

# WORKERS PLAYTIME

EVER HEAR THE ONE ABOUT THE UNION  
THAT CALLED A GENERAL STRIKE, AND



Joe Wade, the NGA General Secretary, addressing the mass picket at Warrington

GOT STABBED IN THE BACK BY THE T.U.C.?

INSIDE : Pages and pages of non-union small print

We've come out at the end of a depressing round of lost strikes. In this issue of Workers Playtime we look in detail at three disputes in print, illustrating three faces of doomed struggle in one industry. The other significant defeat is that of the Post Office Engineers. By following their union into a dead end they have lost the first, and perhaps the decisive battle, in their fight to defend themselves from the job losses and rationalisation which will accompany "privatisation".

Some may accuse the POEU executive of having no stomach for a fight. But this is ridiculous. They have shown remarkable strategic and tactical ability in dealing with militant Telecom engineers. Using "selective action" to wear down their most militant branches, and resisting at all costs BT's attempts to involve the workforce, they have eased the proper functioning of the law. The unions sent the strikers back to work, whereupon the management gave them declarations that they would not strike against privatisation again to sign.

The union announced that the struggle against privatisation would continue for years, in other words until the next election. The newly elected Left Wing executive has thereby shown the difference between Left and Right Wing trade unionism. The Left wants to make sure the members turn out to vote Labour, whereas the Right want to "keep politics out of the union" and show themselves as non-partisan responsible citizens.

The crucial strategic move by the POEU has been to defeat the workplace activity before any other group of workers was facing the Tory laws (for example the print unions). The danger of several groups of workers confronting the new style "industrial relations" at the same time has been avoided, and we can all sit back and watch skilled workers take a hammering on T.V.

On the one hand the traditional craft unions (ASLEF, POEU, NGA) are being destroyed, as their members jobs are deskilled. Thus real barriers between workers are being removed – skilled workers are being given a chance to taste the sort of poverty normally reserved for their unskilled class mates. But on the other hand carefully developed areas of workers autonomy are being lost.

What is clear, however, is that there will be no new rise in the class struggle, unless concrete goals applicable to the mass of the working class are developed. It is not the role of revolutionaries to develop these but to understand how they emerge from the facts of working class life, to criticise their weaknesses, and to analyse how they relate to the emergence of a revolutionary movement which will sweep aside capitalist society.

## LEFT FEELING UNSHAH OF ITSELF

The roots of the Stockport Messenger saga go back some years. Eddie Shah got into the Free Sheet business during the three day week in 1974. The printing and typesetting on his first title was put out to contract with a unionised print firm in Carlisle. Freesheets started appearing in fair numbers at that time. Like the comparatively short-lived growth of the 'radical' Free Press, they responded to the complacency and conservatism of the local and provincial papers. Where the Free Press papers countered the failure of the local press to cater to the interests of the new left and liberal strata, the Free Sheets attempted to cream off vulnerable advertising revenue.

None of this was very surprising – local papers exemplify the worst elements of formulaised idiot journalism. The Free Sheets didn't even aim that high. Correctly perceiving that a high percentage of people only bought local papers for details of local events and small ads, they calculated that blanket distribution of Free Sheets to every house in targetted areas would offer local advertisers 'penetration' into the thousands of houses that didn't see local papers.

Early Free Sheets had no news content at all – merely popular features (horoscopes, household hints, thinly disguised publicity blurbs etc). Shah claims his was the first Free Sheet in the

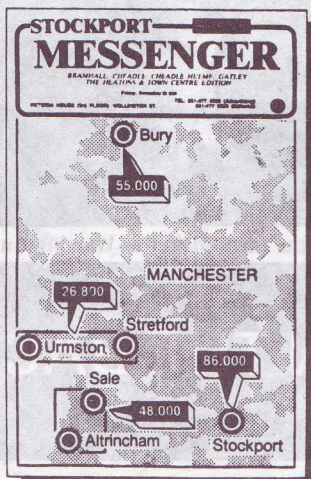
country to have editorial content. Currently 25% of his papers is news, and typically he boasts of their populist stance – support for anti-cuts campaigns etc.

Free Sheets have become big business over the last five years. From 100 in the early Seventies to 354 in 1980, today there are over 600. Between 1978 and 1980 their advertising revenue quadrupled from £35. to £196. million – 4.4% of all media advertising compared to 40% for bought newspapers. By contrast local newspaper advertising revenues increased from £150. to £196. million. The six titles in Shah's Messenger Group Newspapers currently distribute 250,000 copies

in the Greater Manchester Area. Last year he made £170,000 profit on £2.5 million turnover – this year he predicts £600,000 profit on £5. million, despite the dispute.

But these statistics are potentially misleading. Only just over a third of the Free Sheets are independently owned or run. Most have been started up by the provincial newspaper groups themselves to nip potential rivals in the bud, offer a more comprehensive local advertising package and control a key point of leverage in negotiations with the NGA over the introduction of new technology.

In June this year the Newspaper Society, which represents provincial and local newspaper and Free Sheet publishers, (Shah isn't a member), launched Project Breakthrough. This is aimed at reaching national agreement next year with the print unions "for the full and sensible use of new technology". Essentially this means the introduction of single keystroking – journalists typing copy direct into computers ready for printing, rather than it being retyped by NGA compositors. According to them the cost of the extra keystroke (the compositors wages) means that a regional evening paper needs a circulation of 60–100,000 to be viable. Single keystroking would reduce that to 30,000 and offer the possibility of genuinely local editions within a region.



Distribution of Mr Shah's free newspaper.

For years the NGA have been resisting this threat to the existence of the skills of their members. Local press proprietors are now threatening that they will go non-union if no agreement is forthcoming next year. In the other hand is the carrot of new titles becoming viable under new technology – hence potential jobs after retraining for former compositors, as advertising copytakers, paste-up artists, night-watchpersons etc. Perhaps the sweetener of a job for life for key staff as an inducement to retrain. Even if it's only the life of the company.

The NGA knows that it cannot avoid the introduction of the new technology. It's agreed to a pilot study on the effects of it on six newspapers which will shortly be concluded. In a breakthrough an agree-

ment was recently reached over direct input and sub-editing by journalists on a motorcycle magazine. All the compositors do now is put in a computer disc and key in the instruction for it to typeset. An agreement was possible because the magazine is part of a group and the compositors perform normal functions on the other titles. But this is the thin end of the wedge – they know that conceding that much makes it “difficult to resist” conceding full direct entry by journalists. In this situation the NGA's power, expressed through the pre-entry closed shop, becomes crucial in the negotiating away of the skills of many of their members which is imminent.

But the other side of the new technology is that it gives employers the

potential to bypass the union completely. The precedents have already been set (see the article further on about David Dimpleby's group of papers). In this situation it is vital for the NGA to be able to make agreements and enforce them. Faced with the threat of a national strike, the Newspaper Society estimated that over a hundred local papers had introduced new technology and trained staff on it. They could thus continue publication in the event of a strike. Between 25 and 30 did so during the six-week printing strike in 1980. Unlike then the recent Employment Laws would give them the right to sack strikers for breach of contract and continue with non-union labour. Its against this background that the Warrington Messenger dispute must be seen.

At the end of the Seventies Shah decided to set up his own typesetting firm, Fineward in Stockport. He signed a closed shop agreement with the NGA, he and six executives joining the union. Eight NGA members were recruited, some from the Carlisle firm which did his printing and had till then done his typesetting. Wages were £155 for a 37½ hr week including one 15 hour shift. Trouble between Shah and the NGA began in 1981 over the new house agreement and new technology. In the meantime the group was still expanding. Shah planned to open a second typesetting plant – Caps Ltd – in Bury. Negotiations for a closed shop broke down over failure to agree hour and rate differentials with Fineward. Though an interim agreement recognising the union had been signed Shah tore it up and started up with a mixture of union and non-union labour. Applicants were asked how they would react to “trouble with the union” according to Shah himself.

The NGA only pursued the negotiations over Caps Ltd half heartedly because Shah also had plans to open his own printing works and they hoped to persuade him to site it in the North West where they had a high level of unemployed members. Shah finally opened the works at the end of 1982 in Warrington, again with a mixture of union and non-union labour. Sporadic negotiations continued over both Caps Ltd and the press. The NGA were allowed to make a presentation on the benefits of union membership and ballot the workers. The question “Do you wish it to be a term of your employment that you become and remain a member of a specific trade union?” met with a unanimous no. The NGA blamed company propaganda, but coming only weeks after the NGA's desperate appeal for an extra levy on members its hardly surprising they got the big E.

In June this year the NGA National Council decided that failure to achieve a closed shop would be a green light to other Free Sheet and local newspaper proprietors, to break agreements or even go non-union. On June 9th they told Shah that if agreement wasn't forthcoming by June 22nd an official dispute would begin. No agreement was achieved and on July 4th the NGA pulled out its 8 members at Stockport. Shah responded as he meant to go on, by applying the rights granted him under the 1980 & 1982 Employment Laws. Within weeks the 8 were sacked for breaking their contracts of employment, and replaced by non-union labour.

Initially the strikers were left to themselves while the NGA put the pressure on in the way they understood best. A 49% shareholding in the Messenger Group was held by a subsidiary of Reed International, owners of the Mirror group. The NGA asked them to lean on Shah to get him to settle – getting no response they pulled out the Mirror for one night. Reed, on the verge of putting the Mirror up for sale in any case simply sold their shareholding in Messenger for a reported £1.

Negotiations at ACAS got nowhere. The NGA were prepared to concede half the issue by agreeing a post-entry closed shop for future employees and only 50% membership at Bury and Warrington. Shah refused to agree and held his own ballot – again the closed shop was rejected.



After four weeks the NGA asked for and got NUJ blacking of copy. At the start of September Shah issued his first writ against the NUJ for inducing his workers to break contract. It was granted, the NUJ refused to comply and on the 16th were found in contempt of court but not fined. Their executive was prepared to defy this but the local branch disgusted at the failure of the NGA to even picket went back. (Subsequently journalists did refuse to cross picket lines but weren't sacked).

The NGA attempted to persuade Shah's advertisers to boycott his papers. Shah issued a writ. Simultaneously the NGA began picketting the Bury and Warrington works. Shah issued a second writ about this. On Oct.14th both were granted - attempts to obtain blacking, mass picketting and secondary picketting were all ruled illegal.

The NGA went for a treble strategy, increasing direct pressure through mass picketting, pressing for ACAS talks and taking pains to be seen taking them seriously, and trying to apply indirect pressure by trying to get TUC support and by threatening industry-wide escalation to force employers to lean on Shah. (Robert Maxwell was eventually persuaded to do so, but more employers urged Shah to stand firm).

On Nov. 9th 700 pickets successfully blockaded both the Warrington works preventing the papers from leaving, and the Bury offices. This was the first and last successful picket. Organised 'three day mass pickets' in following weeks, largely drafted from Fleet St. and Manchester Dailies, were increasingly augmented by other trade unionists, students and leftists. Violence took place, but only ritualised pushing and shoving, which generally remained 'good natured'. Injuries and arrests remained low and police and pickets complimented one another. Police injuries on Nov.23rd turned 'Violent Illegal Picketing' into a national issue. The stage was set for the 'Battle of Winwick Quay'.

Shah's response to the picketting was to operate his press under siege conditions protected by security guards, and issue writs for contempt of court and then for sequestration of the NGA's assets. These were granted: a fine of £50,000 and threat of sequestration on Oct 14th. The NGA refused to pay as a 'point of principle'. Talks once again broke down - both sides agreed on the post entry closed shop but Shah refused reinstatement for the sacked strikers. (Two of the original 8 went back at the start of Oct. - hence the 'Stockport Six').

Realising that grounds for winning the dispute were limited, that they could not afford to 'lose', and that no acceptable compromise was available, the NGA decided on a desperate strategy. It was to become a battle in defence of union rights

against the employment laws. Their 'confrontation' with the courts was designed to maximise their 'martyrdom', and pressure was to be increased in the only way possible. An industry wide escalation in an attempt to force the TUC into taking responsibility for the struggle. This had to become a 'historic' struggle.

From the start Shah had been portrayed as an 'anti-union' Tory puppet programmed to destroy 'our movement' and force his workers into sweated slavery. In reality Shah was a typical liberal paternalist employer (profit-sharing and free health care etc), and his only concern to this point had been to run his business and maximise his profits. Willing to come to an 'acceptable' deal, his mistake was to hope the NGA could be strung along without it reaching confrontation. Once it had done so he was fully prepared to exercise his legal rights however. Now faced with NGA propaganda portraying him as shifting position during negotiation he eventually took the logical step of making it a matter of principle on his side: specifically the question of workers rights to join or not to join a union.

Having decided to defy the court the NGA made attempts to secure its funds - hiding share certificates and deeds and transferring funds to an Irish bank. Shah went back to the court claiming contempt of the original injunction again and asking again for sequestration of union funds. On Nov.25th Manchester High court imposed a second £100,000 fine and ordered the unions assets to be seized, appointing four commissioners (partners in accountancy firm Price Waterhouse, liquidation specialists). In the Appeal Court in London the same day the NGA got this altered to seizure of £175,000 to cover fines to date and costs, pending a full appeal against sentence. The same day they played the last card under their direct control. NGA members in Fleet St, 'spontaneously' walked out for the weekend.

This was a mingled farce and disaster on both sides. The NGA's fairly transparent attempt not to be 'seen' organising the strike got nowhere. And the objective of the strike - winning TUC backing failed. On the publishers side agreement was reached to sue the NGA for damages - claims for £3. million in total remain outstanding. But an attempt to impose a united lock-out failed when four papers broke ranks - the Mail actually paying its NGA workers a bonus to print extra copies. This display of natural greed saved the NGA's bacon, but effectively cost them any chance of winning the Stockport dispute.

To maximise their 'martyrdom' the NGA withdrew their appeal against the sequestration which then took place. Hopes that this would pressure the TUC into effective support were dashed.

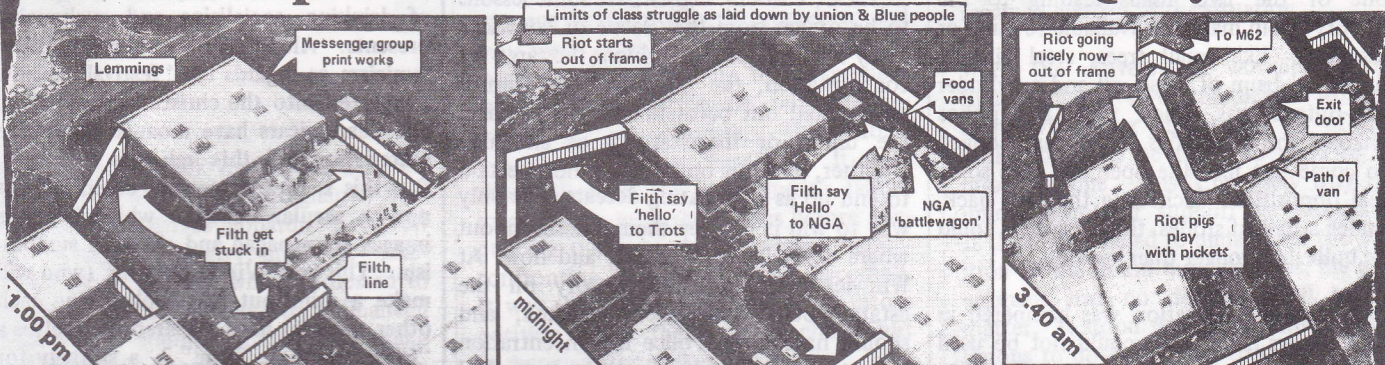
Realising the NGA had played its

ultimate card Shah realised there was little they could actually do. His situation was strengthened by the 'Battle of Winwick Quay' which confirmed his workers resolve not to join the NGA - indeed two of the three remaining members resigned from the union along with Shah and his executives. He announced all previous offers were off the table and issued a further two writs for contempt. An NGA offer to call off picketting if he would suspend these writs was refused - Shah had the satisfaction of forcing the NGA to apply to the court for a seven day adjournment on a promise of good behaviour. Resulting ACAS talks over the following week got nowhere - ironically both sides came closer over the issue of reinstatement around Shah's offer to set up a co-op with £40,000 of equipment and a years guaranteed work for the 'Six'. (Supplemented by promises of work from other print employers). But on the question of the closed shop he refused to budge - they could have one if over 50% of his workers asked for a ballot and 80% voted yes. Knowing there was no pressure the NGA could impose that he could not withstand he merely had to sit tight.

Talks broke down on 9th Dec. Shah went to the High Court and the NGA was fined a further £525,000. To date they had not seriously applied for control of enough funds to pay sickness, retirement and unemployment benefits. Their application now was refused pending a further hearing. The only hope for the NGA was that the TUC would agree to take up the struggle and instruct member unions to give material assistance. The TUC had throughout distanced itself from any illegality, engaged as it was in delicate talks with the govt. over voluntary union reform. In a last ditch attempt to force the issue the NGA called a one day strike of all its members for Dec.14th when NW region TUC had organised a demo in Warrington - well away from Winwick Quay. Either this would force the TUC to honour the resolution at its Wembley conference on the Employment Laws in 1982 to support unions under attack by them. Or it would force the TUC to 'stab them in the back'. After three days of cliffhanging while a rogue vote by the TUC Employment Policy and Organisation Committee was first repudiated by Len Murray and then overturned by the 'Right Wing' majority on the TUC General Council, the latter was the result.

Six month's struggle had only succeeded in getting the NGA's six 'martyrs' the sack, destroying its own credibility as a craft union, and only avoided bringing further ignominy by pulling the same trick as ASLEF - forcing the TUC to 'betray' it.

# The picket line battle of Winwick Quay



## Chronology of the NGA van is

If the mass pickets at the *Stockport Messenger* printing works in Warrington fail to become a *Grunwick-sized Labour Movement* myth, it's only because the NGA called them off just when things seemed to be getting historic.

By the night of Tuesday November 29th., all the ingredients had been put together. Thousands of militants, symbolically encircling Eddie Shah's bunker in a well-worn gesture of working class solidarity. Bathing itself in the reflected glory of pickets three weeks before, when the lorries had been stopped or delayed by a tenth the numbers of people, the 4,000-weak crowd of the 29th. was hopelessly outclassed and outmanoeuvred by the police. As usual, the Left was rushing into the struggle miles too late. All it could do was add 83 names to the roll of honour, to be published in a *Daily Telegraph* court report two days later. Social workers and students outnumbered printers by four to one.

At 9.30 pm, the NGA's Unemployed Chapel bus was starting up the motorway. The Father of the Chapel stands up and gives a little speech :

*"You'll all be wondering what happened to the charter train. Well, British Rail cancelled it at the last moment. Also, we had a phone call from ASLEF. They told us that if we'd taken a train, we'd probably have ended up in a siding somewhere in the sticks. Anticipating this, we booked a fleet of coaches instead. We fully expect road-blocks in a ten-mile radius around the factory, so we'll meet up with the rest of the coaches at Knutsford Services and go in convoy. If we get split up miles from Warrington, I want you to stay on the coach till morning, then we'll go home."*

Reading between the lines, he was telling us that British Rail wouldn't take a dodgy NGA cheque, and they'd had to pay cash up front for the buses. He didn't know the way to Warrington, neither did the driver, and was busy covering himself in case he got lost. We missed the rendezvous, and only found the factory - after wandering around Cheshire Lanes for an hour - with the help of a sympathetic local Minicab driver. (But where was the headline in *Socialist Worker*? **"WORKING CLASS TAKES WRONG ROAD TO SOCIALISM - Saved by Intervention of Petit Bourgeoisie"**)

Of the 4,000 or so picketers, at least half appeared to be experienced tacticians of class struggle. Some were running around in the road, well out of reach of the long arm, shouting *"Come on, link arms and push"* A minority were trying to sabotage these efforts - *"Christ sake don't push so hard, the comrades at the front will get crushed"* As the vanguard of the proletariat was getting itself crushed, concussed or nicked, a further thousand or so watched impassively from a grassy mound across the road, clearly unmoved by appeals such as *"Bastards, why don't you get off your fucking arses and fucking do something, or go home and watch it on your fucking videos?"* - but, of course, edited television highlights are never any substitute for live action.

The police too behaved as though they were involved in historic events, or at least as though they had to cram in as much red-bashing as possible, so as to have a few stories to tell during the boring, routine months ahead.

Having decided that this was to be a historic event, and invested it with so much wider significance, the picket could

not afford to be seen to lose. In fact, the police had been instructed not to lose either. The result was a foregone conclusion, and most people sensed it. The newspaper lorries were never going to have any trouble at all leaving the factory, as the crowd was pushed back, divided and manipulated as and how the police wanted. For the Tactical Aid squad (SPG), it was an opportunity to practise and test crowd-control techniques in a 'live' situation : for the police as a whole, an exciting and mostly enjoyable spell of overtime. But what should we have expected from an event advertised so well in advance as a violent confrontation between us and them?

The point is not that the picket should have been better organised, readier to defend itself, or more numerous. Many of the finer points of street-fighting technique were being debated at the time and afterwards, but the fact is we walked into a fight we had been set up to lose. Neither is it a question of being prepared to fight dirty. The police chose the ground, dictated the issues and tactics of the night, and walked it.

There was, however, one positive development. Early on, the NGA's disputes van and the people in it disappeared from the scene. This spared us the haranguing of union sergeant-majors on megaphones, so that they could not engineer a conflict between 'responsible pickets' and rioters. Later, when the police broke up the crowd with repeated baton-charges, the fighting became much more open, and spread to a wide area around the industrial estate. This was the best action of the night, and not just because it provided instant relief from boredom and cold.

During the pushing-and-shoving, the police not only had the crowd where it

wanted it, but they were able to beat-up and arrest individuals without bother. In the riot, the police looked distinctly more human, suffering most of their casualties without being able to arrest anyone at will.

Barricades were built and set light to, on one of the two roads leading to the factory, from materials available to hand or looted – like small trees, steel girders, fences, a drum of diesel oil and a cylinder of Butane gas. Each time the police charged the barricades, they were obliged to come out into the open and face some real opposition. Each time they fell back, under a hail of stones, the barricades could be built up stronger than before.

The police operation was hampered in other ways ; the road could not be used freely for communications, as all police cars were stoned (at least one Range Rover was forced to take to the fields, though not until it had driven into a steel hawser tied across the road, bringing down a telegraph pole.) Incidentally, the barricades were the most likely way of stopping the lorries, which eventually left in the opposite direction. This, however, is a bit of a side-issue : by now, stopping the lorries was a matter of minor interest. The action was started and developed mainly



Frustration and sub-zero temperatures have brought moments of pure farce as arguments flare between Left-wing factions.

One man screamed with rage at another: "You're a teacher and I used to be a shop steward in a factory—and you call me middle-class. How dare you!"

The real issues of the dispute will soon be forgotten as the name of Warrington is written large in blood.

by local youth from nearby estates. They hadn't come for that reason in the first place. So, at some point the fighting was brought into the open, on ground and on terms that suited us better than the police.

These, I would suggest, are some lessons to be drawn from the 'Battle of Winwicks Quay'. Struggles in which the area of confrontation, the objectives and terms, are worked out beforehand by the police, the union or the state – or all three together, like this one – are almost certain to end up as humiliating defeats. The only way to win is to keep them guessing about where we'll hit them next, and how. At Winwick's Quay, every factory on the estate could have been attacked, and should have been. Police in concentration and at close quarters are difficult to deal with. Broken up in small groups, they are much more vulnerable.

The best activity of the night of November 29th. had nothing to do with the NGA or defending unionism. As *Socialist Worker* so rightly says :

*"(These struggles) will determine how far workers, from post office engineers to peace protestors, from miners to Greenpeace campaigners are able to organise to defend their own lives and living standards."*

— for, indeed, there is little to choose between surrounding a factory in protest at the consequences of capitalist technological progress, and surrounding a missile base in protest at the result of advances in military technique. The real futility of demonstrations like these cannot be compensated for by being wise after the event, or by manufacturing consoling myths, or even by mini-riots. No real challenge can be made without a wholesale and indiscriminate attack on every feature of capitalist life.

The bus taking us back to London was three hours late.

## SEASONS GREETINGS ?



### PISS OFF !

For most people, christmas will be the most important social occasion in December. The holiday will be a period of drinking, socialising and exchanging presents. Along with the forced jollity, cynicism as regards the "festival" is now integrated into the christmas experience. For years vicars have moaned about the materialism of this religious occasion. But this is now somewhat dated, as it is now a secular occasion which borrows images from pagan and christian symbolism. This year 'Virgin Records' (who will make a mint out of people giving each other records) have declared themselves a "Christmas Free Zone" – a strategy for commercialising the cynicism – a subtle new twist.

It is painful to live in this society where the commodity system and its trappings breaks and twists all communal links. This is underlined at a time when the media lays on the jollity. There are still a few occasions when people come together in spontaneous activity. Last year I remember going tobogganing on kitchen trays at Greenwich, I was struck by the fact that this was one of the few occasions when hundreds of people come together to enjoy themselves, without being organised, and without various business people rushing around trying to sell things. No doubt the GLC is trying to come up with ways to organise this – designating official tobogganing slopes.

Meanwhile, back at Trafalgar Square the State is preparing to celebrate the start of 1984 by marshalling the New Years Eve revellers like sheep. Last year they managed to "organise" two deaths. This year they hope that excessive policing will kill any spontaneity without going to such lengths.

The only festivals I'll be interested in will be those where communal spontaneity breaks down ossified relationships – which means pushing back the frontiers of policing, politicking, organising, buying and selling.

Workers Playtime is produced by some members of the London Workers Group. It is not the public face or theoretical journal of the LWG. Articles reflect the thoughts, fantasies and inadequacies of their authors (in no particular order).

Playtime is intended as a forum for discussing the reality of class struggle. If you have something to contribute—news, feedback, whatever—we would like to hear from you. There is no editorial line—but that doesn't mean we don't know what we disagree with.

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The LONDON WORKERS GROUP is an open discussion group involving autonomists, councilists, anarchists and anyone else interested in workplace class struggle from a revolutionary point of view. It meets every Tuesday at 8.15, upstairs at the Metropolitan Pub, 95 Farringdon Road, EC1 (2 mins Farringdon Tube). Anyone is welcome to join in, except party recruiters. If you want to know more but can't face meeting us, or if you want a copy of our free bulletin (a stamp would be nice), write to the address above.

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# Dimbleby Dispute

That paradigm of media 'balance', T.V. superstar David Dimbleby, has emphatically shown that he refuses to be outdone by some tinpot proprietor from up north. However, whilst Dimbleby has frequently been photographed alongside union leaders and Labour MPs, Neil Kinnock has so far failed to stand up in parliament and draw the obvious conclusions.

The background to the journalists' dispute at Dimbleby and Sons Ltd. (The Richmond and Twickenham Times Group) is the 1978 strike throughout the provincial press. After a hard-fought dispute a settlement was reached with the employers' organisation, the Newspaper Society, early in 1979. With the exception of T. Bailey Foreman, a company publishing a newspaper in Nottingham, all the proprietors reinstated the journalists sacked during the strike.

Reinstatement had been made a clear condition of the settlement. Yet in spite of this blatant victimisation, the 28 sacked journalists were left to their own devices. Apart from blowing a lot of hot air, the NUJ simply declared T. Bailey Foreman 'blacked', and placed the journalists on strike pay. The dispute has continued to this day. But the firm has succeeded in bringing out the newspaper with non-NUJ journalists.

## CAN THE HACKS TAKE THE FIRST HURDLE?

The provincial press figures only as a first hurdle in the career strategy of many rising hacks, so the NUJ has far less power to control the supply of labour than the manual and clerical print unions. The blacking of T. Bailey Foreman has only highlighted the sacked journalists' isolation, leaving them dependent on useless gestures of 'sympathy' whilst looking for alternative employment.

Earlier this year Dimbleby sacked NGA members who struck last August against redundancies at the company printing presses. The journalists took no immediate action to support the sacked printers — presumably regarding this as another union's affair.

But Dimbleby was left to find a press not manned by NGA staff. On October 7 journalists on Dimbleby's newspapers were informed that in future the papers

would be printed by TBF. TBF has been manned by non-NGA staff since a dispute over the introduction of new single-key stroke technology in the early seventies. The firm, which is associated with T. Bailey Foreman, was the only viable option for Dimbleby, which lends a twist of irony to the story. After the dismissal of TBF's NGA printers, the NUJ agreed to allow its members to operate the direct-input technology. But stabbing their comrades in the back like this had repercussions for the NUJ.

After consultation with the NUJ leadership, on October 13, the union chapel at Dimbleby's gave notice of a strike to begin four days later. This was in spite of a warning from the editor that no striking journalist would be reemployed in any circumstances.

## HACKS TO THE WALL

The dismissal notice was in fact withdrawn, but a week later Dimbleby sought a court injunction to stop the journalists' action.

The subsequent ruling by the Court of Appeal on December 6 that the journalists' action was 'secondary' turned on the judgment that TBF Printers was a separate legal entity from T. Bailey Foreman.

These mystical 'points of law' need not concern us. Whatever the effect of the employment acts, the journalists' failure dates back to 1979, or even further, to the NGA disputes in the early seventies. No dispute can be regarded as settled when workers remain victimised — it is hopeless trying to pick up the pieces some five years later. And now journalists belatedly find themselves on the same picket line as the sacked NGA printers at Dimbleby Newspapers. Both unions have attacked Dimbleby for 'bad management', 'unreasonableness', and 'negotiating himself into a non-union

corner' as the NUJ mother of the chapel at Dimbleby's recently put it.

But the whole series of disputes illustrates all too clearly the price workers have to pay if they conduct their disputes according to what the trade unions regard as legitimate, let alone what is permitted by the recent employment acts and those few bosses who are prepared to use them to the full.

The current dispute also poses a question for journalists. Contemporary journalism consists of little more than the ability to hack together week after week the same stock stories within the narrow limits of what editors regard as fit for public consumption. Yet there is no shortage of the Woodward and Bernstein type of mythology to convince journalists that they are a cut above your average printworker. Certainly the promise of Fleet Street glamour keeps many in line. All of this will have to go if they are to lay claim to any genuine solidarity with the rest of us working in the media racket.

## HARD HEARTED HANNAH

At any rate we can look forward to some crisp exchanges if Vincent Hannah, the BBC journalists' FOC, is called upon to interview fellow-hack Dimbleby. For at least Eddie Shah had the decency to tear up his own union card — David Dimbleby seems less prepared to damage a brilliant career by doing likewise.

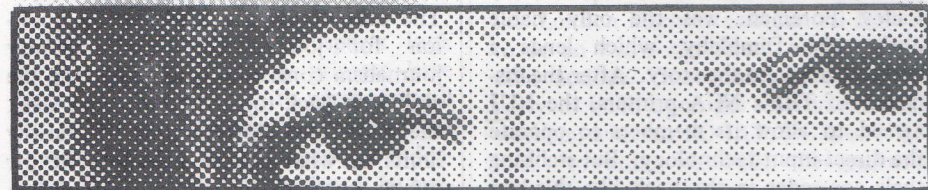


"Then there's the media triangle, where objectivity mysteriously vanishes."

When it comes to stitching-up fellow trade unionists in a print dispute, old hands know best. Eddie Shah, an entrepreneur who had joined the NGA, was left complaining about difficulties in getting a fair deal from union negotiators and resorted to court action. NUJ member David Dimpleby's mask of even-handedness slips as he has to take out injunctions to try and get journalists back to work at his newspaper group. It is left to a socialist, and a proud member of the trade union ASTMS, to show how a workplace can be closed down, and amiable discussions with the unions follow, without dirtying his hands with court actions. Robert Maxwell, head of the printing company BPCC, and the print union SOGAT, have displayed the "acceptable" face of print disputes in their deft handling of the strike by Radio Times printers at Park Royal.

The current action is Maxwell's second attempt to close down Park Royal. The first was threatened earlier this year during a five week strike by SOGAT printers in March and April (see W.P., April '83). They returned to work, with an agreement, initially rejected by SOGAT and the EETPU (the NGA jobs were not at risk), promising a £10 million invest-

ment to replace the 50 year old machinery. The present dispute has arisen from the conditions imposed with this investment - a new shift system and redundancies; but underneath it all a great deal of hatred towards Maxwell as a boss.

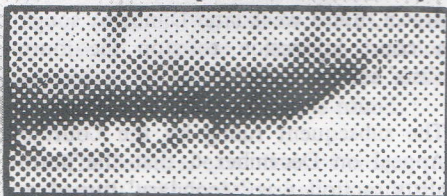


ment to replace the 50 year old machinery. The present dispute has arisen from the conditions imposed with this investment - a new shift system and redundancies; but underneath it all a great deal of hatred towards Maxwell as a boss.

After April, five of the seven presses were dismantled and production moved to East Kilbride in Scotland and Leeds, plants that had covered the printing of the Radio Times when Park Royal was on strike. Park Royal existed solely to produce the Radio Times and The Listener. Whereas it previously produced 2 million of the 3 million print run of the Radio Times it was now to handle only 600,000 copies. This weakened the unions (Park Royal SOGAT members are in the militant London Machine Branch) and reduced costs - at Park Royal printers were earning £14,000 p.a. compared to £8,000 at East Kilbride where productivity is higher. Soon after the announced modernisation BPCC recorded profits of £12.4m (turning over a loss of £1.2m) claiming that these were a result of "the substantial reduction in labour and other overhead costs flowing from the successful implementation, with full trade union support, of the survival plan". The plan of reducing staff levels and improving

productivity had resulted in two plants being closed and two others losing their printing capacity. Workers at Park Royal soon came to realise the implications of modernisation and the 'survival plan'. Maxwell demanded a 75% reduction in jobs - from 360 to 90 - by June. Perhaps it is no coincid-

ence that this demand was made soon after the 'orderly closure', agreed to by the unions, of Odhams in Watford, which Maxwell had purchased for a nominal £1½ million from Reed International in order to close it down. This was to consolidate his hold over colour printing in the UK - contracts worth £30m. per year - at the nearby Sun Printers. The closure resulted in 1,400 redundancies and Maxwell promised no more closures in 1983. The printers at Park Royal



put this statement to the test in their refusal of 'orderly redundancies'.

The June deadline passed but a confrontation arose early in November when SOGAT's refusal to agree to longer shifts and more redundancies as the price of the new web-offset machinery gave Maxwell the excuse to close down the printing plant completely. To this end Maxwell hired Vanguard (sic) Removals to demolish the remaining two presses. The

workers' response was an occupation, claimed initially to involve 100, but more significantly by a group of seven in the plants' electrical sub-station who were able to cut off the power. This meant that none of the typesetting for the Radio Times or The Listener could be carried out. This was a blow to the NGA who had crossed picket lines to work normally during the strike earlier this year. On that occasion they were rewarded by Maxwell putting up signs and logos for a new company, the 'London Typesetting Centre'. The intention all along was to close down Park Royal as a print plant but keep it open for typesetting. This caused a great deal of resentment from other workers who painted up their own slogan - 'NGA cards available for only 20 pieces of silver'.

The occupation of the sub-station was watched anxiously by the print industry because SOGAT printworkers were taking action alongside electricians, who had just left their 'own' union, the EETPU, and joined SOGAT in order to increase their effectiveness as trade unionists. In the earlier strike the electricians had 'pulled the plugs', but power was quickly restored and maintained because as members of EETPU they were not party to SOGAT's dispute. This time round the continued disruption has demonstrated the potential for, and necessity of, links between crafts in a workplace, even though it took the notion of single-union discipline to bring this about.

In both disputes Maxwell has claimed that the issues have been forced by the Central London Branch of SOGAT, who, in his view, must be taken on as they represent a dangerous force often at odds with the SOGAT national leadership. Maxwell claimed to have made 'considerable progress' in negotiations with Bill Keys, General Secretary of SOGAT over the Park Royal question, when the Central London Branch decided to live up to its reputation by supporting the striking Park Royal workers with the blacking of all BPCC publications - including The Sunday Times, Observer, Mail on Sunday magazines, Woman, Woman's Own, Woman's Realm. This immediately hit the distribution of the Sunday colour supplements. Maxwell called off negotiations, which had nearly resulted in a return to work, complaining that they were meaningless if the union could not control its members. Maxwell issued dismissal notices to the 280 on strike at Park Royal and 'protective' (sic), or possible dismissal notices to another 257

# Maxwell's Thirty~ p



at Park Royal, 152 at East Kilbride and 540 at Bristol. This threat to over 1,200 jobs had its intended effect of pressuring the SOGAT executive to take action against the Central London Branch.

## WHEATON EARTHS GOING ON?

The London Machine Branch contacted every branch and chapel in all 25 BPCC plants to win support, but with little effect. This lack of solidarity allowed Maxwell to reach agreement with the NGA and SOGAT on a National Executive level in order to isolate the strikers and the Central London Branch who were blacking distribution. Typesetting was transferred to Wheatons, a BPCC plant in Exeter. Workers at Purnells in Bristol maintained that they wanted to carry on working so long as it kept to the 'status quo', i.e. they were prepared to print the colour pages, but no more. Printers at East Kilbride decided not to fight plans to transfer production from Park Royal to their plant. This was in part due to the protective notices issued against them by Maxwell (who during the first strike sacked 114 who took sympathetic action and refused to handle plates typeset at Park Royal), but also reflects the difficulties encountered by the Park Royal strikers - a hostile union bureaucracy making concessions to management while their own lack of direct contact (not simply a result of geographical distance), failed to capitalise on dislike and distaste for Maxwell.

## DREAMING OF A BLACKED CHRISTMAS

It was at this point that SOGAT became involved in legal proceedings. Maxwell was not party to the injunction taken out on 23rd November by 11 London wholesalers and distributors (including WH Smiths and Menzies). The week-long blacking of BPCC publications had hit a significant proportion of their trade. The SOGAT executive 'advised' Central London Branch to comply with the court order and stop the blacking - an illegal 'secondary action' under the Employment Act - but they refused. The executive's response was to make the Park Royal strike official, and order the blacking to be lifted. Thus the executive took the dispute under their control, and while they imposed blacking of the phototypesetting now being carried out in Exeter,

they broke the effective actions being carried out against the BPCC empire.

Negotiations between Maxwell and Sogat continued, but broke down on the 30th. BPCC, in conjunction with BBC publications (publishers of the Radio Times and the Listener), took out an injunction on the 2nd December to stop the blacking of the phototypeset negatives from Exeter, which had resulted in the loss of one complete print run of the Radio Times. This litigation was a careful application of pressure. Maxwell stated he would give SOGAT time before resorting to further legal action, citing their responsible attitude in lifting the blacking of BBC publications when ordered to do so. In addition, the executive was under pressure from other plants to allow printing of the Bumper Christmas issue of the Radio Times - double the size and with a print run of 9 million copies - three times the usual. East Kilbride and Leeds threatened to



print even if the blacking of plates was not officially lifted. The executive gave the go-ahead to print after the printers at Bristol backed a motion deploring support for a minority - the Park Royal workers - and a disregard of the wishes of a majority involved in the printing of the Radio Times. This attitude serves as a suitable epitaph, not just for the Park Royal strike, and not just to the other current disputes, but to the attitude of 'unionism' in general and the 'new realism' in particular.

The resumption of printing, even though it looks as if the London edition of the Radio Times may be lost, came as a relief to Maxwell, who had been given

an ultimatum by the BBC to get the Christmas issue published or lose the contract. Maxwell was prepared to put money on the negotiating table to ensure printing; the rumour being that he needed the contract in order to be in a secure financial position to bid for shares when the Mirror Group is sold off. The closure of Park Royal points towards this - a process of asset-stripping that most BPCC employees fear. For example, Maxwell - having closed down Odhams - was hoping to develop the site in a £20m. deal with Savacentre, the superstore chain owned by Sainsbury and BHS.

During negotiations over Park Royal with SOGAT and the NGA, Maxwell became involved in the Shah/Stockport Messenger dispute. His concern was over the threat of a nationwide strike, and he voiced his fear that the industry would lose orders abroad and would be "wiped out". This apocalyptic vision was merely an expression of his anxiety to ensure printing at BPCC, especially of the Radio Times, but also of colour work such as the Argos catalogue, which BPCC had clawed back from abroad. Maxwell is dubiously reported to have made a £4m. offer for the Messenger group - his real ambition is Fleet Street, not the provincial press. In February '81 he made a bid for the Times, and lost to Murdoch (2 months later he took over BPC, now BPCC, for £10m.) In July '82 he announced he was no longer interested in Fleet Street, but at the same time he was keeping an eye on the Observer, and was planning a major printing centre in the Isle of Dogs, to which the Telegraph is expected to move.

Maxwell seems to have got what he wanted out of the dispute. The contract is safe - if only for the fact that BPCC is the only single company capable of handling the work involved. Park Royal is closed and will probably open as just a typesetting centre, if at all, thus saving his £10m 'investment'. Production of the Radio Times has been diversified away from the expensive and militant London plant (where wildcat strikes have lost 16 million copies in the past 18 months, Maxwell claiming that £20,000 worth of production per week was costing £100,000 in wages) to the cheaper and less militant provinces. Last Christmas, production was concentrated at Park Royal, with colour printing done in Bristol and a small print run for some Northern editions at East Kilbride. Now

# piece Silver Hammer



it is spread between Exeter (or Park Royal) for typesetting, colour and perhaps other work at Purnells, litho printing at East Kilbride, and web offset in Leeds. And all this has been achieved, in the end, with union acquiescence.

For the workforce, prospects look bleak. The Park Royal printers have added another example to what Maxwell has previously described as "a record of non-cooperation and bloody mindedness..." The 'victory' achieved in preventing a closure in April was realised simply as a stay of execution. This time, with Maxwell removing the remaining machinery, they had virtually no chance of achieving anything, given the lack of solidarity from other plants. But they achieved nothing because they did nothing. Maxwell feared the dispute spreading, while SOGAT (as you would expect) and the workers themselves (less understandably) left his fears unrequited. No pickets were sent to ask for support at other plants, simply a half-hearted call for blacking from the executive once the dispute was made official.

Muted squeals of outrage resulted from the court injunctions banning the sympathetic action by other SOGAT members in blacking BPPC publications. The gibberish about 'outlawing class solidarity' only obscures the fact that it was only 'sympathetic' action anyway. The blacking was seen in terms of giving Maxwell, in the dismissive tone adopted by Bill Keys, "a bloody nose". What was needed was a kick in the vitals — his (re)productive system. BPPC magazines, and more significantly the Radio Times for a week following the start of the Park Royal strike, were being produced in other plants. No rhetoric of class solidarity here. The blacking by the Central London Branch was doomed to failure under the Employment Acts, but the essential point is that autonomous action is doomed to fail — to not achieve its aim — if it is action

taken in isolation. It simply becomes an issue of defiance of the union executive. Great in theory but little in practise.

While not expecting the SOGAT executive to spread the dispute, the failure of the London Machine and Central Branch to do so was a significant omission in their actions. There was a great opportunity to build upon the resentment most workers, whether SOGAT, NGA or NUJ, have towards Maxwell. Geographical limitations offer some excuse, but no attempt was made in the London area to approach the NGA (partly because of animosity over them crossing picket lines in April) or NUJ members working on the Radio Times — who had themselves asked for and received support from SOGAT members when they went on strike 2 years ago. In fact, the NUJ and NGA worked together setting pages in Exeter even while the plates were being blacked elsewhere. The most significant aspect has been the activity of the engineers switching from the EETPU to SOGAT, and by their actions and occupation increasing the effectiveness of the strike at Park Royal the second time round.

The national executives of unions are constantly criticised for 'selling out' disputes, and in moments of lucidity the function of unions are analysed as such. The Park Royal strike demonstrates that despite militancy at Branch level, workers will still fail to spread strike action, with or without the hindrance of unions. Disputes which are 'localised' — which remain restricted in geographical and industrial terms — generally receive only localised solidarity. Appeals to other workers over questions which involve differentials or competition between workers, such as redundancy, wages, work practises and so on, merely confirm entrenched positions. Disputes will only realistically widen to involve other workers, and other individuals, when the demands themselves widen beyond mere sectional interests.

## Battle of

Although given scant attention in the British media, public services in Belgium were paralysed by mass strikes in late September 1983. The Belgian trade unions took no initiative, but a series of rank and file actions began on Thursday 8 September with a wildcat strike by rail workers in Charleroi. This was a spontaneous walkout in protest against measures imposed by the Martens government to stimulate the economy at the expense of workers' living standards. These measures affected all workers, but were aimed primarily at public employees — including railworkers.

The strike movement spread immediately, at first to other Walloon (French-speaking area) towns, principally Liege, Namur and Mons, and then into Flemish towns such as Ostend, Kortrijk etc. On Monday 12, only a few local trains ran in Flanders, and before long all rail traffic was halted throughout the country. The rail strike was a signal which many other public sector workers followed. A 'hot autumn' had begun. As one postal worker explained, "The trade union movement went for a bus ride, but the workers took the TGV." (TGV=the new French high speed train).

The growing discontent of striking postal, telephone and sanitary workers meant the unions could no longer ignore their demands. The social democratic union federation (FGTB/ABW), as well as the Christian confederation (CSC/ACV) had no choice but to declare the strikes official on Monday 12. For ten days, public transport, postal and telephone services were almost completely halted, whilst there were periodic interruptions to the radio and television networks. Bank employees, council workers and teachers joined the stoppages; workers succeeded in closing the port of Anvers, and not a single car ferry left Belgium. The strike began to make an impact on a number of private firms whose activity was often brought to a halt through a lack of supplies.

# the Belge

The Belgian employers' confederation reacted violently. They indignantly declared that the strikes jeopardised the future of Belgian industry, and that "responsible trade unions, which professed to an awareness of the country's financial difficulties, should immediately take every possible measure to end a situation which was becoming intolerable". In putting it like this, the employers were expressing precisely what is the function of trade unions in capitalist society. But by the same token they were showing their imperfect understanding of how the unions might best fulfil this function. They were barking up the wrong tree, since the trade unions, far from making strikes 'official' in order to create an intolerable situation, were making strikes official because they too regarded the situation as 'intolerable'. Giving their 'support' to the strikes was the only way the trade unions could regain control over the workers. It was the only way the strikes could be brought to an end without loss of face for the bureaucrats.

But what was not quite clear to the employers was, on the contrary, abundantly clear to the workers. "The trade union leadership is composed of arseholes who

want to keep us under the thumb" explained a worker - an accurate assessment of the relationship between workers and unions.

Reading their own declarations in the Belgian press, one would think that the trades union executive was also violently opposed to the cabinet's proposals. But they were purely verbal reactions, which moreover only lasted up to the moment when the workers came out spontaneously in open struggle. The unions' 'anger' amounted to very little. It arose above all from the government's failure to negotiate with the unions before announcing the reduction in wages, thereby confronting them with a fait accompli. It was this that forced the unions into a position where they had no choice but to recognise the strikes.

## MILITANT OSTENDANCY

This explains why it took the unions a little longer than usual to put an end to the 'intolerable situation'. But they nevertheless achieved this with two moves. Firstly, the leadership of the Christian unions broke the united front that the strikes had established, and then the socialist union bureaucracy (not without a good deal of malice) followed suit. Pressure from the rank and file to continue the strike remained strong. A group of workers at Anvers railway station told a journalist, "if we don't force the fifth Martens government to give in with this strike, then nothing can stop them from making really savage attacks on the whole working class".

The government shared this opinion. In order to remain in control, they made

every effort to appease the workers with empty gestures: vague promises about the industrial code and safeguarding pensions. But they stood by the 'sacrifices' they were imposing on the public and council workers, and, what's more, acted to dispense with the traditional bi-yearly salary increases as soon as the trade unions regained control of the situation.

Were the Anvers rail workers proved right? In our view, the Belgian government will never give in to an official strike, but can be made to yield to an unofficial one. This is precisely why the unions gave their 'support' to the strikes. If the bosses failed to understand the position of the union bureaucracies, the government had no doubts at all in the matter. It stood firm and waited for the unions to do the job for them. They had confidence in the arseholes, and the arseholes proved themselves worthy of it.

## GOING DOWN LIKE A LEAD WALLOON

The strike is over, though it goes without saying that the workers' anger remains, and their grievances run deep. The unions may have extinguished a social conflagration, but resentments continue to smoulder. This is the conclusion of many Belgians in both Walloon and Flemish areas: there has developed a profound crisis of confidence in the trade union movement. Union officials are witnessing the evaporation of their influence and facing violent criticism in numerous meetings around the country. In many people's opinion, the atmosphere is such that the slightest incident could lead to a resumption of the great strike movement of 1960-61, but springing this time from the workers themselves and not the 'trade union movement'.

## THE MARTENS HAVE LANDED

The unions have done their best to grovel and apologise to their memberships. The Christian union has been particularly exposed to criticism, having been the first to put down the struggle. Of course, a lot of this criticism springs from illusions as to the nature of unionism. The fact is that the government includes leaders of the Christian union and their political associates. But it is a growing awareness of facts like this which may distance Belgian workers even further from the union godfathers and lead them to take command of their own destinies.

The Martens government announced recently that Belgium finds itself at a crossroads. This is no less so for the Belgian working class.



Christian and Socialist Officials appeal over the heads of the Workers

# KNOWING Y

It's enough to

Cashing in on the continuing disillusionment with or apathy towards the trade unions, the Tories have launched their latest reform proposals under the banner "Giving the unions back to their members". The new bill is intended to force the unions to hold elections to national executive positions every five years, and to weaken the Labour Party by requiring them to hold regular referendums on their political levies.

These, at any rate, are the proposals on which any 'debate' will concentrate. The union bureaucracies' riposte is to oppose 'outside interference' with independent organisations. Of much greater importance to us though is the proposal to compel the unions to hold secret ballots before their members can take industrial action. As it is, workers usually have to face an assortment of bureaucratic obstacles if they come out on strike — unions can strangle effective action by isolating local disputes, or by taking control away from the workers themselves once they have recognised a dispute as 'official'. The complicated machinery of balloting union members aims to make any immediate shopfloor action virtually impossible. Both parties in the great debate will obscure this concrete reality behind a barrage of democratic verbiage.

The origins of all democratic organisation lies in the need to create social cohesion in a society where all natural community is absent. The separation between people which arose with private property, demanded institutions which could regulate the relations between individuals in order to serve what was perceived as the 'common good'.

The modern state certainly requires 'authority' in order to carry out its function: democracy does not exclude force or dictatorial forms of government. But the democratic state is equally the guarantor of conciliation and must be seen to rise above the class divisions which give it its existence. So, whilst the state must provide social stability, this demands in some measure the participation of its citizens. The state cannot appear merely arbitrary, whether it assumes a unitary or pluralist nature. This is why even the most dictatorial regimes must adopt a show of parliamentarism and democracy.

Trade unions appeared in specific capitalist conditions which have long since passed, yet their form has been exported to every corner of the globe. As

organisations which represent the interests of workers — which for capitalism are just 'variable capital', living labour power — they are essential to capitalist development which requires a level of 'harmony' or 'understanding' between all its competing interests. As organisations charged with disciplining a class whose very existence poses a threat to society, the trade unions do sterling work in keeping alive the myth of democratic participation amongst those who have least to gain from it.

It is hardly surprising, then, that both the bureaucratic faction seeking to reduce the role of the unions in economic management (the Tories and SDP) and those seeking to augment it (Labour and the Left) are couching their demands in democratic terms. Nor is it surprising that Len Murray and co. went through the ritual of 'bowing to the verdict of the people' before talking to Tebbit about the proposed reforms. (In reality, the trade unions are engaged in a constant dialogue with the government, whoever happens to be in power. They are represented on hundreds of government committees. The representation of 'opposition' is one of democracy's most important functions).

Behind the rhetoric, the intended outcome of trade union reform is to reduce shopfloor activity — an outcome in which both the government and the trade union bureaucracy have an interest. This is not to say that there is no conflict of interest involved. The trade unions and the Tory Party are grouped into opposing interest blocs whose disputes are what pass as 'politics'. Of course these conflicts are presented in a mystified form, since to be effective, they demand a level of public participation.

The usual objection to this view of trade unions is that, whatever their present shortcomings, they form a focal point for working class community. They are 'where the working class is organised'.

But the substance of this claim has greatly diminished, with the disappearance of many former aspects of working class existence. Working class community was once a much more easily identifiable phenomenon — with labour-intensive heavy industries dominating large districts, the union apparatus could form the backbone of a community. This may still persist in some areas. The reaction of Barnsley coalminers to pit closures was against the wishes of the union bureaucracy, but was conducted through the trade union apparatus, which still commands much greater influence over local life than is the case in most industries. But such instances have become except-



# OUR ONIONS

make you weep

ional. We may be more acutely aware of the dissolution of close-knit working class community in London (especially since the break-up of the docklands) but the suburbanisation of workers is a nationwide phenomenon.

## ONIONS – A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

But even if the trade union can be seen as a focus of identity, by definition, this must be an identity with the place of work. Not with our needs and desires as human beings – which is the basis for any real community, but with the focal point of our alienation as commodities at the service of capitalism! This is why

programmes to democratise the trade unions, to increase participation (whether this means atomised suburbanites passively filling in ballot forms, or formally associated individuals passively raising hands at the request of bureaucrats) must be seen as being aimed at reinforcing our integration into waged existence, through the lies of 'freedom of choice' or 'grassroots control', depending on whether you read the Sun or the Guardian.

The other tired line of argument – that trade unions represent gains from past struggles – obscures the specific circumstances in which trade unions came into existence, and how these circumstances have changed. The rapid growth of the productive forces under capitalism has changed the nature of exploitation.

Capitalism took centuries to emerge from feudal society, and establish itself as the dominant mode of production. The technical superiority of early capitalist over precapitalist forms of production lay in the cooperation and concentration of various labour processes. Manufacture based on a handicraft division of labour displaced fragmented domestic industry.

The workers in these manufactures sold their *labour power* to a capitalist, whereas the domestic craftsman sold the *product of his labour* to a merchant, retaining control or ownership of the tools of his trade.

But although the worker had been dispossessed of the instruments of his labour, the labour process still rested on his skill, qualifications and know-how. In short, labour was still of much greater importance in the technical processes of production than capital. Trade qualifications meant that workers were not easily interchangeable, and competition between workers much less than was later the case.

This gave the early combinations a great leverage when confronting employers. It is scarcely surprising, then, that from the fourteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, trades combinations were ruthlessly outlawed in Britain.

As capitalism established itself as the dominant mode of production, and manufacture was consolidated, the statutes

which had been enforced against wage labourers for four centuries came to be seen increasingly as an unnecessary and cumbersome burden. In 1813 the laws for the regulation of wages were repealed. "They became an absurd anomaly as soon as the capitalist began to regulate his factory by his own private legislation, and was able to make up the wage of the agricultural labourer to the indispensable minimum by the poor rate." (Capital I,8)

The legalisation of the unions followed a similar logic. The repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824 was easily passed through a corrupt and unreformed parliament, with a campaign by the bourgeois radicals Place and Hume, largely on the basis of employers' own testimony. The later Act of 1825 restricted trade union activity to the negotiation of wages and working conditions. Although the state had ditched a number of cumbersome statutes, it would not hesitate to invoke the common law if trade unions went beyond their legitimate function. It was only over the course of a century that a legal identity became clearly defined for the unions.

## IS THE CNT A SPANISH ONION?

But the unions never challenged wage slavery. They acted as defensive mechanisms to wring concessions out of employers by collective bargaining. Unions served as a counterweight to the power of individual capitalists, whilst the logic of the capitalist economy as a whole exerted its influence over both. "The workers combine in order to achieve equality of a sort with the capitalist in their contract concerning the sale of their labour. This is the whole rationale (the logical basis) of the trade unions." (T.J. Dunning, (Secretary to the London Consolidated Society of Bookbinders), 'Trades Unions and Strikes...' Quoted from Marx's Unedited Chapter of Capital.)

Unions enabled workers to prevent the price of their labour falling below its true economic price: the value of labour power, that is, the minimum necessary in a given society at a given moment for the working class to reproduce itself. (In other words enough to keep the worker and his/her family alive but at the mercy of the employer.)

Cont. Over



Even as a defensive organisation, the union was unable to go beyond these local and partial successes. Wider struggles, not least against the extension of the working day, were overtaken by capital's own movement.

The development of new technological processes cut the ground from under the craft unions' feet. At first the intensification of capitalist competition had expressed itself mainly as the lengthening of the working day beyond the limits of human endurance and the widespread introduction of child labour, all with the active support of the state. By extending the working day exploitation was increased in simple, *absolute* terms. Every additional hour added to the surplus value produced. But there are obvious physical limitations to the increase in *absolute surplus value*. By introducing new technology, the output per worker per day is increased. So, whilst the length of the working day may remain constant, a greater proportion of the day is spent producing surplus value: surplus labour time is increased *relative to* necessary labour time (the labour time necessary to pay the worker's wages).

### GRESS MATERIALISM

The capitalist's motive in introducing new technology is that he can reduce the price of his product below the competitive market average, and thus enlarge his share of the market, whilst at the same time getting a larger than average return of surplus value on each commodity produced. So his goal in introducing new technology is super-profits. But of course, once his industrial competitors have adopted similar technology these super-profits are wiped out. The

value of commodities is equalised downwards, and the increase in *relative surplus value* is generalised throughout the industry.

Technology in its specifically capitalist form has an additional benefit for the capitalist class as a whole: whereas in early manufacture, the worker still dominates the instruments of production, in large scale industry the machine (= capital = dead labour) dominates the living labour of the worker. The machine assumes all his skill and craft. The worker is effectively reduced to a mere extension of the machine. This is the basis of modern factory discipline.

Hence one of the fundamental supports used by the working class to impose the sale of labour power at its value — trade and qualification — progressively disappears. Capital increasingly turns out not 'workers' in any qualitative sense, but interchangeable proletarians capable of being moved from one job, industry or region to another. This intensified competition between workers leaves the craft unions having to fight an impossible rear-guard action against some of the effects of technological change.

At the same time, competition is intensified between the waged and the unwaged. Economic expansion — the accumulation of capital — is translated less directly into job creation as capital is increasingly reinvested in more advanced machinery, and only incidentally into new employment. Consequently there is less scope for the trade unions to exploit economic upturn to raise wages. Wages are stabilised within the narrow limits of capital's requirements. "The silent comp-

ulsion of economic relations sets its seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker." (Marx)

### CELERIED STAFF

The growing domination of the productive process by capital completes the mystification of the relationship between wage labour and production. Throughout capitalism, wages appear to be payment for the product of labour (this is the basis of the commonly held view that profits are derived from the circulation of commodities, i.e. profits arise from a swindle perpetuated against the consumer). In fact, wages in no way reflect the value of the product, but the value of *labour power* (the minimum socially necessary for the worker's maintenance). Anyone who doubts this should try comparing the value of a carworkers' output with the value of his wages! But once capital has attained total (or real) domination of labour, the mystification is reinforced, since it is capital, not labour, which appears to be productive. Furthermore, wage labour is generalised throughout society. The middle classes, whose numbers and power are first magnified with their importance as a technocratic class charged with managing more complex production processes, and later as the class charged with the social management of society as a whole, are paid in a similar way to the workers. Thus wage labour no longer appears synonymous with the production of surplus value.

In the early period of the capitalist mode of production, the period of manufacture, when capital only dominated labour partially or *formally*, the value of labour power remained fairly constant. This is because it is only rapid technological pro-



A big step forward for capitalist technology: the first assembly line, Ford's Park Plant, 1913.

gress in the production of commodities necessary for the maintenance of the working class which reduces the input of resources (labour-time) necessary to reproduce labour power. Consequently the movement of wages only represents oscillations around the value of labour power — an increase in wages automatically implies a fall in profits, and conversely, one of the ways to increase the production of surplus value is to reduce wages. This relation is immediately apparent, and workers therefore combine in the factory to resist the attacks of capital.

### DO ONIONS GIVE YOU HOLYTOSIS?

But in mature capitalism, in the phase of the *real domination of labour by capital* it becomes possible, as a result of the increase in the productivity of labour and the consequent falling value of commodities, to increase workers' real wages (buying power), whilst reducing *relative wages*. This is because the proportion of the working day necessary to meet a workers' wages is reduced. It becomes possible to raise wages whilst simultaneously increasing the rate and mass of surplus value.

At an immediate level, this phenomenon greatly reinforces capital's potential for class domination, and the working class (at least, in the capitalist heartlands of the world market) is more readily integrated into the capitalist state.

The reduction of *relative wages* occurs without any apparent personal intervention by 'the capitalist' whatsoever. The action of technological progress on workers' relative wages results automatically from commodity production, within which labour is itself a commodity. This is why the unions are impotent to challenge the fall in relative wages. The struggle against the fall in relative wages is not one fought on the basis of defending a price — it is not fought in the terms of a market economy. On the contrary, it is an assault on the wages system itself, against capitalist society in its entirety.

In the modern era, the unions are cultivated by the bourgeoisie as brokers of labour power, as managers of variable capital. In particular, they have the job of disciplining workers into long-term acceptance of the intensification of labour, through speed-ups on the line etc. which new technological processes entail. As permanent organisations working within the framework of commodity exchange, they form an indispensable defensive barrier to any assault against "the holy of holies, against the law of capitalism which tends towards a progressive reduction in relative wages". (Luxemburg)



Technology versus the workers : A container berth at Tilbury. Ten miles downriver from Canning Town's old docks, its technology means only a tenth of the old number of workers are needed and the containers can be stripped elsewhere by lower-paid workers.

In a period of generalised recession, however, the increase in real wages can no longer comfortably coexist with the reduction of relative wages. With the rate of profit under constant pressure, capital needs to direct the maximum surplus value towards its own requirements. In these circumstances the role of trade unions as institutions which objectively defend capitalist relations can become more apparent. Their function as part of capital's management structure becomes all the clearer when they are actually negotiating cuts in real wages and redundancies, or when any 'benefits' they win are at the expense of workers in other sectors.

Unfortunately, this does not imply that the situation is necessarily pregnant with revolutionary possibility, at least in the short term. To assume so is to underestimate the compulsion of capitalist relations, and the weight of capitalist ideology. Even where workers do challenge the traditional union management structure, this is generally in a way that does not pose any fundamental threat to the system as a whole. The Solidarity movement in Poland swept away the old union structures, but only to fill the vacuum with a more democratic body, administered by workers raised from the shopfloor, under the tutelage of Poland's alternative ruling elite. In Britain, too, militant workers often see the solution in terms of a change of union or a change of leadership. But here, where the state is more

pluralist, the ruling class can itself set in motion and dominate the democratic dialogue, forestalling any unnecessary upheavals.

### ENDIVE STORY

Indeed, the current 'debate' about union democracy is no more than the ideological sugar-coating on moves to redefine the role of the unions (yet again) in contemporary management structures. This does not require any 'conspiracy' on the part of the ruling class. Bourgeois politics is nothing but a constant search for an elusive social equilibrium in which commodities (including labour power) can be bought and sold to maximum effect. In the to-ing and fro-ing of bourgeois politics, some institutions inevitably gain at the expense of others as a result of any 'reforms'. All of these institutions claim to have the public interest at heart. We are not convinced.

I am not suggesting for one minute that the question must always be 'all or nothing' or that reformist struggles can be ignored. Reformist struggles are an inescapable reality, and the source of experience for the future. But it is important to understand that so long as they remain under the control of the unions (or for that matter any institution with a permanent interest in the capitalist set-up), these struggles will not so much be 'sold out' as pushed in such a direction as to serve the long term interests of capital rather than of the working class.

# PEACE-ING IT ALL TOGETHER

To say that the participants in the Peace Movement have no analysis of the real causes of war, and that therefore they will be unable to prevent war, however big their movement becomes, is a banality.

"Ban the Bomb" they say, yet even an international treaty outlawing the possession and development of nuclear weapons (beyond the wildest dreams of CND, this) would simply be a worthless piece of paper which could be torn up and revoked by the government of any nation state that thought it appropriate to do so. Even if all the factories making nuclear weapons were demolished, they could always be rebuilt if it were felt to be 'in the National Interest'. Even the most 'left wing' supporters of CND simply try to supplement the central demands with other meaningless slogans like 'Britain Out of NATO' — as if any nation state, economically integrated into the world capitalist order, as they all are, could avoid involvement in imperialist rivalries.

Worse still, many 'Peace' activists see the alternative to nuclear weapons as being a defence policy which makes use of conventional weapons — as if a nuclear war wouldn't start as an escalation of conventional war. We can also see here the hypocrisy of CND's 'non-violence' policy — violence is clearly not the issue, since the likes of Bruce Kent defend the right of the British state, and therefore the British ruling class, to use violence to defend its interests. What they are against is people using violence to threaten these interests.

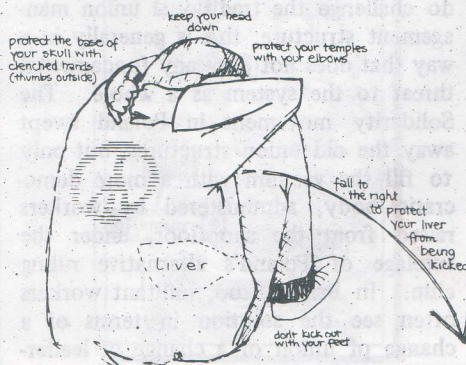
Despite the 'make-them-see-sense' rhetoric of the peace movement, sections of the world-wide ruling class do not pursue warlike policies towards each other because they are mad or irresponsible, but in order to defend their economic class interests. In practice, this means seizing the productive apparatus, markets, labour force and raw materials of rival capitalist interest groups, or sometimes just embarking on nationalistic adventures, which have the propaganda effect of reinforcing their power as a class.

Even though the US and USSR are supposed to have had their own separate spheres of influence since 1945, they have carried on wars, directly or indirect-

ly, in the 'Third World' almost continuously, killing more people than died in World War 2.

Clearly, to carry out these policies, the capitalist interest groups need more than just a few nuclear bombs to blow the world to bits with. They need large land armies to occupy territory, navies to block and defend commercial sea routes, and so on. This is why, in the present period of economic crisis, the super-powers are busily building up their conventional forces (particularly for the purpose of rapid intervention) and maintaining mass armies of occupation along with their nuclear arsenals. It is simply ridiculous to think that the next world war will begin with a couple of buttons being pressed and end four minutes later in Armageddon, though the Armageddon bit could turn out right.

Nuclear weapons aren't just there as a final trump card which a Nation State or a Superpower can play if it looks as though they might lose a conventional war, though this is one of their functions. Their other important function is to act as a means of intimidating the mass of the population into submission by fostering identification with 'their own' ruling class. Citizens are told "the bomb is terrible, our enemies have it and intend to use it against us. Only the armaments and negotiating skills of our rulers can save us." In the case of many Peace Movement people, the feeling of impotence produced is so great that not only do they almost completely ignore other



weapons of mass destruction (e.g. chemical and biological ones), that they propose conventional war as the only realistic alternative.

In this sort of climate, it is very easy for the mainstream forces on the Left of Capital to play a major role in organising the peace movement as a means of campaigning for their own particular 'realistic alternative' — the election of a Left government. The Peace Movement provides a convenient focus for them at a time when they are unable to put forward any credible alternative economic strategy. In France, where the 'socialists' are in power, there are certainly nuclear weapons, but almost no Peace campaigners.

But more than this, in a society where there is increasing social atomisation, leading to everyone becoming afraid of everyone else, the bomb becomes a focus for all sorts of other nameless fears about violence and desolation (bored with video nasties? Try a CND leaflet or the latest disaster movie, *The Day After*). It is also the pretext for a kind of alternative Peace Culture (analogous to the 'Alternative Society' of the sixties, and sometimes just as mystical) stretching all the way from pacifist punks and Greenhamites to respectable middle-class demagogues, all thinking nice thoughts about each other and carefully avoiding any potentially disruptive debate, in fact avoiding communication altogether.

Of course, this doesn't only apply to the Peace Movement, almost any political involvement, however superficially radical can become simply an alternative mode of survival in this society — 'the goal is nothing, the movement is everything'. Perhaps the greatest disaster that could befall the Peace Movement would be if the government called its bluff and gave in, or appeared to give in, to its demands. Something similar to this actually happened in 1964, when the Test Ban Treaty was signed and the Peace Movement virtually disappeared.

But what of the possibility for the creation of a real movement against war?

To wage war, the ruling class needs to gain the consent and active participation of the working class, just as they do to wage peace.

Clearly, there can be no talk of simply creating 'an anti-militarist movement along class lines'. War is not a special issue which can be dealt with separately, it is an inherent feature of capitalism, and any struggle against war has got to be a struggle for the destruction of the totality of market relations.