Limited. You will find good relations in this factory and my gangs on the assembly lines can and will perform miracles. Just get us the orders and materials and we'll do the rest'.

No wonder it is such a short step from steward to foreman!

These were the days of 'keep politics out of the unions'. The stewards were totally disinterested in anything except 'bread and butter' questions. Many workers will remember that if you wanted a 10shillings

a week rise then you put in for £1 and everyone was happy to settle half way. This encouraged ideas amongst workers of thinking only of their own section or at best their own industry. This was the hey day of the piece rate system and other forms of payment by results. National wage rates were low but by local action bonuses and other enhancements could be won - all this was to become known to the employers as 'wages drift'. Even the role of the steward should not be exaggerated. In 1968 the Government published a report on the state of industrial relations in the country which came up with the following conclusion as to the role of the stewards,

'Consequently it is often wide of the mark to describe the shop steward as a 'troublemaker'. Trouble is thrust upon them. In circumstances of this kind they may be striving to bring some order into a chaotic situation, and management may rely heavily on their effort to do so. Both case studies and surveys show that this sort of situation is not uncommon. In addition the shop floor decisions which generally precede unofficial strikes are often taken against the advice of shop stewards. Thus shop stewards are rarely agitators pushing workers towards unconstitutional action. In some instances they may be mere mouthpieces of their work groups, but quite commonly they are supporters of order, exercising a restraining influence on their members in conditions which promote disorder. To quote our Survey of Shop Stewards and Workshop Relations,

-For the most part the steward is viewed by others and views himself as an accepted, reasonable and even moderating influence; more of a lubricant than an irritant.'

(Paragraph 110 of the Donovan Report)

In the short run and in buoyant market conditions managements can pass on cost increases as price rises or otherwise offset wage increases and so the stewards movement enjoyed an illusionary 'independence' from the unions, so long as it retained its position as the negotiator at plant level of any of the Payment By Results systems. This was the time of the official 'unofficial strike' and massive wages militancy. Then came the spate of productivity deals which were designed by managements to recapture control of wage costs; the whole position of the steward as a bargainer of rates was undermined. No longer were PBR systems used. Instead managements preferred the scientific approach of Measured Day Work and other systems which gave them greater control over wage costs.

With their leverage on the shop floor gone and wage rate negotiation back in the hands of national union officials, the role of the steward should have been eliminated. But almost straightaway the stewards found themselves in the early 70's doing their best to put over the results of the union officials efforts as apparent victories for the workers. At mass meetings up and down the country stewards faced hostile audiences. All this because the stewards had no alternative (eg. during the Ford 'Parity' strike the stewards slogan was "our unions line suits us fine"). Straightaway the stewards seeming independence from the unions was shattered, and being tied to the unions means being tied to capitalism. The state used stewards first of all during this period of productivity dealing to try and achieve rationalisation and an end to demarcation practices (flexibility). There was the famous Commission on Industrial Relations (CIR) which stewards were only too glad to appear in front of and to cooperate with. During this period also the Heath Government tried to impose its Industrial Relations Act, which naturally aroused the

bitterest opposition of wide sections of workers and eventually, with the strike over the jailed dockers and finally the miners strike, this culminated in the defeat of that Government. Many militants today might ask themselves what happened to that movement.

The answer is that the stewards (who largely led it) and the unions wanted a Labour Government to come to power so that their position would be guaranteed. It is no accident that today the stewards movement is one of the staunchest defenders of the Labour Government, stewards are constantly making pleas to workers not to rock the boat. The Labour Party learned its lesson too by dropping its 'In Place of Strife' (which was only a carbon copy of the Tory proposals). The stewards movement found a new role as the bottom rung of the governments participation ladder. The aim was to use the stewards to con the workers into making greater sacrifices for the 'national interest' by making it appear that the workers really did control the factories. Wedgewood Benn went hobnobbing with stewards committees and doled out largesse (£4 millions to Fischer Bendix for example). On the docks the effects of the Devlin proposals are everyday more apparent. With their unofficial organisation, dockers proved a difficult nut to crack for the state. The problem was how to bring this unofficial organisation out from the cold of the dock gates and into the warmth of the personnel office. The Devlin report recommended that there should be a permanent representative of the dock workers to negotiate with the management - the shop steward - with his own office, telephone etc. Throughout industry generally it is now standard practice to have government backed joint management/union courses for stewards.

However all these measures could only work if the situation was stable. Since this first wave of rationalisation the situation for the capitalist class has worsened. The global cycle of accumulation has slowed down and will ultimately go into reverse - in Britain the effects of this are plain for all to see - chronic underinvestment, low productivity, inflation, unemployment as a consequence of redundancy or bankruptcy, savage attacks on the standard of living through the withdrawal of subsidies etc. The problem is no longer one of extracting more surplus value from the work force. With increasing closures of factories the problem is more and more that of containing the workers response. We have seen attempted sit-ins work-ins, occupations all of whose sole aim was to preserve the capitalist nature of the industry. The stewards have gone round either looking for a new boss or to the Government for a hand out. In either case it means they have to prove that they are better managers of the workforce than the old lot. This has without exception resulted in workers being made redundant, increased speed ups and exploitation - and the elevation of certain shop stewards to the Board of directors. This is what happened at Fisher Bendix, where the senior shop steward is now chairman of the board. (I) In the British Leyland empire the stewards are busy implementing the Ryder Report, and more generally the stewards are the ones most anxious to play the Governments 'participation' game.

CONCLUSION

We hope we have made it clear that we do not see all these action as the result of cynical manipulation or double dealing by power hungry

(I) See the 'Bankruptcy of Workers Self Management' in WW 16.

union officials or even ego tripping shop stewards. Today, with the state regulating wages through its pay norms, with inflation eating away at peoples purchasing power, with public services being cut back and unemployment over one and a half million - there is nowhere else for such a movement to go. To really challenge the Governments pay norms for instance means to challenge the whole state apparatus which no steward can or would do. However much they may scream about it, the days of 'free collective bargaining' are gone never to return, workers who attempt to go beyond the norms would find that they stood absolutely alone, attacked from the right by the established press and bosses and from the left by the unions and the stewards urging 'moderation' so that the Government's appletart is not upset.

Many workers today are beginning to sense this situation. They weigh up the cost over a year of going on strike against what they probably might 'win' and find the cost is not worth the sacrifice. This has caused a great deal of bewilderment and confusion, the old sectionalism, the old money militancy is no longer enough. A class alternative will be found in the process of the struggle itself but the workers cannot advance without examining and criticising their own actions. Part of that criticism today is an understanding of the obstacles and pitfalls that confront the Communist movement of the class. Many of the criticisms we are making here will increasingly find an echo in the movement of the workers. In any unofficial action it is more and more necessary to insist on mass meetings, and to give the delegates binding mandates. More and more it will become the urgent practical necessity to avoid the steward/union apparatus if workers in one factory are to unite with workers in another. It will become more and more necessary to elect a strike committee out of the meeting rather than rely on the same old faces. But sooner or later the hostility of the stewards to any independent movement of the workers will become more apparent. All the more reason therefore why the workers should understand why they will have to fight against the stewards and the rest of the union apparatus. We hope this article contributes to this understanding and thereby strengthen and reinforce that tendency towards independent action and autonomy which is the beginning of any movement of workers towards Communism.

REVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES

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General Strike 1926

WAS IT REVOLUTION ?

INTRODUCTION

Fifty years ago, in May 1926, the General Strike broke out, the first and last in the history of the British working class movement. Thought by many to be the start of a real revolutionary movement, the strike ended after only nine days in complete demoralisation and defeat. The purpose of this article is not to join the uncritical ouvrierist euphoria currently to be found in the TV, bourgeois press, from the left to the right, but to evaluate its revolutionary potential and, most importantly, to underline the lessons contained in the strike for the working class today.

An understanding of the limitations of the General Strike is impossible without an examination of the historical period in which it took place. After the first world war it looked as though the Russian example of revolution would be followed in the rest of Europe: in Germany the Kaiser was overthrown and workers councils were formed; likewise in Britain there appeared the possibility of imminent revolution especially on Clydeside and in Belfast. However, this movement was defeated internationally and, by 1921, any possibility of revolution in Europe was crushed.

By 1926, then, the international working class had not only been defeated but also weakened by unemployment. And it was because of this demoralisation and defeat that the working class assumed such a passive role in the strike, leaving all the organisation to the unions.

We shall now look closer at the events of 1926, in particular at the role of the unions, the role of the state and the response of the class.

THE STRIKE

In 1924 the mine owners had agreed to a wage increase. However, by 1925 an economic crisis led to a depression in the mining industry. The owners responded by demanding an increase in working hours and a wage cut. The General Council of the TUC agreed to support the miners in their struggle against such a blatant attack on their living standards. In July the transport and railway workers threw their weight behind the miners by agreeing to place an embargo on any movement of coal. With such a show of strength the miners looked capable of resistance. But the Government knew how to handle a dispute with the unions. In order to cool the situation they offered a temporary subsidy until May 1st to maintain the wages of the miners at the current level and set up a Royal Commission to examine possible reorganisation of the industry. This apparent climb down by the Government was claimed by the unions to be a great victory and named 'Red Friday'. However, 'Red Friday' doesn't just show the superior cunning of the Government, it also quite clearly reveals the capitalist nature of the trade unions in the twentieth century. The time gained was put to good use by the state to organise a

resistance movement, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies. Considerable stocks of coal were also built up. The unions, relieved at not having to face a confrontation, made no such preparations and sat back to await the opinions of the Royal Commission. This commission recommended wage cuts to make the mining industry profitable and once again the battle was on.

THE ROLE OF THE UNIONS

On one side the Government had rallied all the forces of reaction and was determined to win. On the other the unions had been forced into a situation they had been trying to avoid desperately and were terrified lest the situation should get out of their control. The union leaders were eager to emphasise that the strike was purely economic and in no way a challenge to the state:

"I have never disguised that in a challenge to the constitution God help us unless the Government won.....but this is not only not a revolution, it is not something that says, 'we want to overthrow everything'. It is merely a plain, economic, industrial dispute...."

(J. Thomas, Rail Union Leader, quoted from Farman, The General Strike p112)

But the time when there was such a thing as a 'plain, economic, industrial dispute' is over. In the era when capitalism was a powerful expanding system, the workers could only hope to gain reforms and wage increases but by 1926, capitalism had long since ceased to be a progressive system capable of granting meaningful reforms to the working class. The first world war had shown that capitalism would only expand by the physical destruction of capital and the working class. By their support for this war the unions had become not organs of the workers but organs against the workers. The activity of the unions in the General Strike further underlines this. When J. Thomas talked of avoiding a 'challenge to the constitution' he was actively expressing the role of the trade unions in the disarming of the class. Whilst the Government was blatantly organising scab labour, the unions were aiding and abetting them by doing nothing to prepare the working class politically for the coming confrontation, and by pretending that 'Red Friday' was a victory for the class.

The organisation of the strike was firmly in the hands of the unions organised nationally by the General Council and locally by the trades councils. That these local trades councils were not motivated by any revolutionary ardour is beyond dispute. The Dover strike committee requested strikers to sing Rule Britannia instead of the Red Flag. The organisation of the strike is indicative of the unions determination not to allow any independent action on the part of the working class. For a start, the strike was hardly 'general' at all and the union leaders preferred not to call it such. The whole impetus of the strike was weakened deliberately by the union leadership's refusal to call out all the T.U. membership at once. Instead, they operated a 'two tier' system whereby many industries were held back as a 'reserve army' to be called out on the second week of the strike. This not only gave the Government a chance to rally and organise its forces of relief workers but was also intended to further demoralise those sections on the 'reserve list'. The ending of the strike was as abortive as its beginning. Just as the action was beginning to take effect, just as the 'reserve list' had joined the strikers, the strike was called off, an unconditional surrender was made to the Government. Thousands of workers had risked their jobs and possible starvation to no avail.

THE ROLE OF THE CLASS

Of course to blame the defeat solely on the unions is to oversimplify. The passivity and demoralisation of the class left them easy to manipulate. But many positive actions of the class were evident during and after the strike. For a start there was a tremendous show of solidarity from the workers, especially in the industrial centres. Indeed, the problem facing the unions was to keep those sections on the reserve list working. According to a General Council Communique of May 4th:

"The difficulty....has been to keep men in what we might call the second line of defence rather than call them out."

Always present in the minds of the union leaders was the possibility of the control of the strike slipping from their hands into those of the working class.

"Everyday that the strike proceeded the control and the authority of that dispute was passing out of the hands of responsible executives into the hands of men who had no authority, no control, and was wrecking the movement from one end to another."

(Charles Dukes, Secretary GMWU Jan 1927 in Farman, The General Strike p152)

Much has been made of the fraternisation between police and strikers and the celebrated football match between them held in Plymouth. In other areas though, tempers ran higher and there are many instances of violence:

- strikers and police fought pitched battles in Cardiff, Ipswich and Leeds

- in the East Fife coalfields men organised to form defence corps which armed with pickshafts, defended pickets from the police.

These are but a few of the examples of working class militancy

during the strike but in the great majority of cases this militancy was simply directed against the scabbing of the volunteers. Though here again there are outstanding examples of violent action taken by the strikers: the derailment of the Flying Scotsman which was being run by volunteers and the bombing of the Times premises. But even this represented the beginnings of an independent class activity and organisation. The TUC frightened by the prospect of losing control, were only too glad to order an end to the strike. This in itself led to the greatest outburst of spontaneous anger from the

class. On this occasion the action was not organised by the unions but, in many instances, against them. The day after the strike was officially called off 100,000 more men were on strike than had been out on any other day since the strike began. In some areas rent strikes were started and in other areas outbreaks of rioting. In Manchester one writer tells of how:

"For the first time feeling was bitter - bitter against employers who were everywhere victimising the local strike stalwarts, and bitter against the TUC General Council. It looked as though the end of the strike might be the beginning of the revolution."

(Farman p240)

Unfortunately this bitterness was not 'the beginning of the revolution'. Even if it had been, given the world situation in 1926, when the possibility of an international extension of a revolutionary movement was nil, the working class would have been defeated. However, better an experience from which the class could draw positive lessons, than the demoralising debacle of a return to work after only nine days on strike.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Even though the working class was largely passive, the Government still did not trust the ability of the unions to control the situation and took no chances. An understanding of the part played by the state in the General Strike is important for the working class today, as it shows that the British bourgeoisie, when faced with a challenge to its authority, will react with the same ferocity against the working class as any of the harsher totalitarian regimes. Long before the strike began plans had been made in the event of disorder or civil war to divide the country into regions, each region having a regional seat of government under a regional commissioner. Furthermore all army and navy leave was cancelled, troops were organised to stand ready and warships with guns pointed towards the shore were anchored off all the major ports. In order to strengthen the police force special constables were recruited from the bourgeoisie. And lastly, in order to combat the effectiveness of the strike, large armies of volunteers were used to keep key industries and transport going. The effectiveness of these volunteers was limited, some of the untrained volunteers causing a great deal of damage. The main purpose of this scab force was for publicity and to demoralise the strikers. A considerable show of strength backed the forces of reaction, but had the strike reached truly revolutionary stature this force could have been easily wiped out. Troops recruited from the working class could have been persuaded to turn their arms against the bourgeoisie. And it is hardly conceivable that in any strike today workers would sit back and allow strike breakers and volunteers to man their posts. The new confidence of today's undefeated working class was evident in the 1972 miners strike when 'flying pickets' were used, with overwhelming success, to stop the movement of supplies.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS OF THE GENERAL STRIKE

One valuable lesson to come out of the general strike was to show quite clearly the nature of the unions. In criticising the role of the unions we must make quite clear that it is not simply a question of bad or stupid or reactionary leaders but that the unions themselves are part and parcel of the capitalist state. We do not seek to reform the unions but rather to abolish them along with all other aspects of capitalism. That the unions were closely bound up with the capitalist state became obvious to many in 1914 when they stood solid in their support for the imperialist war. But for many workers the realisation of the new role of the unions as part of the state was not to come till the general strike. After the strike union membership fell to below 5 million, a total loss for the unions of about 2million.

That unions were an essential part of the capitalist system was recognised by the more aware elements of the bourgeoisie. The Conservative Prime Minister, Baldwin, was well aware of the importance of the unions and, in a warning to employers not to anger union leaders after the strike, he stated:

"There can be no greater disaster than that there should be anarchy in the trade union world. It would be impossible in our highly developed system of industry to carry on unless you had organisations which could speak for and bind the parties on both sides."

(Farman, p241)

For the unions the general strike was a break from their previous role of parliamentarism, a syndicalist misadventure never to be

(Continued on page 4)

CHINA

MYTH / REALITY

INTRODUCTION

1975 was ushered in in China by the launching of the 'Campaign to Study Lenin', the Chinese governments name for its economic policies for that year. The main features of this campaign were:

- 1) The drive to maintain a wage freeze
- 2) Appeals to the working class to work for the 'national good' and not their individual profit
- 3) The struggle against corruption and mismanagement
- 4) Attempts to implement tighter industrial discipline

A familiar package to workers throughout the world. The circumstances which provoked the campaign are equally familiar: declining trade figures, a massive balance of payments deficit, falling industrial productivity, and a deepening of the class struggle as the working class attempted to defend its living standards. By the middle of the year the army had been used repeatedly to break strikes and ensure the maintenance of production.

Any attempt to understand these events and their significance for the world working class must start from the understanding that China, like every other country in the world today is capitalist. Certainly the private capitalist has been eliminated and the Chinese economy has taken the state capitalist form, that is to say, the state owns and controls the means of production. But for the working class the identity of the owner and controller of capitalism does not in any way change the nature of capitalist exploitation. In China, as in every country, the worker in order to live, must sell his labour-power for a money wage. This wage representing only a fraction of the value the worker produces. The goods his labour produces are produced for sale either on the home market or in foreign markets. This exchange production is for the realisation of profits to enable further accumulation. Insufficient profit demands that more value be extracted from the working class; China as we shall show is no exception.

The experience of the working class in the various state capitalist regimes throughout the world in the last 50 years, shows quite conclusively that state capitalism, whether it calls itself Communist or Fascist, is in no way an improvement or advance on capitalism. Nationalisation and state bosses are in no way a move towards socialism but on the contrary are capitalism's last desperate attempt to solve its problems within its period of decline. This attempt is a tool for increasing exploitation and control of the working class. Such was the so-called 'Communist' revolution in China in 1949. Nothing more than a violent take over of the capitalist state by a new set of capitalist bosses more able to run it than the previous ruling faction. This had nothing in common with a genuine working class revolution like the one which erupted in Russia in 1917. Then, the mass of the working class was involved in the smashing of the bourgeois state, and its replacement with a Workers' State. (I)

(I) For details of the successes and eventual defeat of this movement see our publication Revolutionary Perspectives No. 4.

In 1949, the Chinese working class was small in number, demoralised and exhausted by the defeats of the revolutionary upsurge in the late 20's and the years of hardship and carnage through the 30's and world war two. This defeated class played no part in the Maoist coup of 1949. Mao's forces and support came exclusively from the peasantry. The capitalist state machine remained unchanged by the takeover except that now it was controlled by Mao and his 'Communist Party'. Wage labour, the money economy, buying and selling all remained untouched. In short the only Communist part of the 'revolution' was the name of Mao's party.

IMPERIALIST PAWN

By the time of the Maoist coup, the world stood as it is today divided by the two strongest capitalist powers, Russia and America, surrounded by their allies, satellites and pawns. No nation in the world could escape domination, economic, political or military by one or other of these powers. For the weaker undeveloped nations the task of trying to construct a whole industrial economy of sufficient strength to compete effectively on the world market against the strongest capitals was and is totally beyond their powers. If any country could have done it, it would have been China with her vast resources, as potentially rich as almost any country in the world. China covers a vast body of land of greatly varying type and climate, and as a result, almost any type of crop can be grown. Her volume of agricultural produce is second only to America, being the world's most prolific producer of rice, millet, sweet potatoes, sesame and rapeseed, and the second largest producer of soybeans, tobacco, wheat and cotton. The physical resources needed to support a modern industrial economy also exist: coal and iron deposits equal to U.S. and Russian, oil reserves only slightly smaller than the whole of the middle east, the world's largest supplies of mercury, tin and tungsten and a massive hydro-electric potential. But the events in China over the last 30 years have shown clearly that even these vast resources were insufficient to allow any independent economic development. Within a very short time after the coup China threw herself open for Russian aid and in the decade up till 1960, functioned virtually as a subsidiary of Russian capitalism. During this time Russia supplied massive quantities of machinery and equipment, much of it in the form of complete industrial plants. Agreements were signed with Russia for the construction of 291 of these major industrial installations, and by 1959 more than 130 were completed and equipment valued at 1.35 billion dollars had been delivered. Agreements were also signed with east European countries for the construction of at least another hundred major projects, two thirds of which were completed by 1959. In addition to these installations, Russia also provided invaluable technical aid including 10,000 Soviet technicians and advisors, blueprints, training in Russia for 15,000 Chinese technicians, and financial loans of 1½ billion dollars. As a result of this flow of aid the Chinese economy expanded fairly rapidly, helped by the boom throughout the world following the reconstruction in the aftermath of world war two. From 1949 to 1960 China's GNP trebled and industrial output rose at a rate of 25% annually. (1)

THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

This period must qualify for the most comical piece of misnaming in Chinese history. It was an attempt at the end of the 50's to speed up the pace of development and break free from the ever-growing

(1). The massive amounts of aid from Russia to China was by no means a free gift. Russian leaders began demanding payments that the Chinese economy couldn't meet, which was the material basis for the 'ideological' split and accusations of Russian Imperialism.

Soviet domination. By massively increasing exploitation, China hoped to make up for her lack of industrial capacity. Throughout the country work-loads were savagely increased, and giant projects based solely on the mass mobilisation of labour were begun. This was the period of huge dams and irrigation schemes being built virtually barehanded by armies of workers in a manner reminiscent of the construction of the Egyptian pyramids. Agriculture was completely disrupted by the organisation of farming communes of up to 25,000 people, so large as to be totally unworkable. New farming methods (eg. deep ploughing and close planting) were demanded of a bewildered peasantry ignorant of such techniques. In industry the call was for 'a blast furnace in every backyard, a steel plant in every village'. In 1960 Russia cancelled all aid and withdrew her technicians. Many of the Russian construction projects remained uncompleted and the ones already finished lacked a trained Chinese workforce to operate them. By 1961 the Great Leap Forward was abandoned. The results were an exhausted workforce, plummeting food production and widespread famine and starvation, and industrial production back to 1952 levels. Production stagnated for the rest of the decade while China attempted to maintain her 'independence'. The absolute failure in this period to make any economic progress has forced China into a closer relationship with the American dominated bloc. Only the more advanced nations could provide the technology and capital required. International trade which had dropped dramatically during the Great Leap Forward began to rise again. In the 50's 75% of Chinese trade had been with Russia and her satellites. By 1970, more than 80% of trade was with the west and most of that was with Japan, America's eastern lieutenant. Japan and W. Europe in the late 60's and 70's took on the same role as Russia had in the 50's, as supplier of advanced technology and capital: Japan, West Germany, U.K., France and Switzerland are currently the source of more than 4/5ths of China's imports of electronic products and production equipment. This dependence on western technology can be seen in every branch of industry. In 1966 agreements were signed for Japan to supply and construct 50 complete plants for the chemical and steel industries, and recently Japan has been involved in the development of China's oil resources, harbour facilities and steel industry.

The growth of economic dependence on the west has led to a growing political involvement with America and her allies, this involvement reflected in the Chinese support for the unification of European capitalism in the EEC, and consistent support for western bloc factions in the inter-imperialist struggles across the globe, from Bangladesh to Angola. As yet China is not fully integrated into the U.S. camp and thus she can still pose as an 'independent' power, but the deepening of the global crisis with the exacerbation of inter-imperialist rivalries, China's inability to counter growing Russian domination in south east Asia must force China into complete integration, economically, politically and militarily with American Imperialism.

SUPERPOWER?

Despite claims to the contrary by its leftist supporters, China remains an incredibly backward country with only rudiments of the infrastructure necessary for an industrial economy. Even with the help off the massive Soviet aid of the 50's, China remains essentially an agricultural nation with more than 80% of the population working on the land. The gross national product per head of population is only

I60 dollars per year which is only slightly more than that of India or Cambodia, (for Australia the figure is 2980 dollars and for Japan 2320 dollars). The rate of growth in food and industrial production combined, over the period 1952-70, is virtually the same as India's 4.6%. Hardly the success story of the century. The basic necessities of an industrial nation, like roads, and other transport, a skilled workforce (the literacy rate is under 30%) etc. remain totally inadequate. Only slightly more than half the roads are 'all-weather' roads, the rest being unmetalled dirt or cinder tracks. The railway network is only the skeleton of what is required: the whole of western China, for instance comprising Sinkiang, Tibet and most of Tsinghai province has only one railway line and that in an area the size of France; the rolling stock that exists relies mostly on steam engines making China the only sizeable country in the world still using steam power. Aviation remains basic, comprising only nine weekly international flights and less than three hundred domestic flights. Increased world trade has placed intolerable strain on the already inadequate harbour facilities. All these deficiencies must be made up with imports from abroad. Trucks and trains from W. Germany, Tridents and Boeing 707's from U.K. and U.S.A. and from Japan, in the period 1972-75 she imported 235 million dollars of port equipment.

The standard of technology which China can produce domestically stands anything from 5 to 20 years behind the western equivalent. The steel industry, the backbone of any industrial nation, is also under great stress according to recent reports in the Financial Times. The iron ore reserves in China, although large, are of poor quality ore requiring extensive processing facilities the Chinese can't afford to build. The result once again has been an increasing reliance on imports.

The pattern of trade throughout the period has remained unchanged, the export of rice foodstuffs and raw materials in exchange for capital goods. Thus the rate that China can industrialise depends upon the amount of surplus that can be squeezed out of agricultural production. The growth of agricultural productivity has only just kept pace with the growth of the population despite desperate efforts to control population and to mechanise agriculture. China is caught in the vicious circle that all the backward nations in the era of decadence are in, to mechanise agriculture demands the expansion of industrial facilities necessary for the production of farming machinery, but this can only be achieved in the first place by producing a sufficient agricultural surplus. Lacking an adequate chemical industry for the production of essential fertilisers, China has been forced to import large quantities of fertiliser from the west, placing further strain on her capabilities to purchase the desperately needed machinery.

MILITARY MIGHT?

Any notions of China being a world super-power, rivalling US and Russian imperialism disappear like wisps of smoke on examination of China's military potential. All of the armed forces technology is almost obsolete, depending very largely on designs based on Soviet patterns of the 50's. The airforce for instance is large, 7,000 planes, but most of the planes are either old having been bought before 1959 or of obsolete design. The navy, again large is basically a coastal defence force and has little deep sea going capacity. Though with their increasing reliance on the world market frantic efforts are being made to change this. Her much

vaunted nuclear strike capability consists of 70 to 80 missiles of short to medium range, all of primitive design and apparently none of them flight-tested! The weakness of her military forces is best illustrated by her policy of defence against Russian invasion.

To quote from a paper submitted to the US congress:

"(China) must be the only country openly to admit that any future war will be waged on its own soil - by nuclear counter-blows and guerilla warfare...The Chinese response to the Soviet threat remains to 'dig tunnels deeper, store grain everywhere, and accept no hegemony'."

In foreign policy attempts to counter Russian and American influence by the granting of aid, loans and military supplies, has been equally ineffectual. When Egypt withdrew from the Russian sphere of influence recently, it was to America that she turned, despite the long history of Chinese aid. In Angola aid to the pro-western faction UNITA melted quickly away in the face of the reality of Soviet might. In her own area, south east asia, attempts to counter Soviet domination have also been a failure. After years of accepting military supplies from China, N. Vietnam moved rapidly to align itself with Moscow after the US withdrawal, much to the alarm of China. An economic agreement signed by N. Vietnam was dwarfed within months by a much larger agreement with Russia. Laos and Cambodia likewise have aligned themselves with Russia. N. Korea although publicly and vociferously supported by China, received a point blank refusal when asked to provide material support for an invasion of S. Korea. In Malaysia, a country with a large Chinese population and traditionally within China's sphere of influence, Peking has for years financed the local CP. in terrorist campaigns, but has recently complained bitterly about the infiltration of the Malaysian CP. by Hanoi (pro-Russian) trained elements. The withdrawal of America from South East Asia, coupled with China's inability to counter Soviet expansion has left China in an increasingly vulnerable position. There has been the rapid realisation that only US imperialism can withstand Russian imperialism. Hence the increasingly hysterical warnings by the Chinese to America about Russia's plans for war, and the frightened squawking at the withdrawal of American bases from Thailand. The lessons to be learned from the Chinese experience are quite clear: liberation from imperialist domination is today an impossibility within capitalism, only the destruction of capitalism on a global scale can end imperialism.

CLASS STRUGGLE

Even in the best of times, during the years of Russian aid in the 50's, the Maoist state had nothing to offer the working class but the most spartan living standards and programmes of austerity for the benefit of 'socialism'. The onset of crisis throughout the capitalist world in the mid 60's found China a backward primitive economy already shattered by attempts like the Great Leap Forward to remain independent of the developed world. The Cultural Revolution, 1966-68, was the last expression of this policy. In essence this was initially a struggle between two factions in the Party about the best method of dealing with the shattered economy and growing working class demands for better living conditions. One faction led by Liu Shao-chi advocated a return to the Soviet bloc and the importing of Russian technology to increase productivity accompanied by wage incentives and more consumer goods to 'buy off' the workers. The Maoist faction favoured the maintenance of independence from aid accompanied by a campaign to force the working class to accept massive increases in exploitation for the 'good of the socialist economy',

along with a continuance of the wages freeze. Mao's Red Guards (millions of students and lumpenised youths) flooded across China into the main industrial centres to coerce the anti-Mao elements of the bureaucracy and administration into acceptance of Mao's policy. Their other main targets were the factories and work places to try and stifle working class opposition to increased exploitation. The workers response was not long in arriving. By the start of 1967 the demands for higher wages had escalated into a massive strike movement, beginning in the docks in Shanghai and quickly spreading to all the other industrial workers in the city. With the support of the railway workers the strike quickly spread throughout the country. There were reports of factory occupations and seizures of arms by workers.

The suppression of information on China makes it difficult to evaluate the level of the class movement but the struggle certainly seems to have developed beyond purely economic demands and moved into a more political level. There appears to have been growing awareness among sections of workers that the struggle was not for or against one or other of the factions but that their class interests could only be defended by struggle against all factions and organs of the capitalist state. Undoubtedly this awareness remained embryonic and flourished only in a confused and fragmentary manner. The clearest expression appears to have been an organisation called Shen Wu-Lien based in the province of Hunan. In their publications they began to characterise the Party regime as capitalist and put forward the idea that it was impossible to reform it but that the state and all its organs (army, police and government bureaucracy) must be smashed.

"The rule of the new bourgeoisie must be overthrown by force in order to solve the problem of political power." And later when the struggles had subsided they criticised the mass of workers because,

"They not only failed to realise voluntarily the necessity of thoroughly smashing the old state machinery... but didn't see that the enemy formed a class and they (the workers) were dominated by ideas of 'revolution to dismiss officials'". By 1968 however, most of the disturbances were over, the strike wave having been broken by extensive use of the Army and Red Guards in the factories and on the railways. There were reports of large numbers of workers being imprisoned for the purpose of 're-education'. This was China's last attempt at independence from the world market. The moves into the western sphere of influence accelerated rapidly from then on.

THE PRESENT

The intensification of the global crisis and its effects in China over the last two years appears to have provoked fresh outbursts of class struggle. The main areas of activity have been in the provinces of Hangchow, Hunan and by railway workers throughout the country. In Hangchow there was unrest throughout 1974, and 1975 saw a series of strikes, occupations and armed clashes with the police. The Asia Year Book for 1976 states,

"...Attempts to restore discipline by enrolling the labour force in the militia merely armed the 'workers cliques' anxious to unseat the municipal authority".

Eventually Premier Teng moved in to the city with armed troops and cut all contact with the rest of China while the troops moved into the factories to break the strikes and maintain production. In many

of the factories, Government cadres were left behind to "inspire industriousness and watch for unwholesome tendencies." (Asia Yr. Book)

Reports of similiar actions by troops in many other areas from Hunan to Kwantung have also appeared. In Anhwei, unrest on the rail-ways, strikes, go-slows and sabotage in 1975 led to the creation of a new Railway Defence Organisation, a combination of local police and army units, to 'assist efficiency'. Similiar units appeared in other provinces.

The physical attacks on the working class by the organs of the state have been paralleled by ideological attacks like the 'Campaign to Study Lenin', and the ceaseless attempts to persuade the workforce to identify with the national capital. Early in 1975 the Government resurrected the trade unions so that they could play their role of maintaining discipline on the shop-floor. Schemes for the integration of workers into factory administrations have been introduced in the hope that the workforce can be persuaded to participate in their own exploitation. In an effort to mask unemployment and break working class strength in the cities, vast numbers of city workers (over 10 million since 1968) have been forcibly relocated in country areas where they are used to supplement agricultural production.

But today the capitalist class of China, like the capitalists throughout the world, have their backs to the wall. Capitalism is wracked by irreversible crisis and its only response is to attack the working class, who have shown in struggle after struggle their willingness to confront capital head on, and their ability to learn from their experience. The inability of winning struggles within capitalism, the inability to gain any concessions from capitalism, changes the nature of the struggle from an economic one to a political one.

Increasingly in struggles throughout the world the need to extend the struggle beyond the confines of one factory or even one country brings the working class into more and more open confrontation with all the organs of the capitalist state - the unions, police, army - and makes ever clearer the historic task facing the working class - the world wide destruction of capitalism and the construction of a Communist world.

PLATFORM

The platform of the Communist Workers Organisation has just been published, price 4p. Readers who want copies of the platform, which outlines and explains the political positions of the C.W.O. should write to the publishing address. Please allow for postage.

FOR CONTACT WITH C.W.O.

For meetings and/or contact in the following areas, Aberdeen, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester, Merseyside and Tyneside (meetings can be arranged in other areas with interested individuals), write to

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