

## AN APPEAL TO THE POLICE

We, the unemployed workers, are fighting for Bread, for Work, Against the Means Test, for No More Economies.

You London Police know what the Governments' Economies have meant for us. As you walk the streets you see on every side of you the hunger, the misery, the bitter suffering forced on us and our families.

You, also, do not escape. To-day you are faced with another pay cut. Despite promise made you, despite your Albert Hall protest, the Government bluntly tells you that "there is no alternative but to insist on the full police economies decided, on last year."

Yet these same people rely on you to smash our fight against starvation.

They use you repeatedly to break up our Demonstrations. At Hyde Park, on Thursday, they ordered you to attack us. And they expect you to do the same again at Tuesday's Demonstration; To answer our cry for bread with batons.

Why do it? Why act as thugs against hungry men and women? Why fight for the parasites who wallow in luxury while we, the masses, starve?

We call on you. Help us in the fight to end the economies. Keep out of the way on Tuesday. Your own relatives. are among our number. And only by supporting our fight against the economies can you defeat the cut in your own pay.

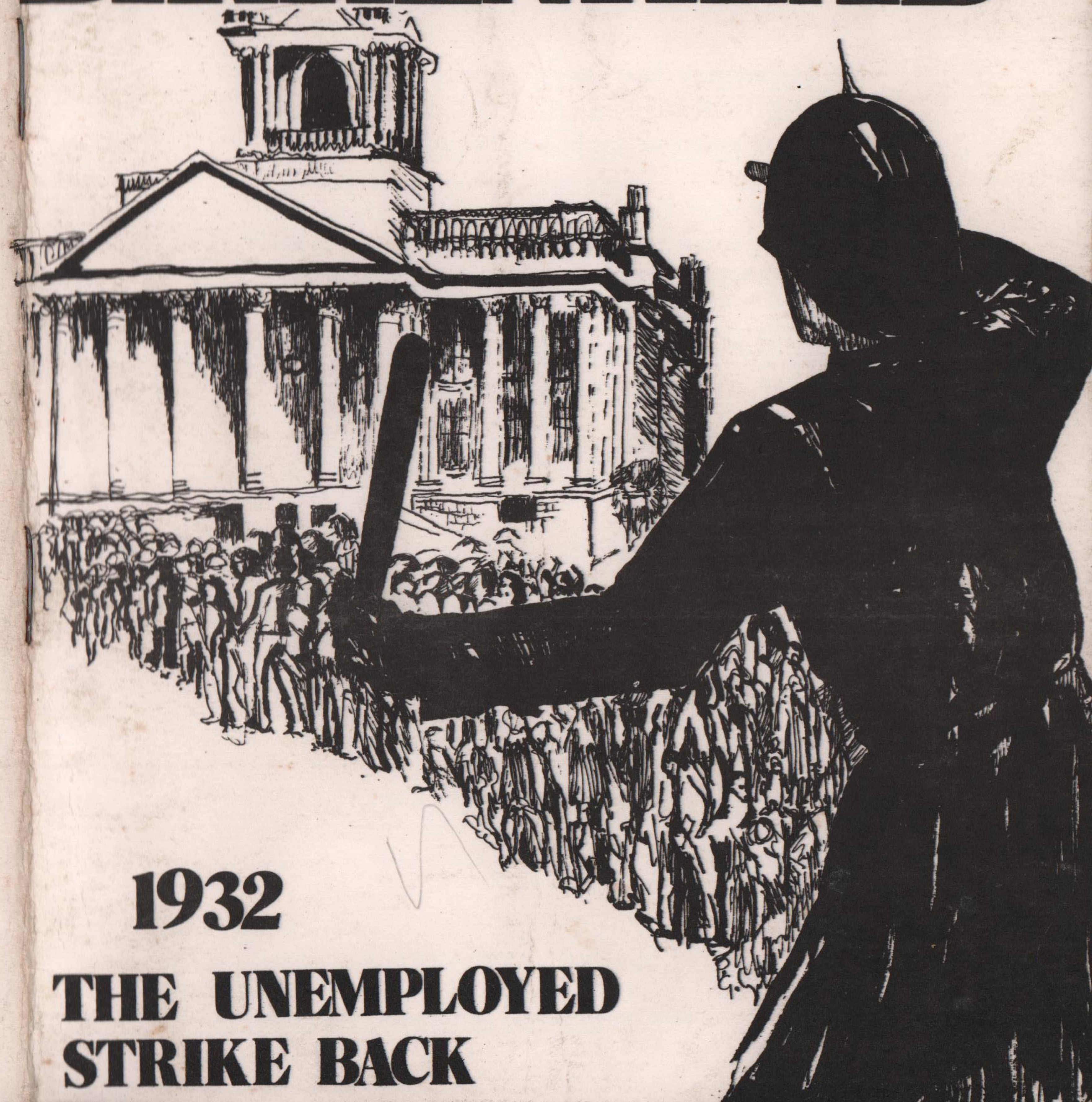
This is our call to you. But we also warn you. If you attack us, we shall know how to defend ourselves, how to fight back.

REMEMBER BIRKENHEAD!  
REMEMBER BELFAST!  
(The London Unemployed.)

NUWM poster circulated in London for arrival of hunger march and demonstration  
Oct-Nov 1932.

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# 'REMEMBER BIRKENHEAD'



1932

## THE UNEMPLOYED STRIKE BACK

Andy

50p

# “Remember Birkenhead!”

— an account and story on the 50th anniversary of the successful fight of the Birkenhead unemployed against the means test and for increases in relief.

“This is our call to you. But we also warn you. If you attack us, we shall know how to defend ourselves, how to fight back.

**REMEMBER BIRKENHEAD  
REMEMBER BELFAST.”**

(Extract from NUWM leaflet to the London police on the eve of the 1932 National Hunger March).

By Andy Shallice, with assistance from other members of the Merseyside Socialist Research Group.

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## FOREWORD

A riot concentrates the attention of the English ruling class like nothing else. In the 18th century, the riot was an almost accepted manner in which to vocalise grievances for bread or against enclosure. In the 19th century, there was rioting against the introduction of new machinery, to demand respite from the continual state harassment of radicals and early trade unionists and in support of the demands of the Chartists. By the 20th century, British life had taken on a more 'conservative' appearance, a reflection of the dominant conservatism of the working class movement. But echoes remained. And at the beginning of July 1981, those echoes came alive with the wail of police sirens throughout innumerable towns and cities in this country.

Quite quickly, the thirties were evoked by Thatcher and the Tories, but not to tell the truth of that decade, rather to insult those of us, or our relatives, who starved or struggled through those bitter years. "Unemployment", we were told, "was much worse then and no-one engaged then in riot and disorder". For the Tories of today, the '81 riots were explained by — parental irresponsibility, the erosion of moral values due to years of cushioning by the welfare state, total disrespect for 'law and order', even the old myths of the 'four hooded ringleaders' were trotted out with dutiful obedience by the flotsam of Fleet Street. And their list pointedly omitted any reference to police racism and youth unemployment. The riot was presented as a 'new phenomenon'.

In many fields of social and political life at present, the right and the ruling class are successfully undertaking a re-evaluation of the causes of unrest, exploitation and alienation that many activists within the widest labour movement find difficult to challenge. As the slump deepens, trade unions are still accused of holding the country to ransom, workers of not wanting to work, women of unjustly demanding equality and blacks of being here . . . . . The difficulties surrounding the working class's inability to mount a 'fight back' stem largely from the fact that too much ground has been conceded, too many answers to crucial questions cannot be given. Ideologically the right, and now after the Falklands war, the Tory Government, is in the ascendancy.

But when Thatcher starts to utilise the experience of the thirties as a justification for the policies of strengthening the police, of importing the RUC, it has gone too far. She needs to be answered. Then as now, it was the working people who paid dearly for the blatant inadequacies of a system based on private ownership and the uncontrolled operation of the market. Then as now, it was the likes of the Astors and Vestey's who saw their way through. Then as now, the organisations of the working class proved incapable of developing a strategy that could channel discontent, combat mass unemployment and raise the question of ownership, control and socialism.

But if the left were unable to mobilise the mass of the population behind a clear socialist programme during the thirties, it was not inactive. Nor did the working class sink totally into the apathetic torpor that Thatcher would have us both believe and imitate today.

**This account of the Birkenhead riots of September 1932 is part of an attempt to put the record straight, to attack the myth that people in the thirties who were 'much worse off than people today' suffered in dignified silence. On the 50th anniversary of the riots, we present this account as a celebration of a fightback by the unemployed and local workers — and a fightback that was, to a certain extent, successful.**

There is always a danger in romanticising such events and giving them a greater significance in retrospect that they justify; we hope this account does neither. The political impact of Birkenhead, and of London, Castleford, Bristol, Belfast and Liverpool, and other scenes of riot in 1932 was considerable. It is not possible to point to large permanent gains made by the unemployed movement but there were temporary gains, and Birkenhead was one of them. Other more nebulous long-term effects could include a lower level of police violence in later years as a direct result of outcries against their behaviour in 1932 — like the formation of the National Council for Civil Liberties.

But these, and other themes, cannot be examined in more detail in this pamphlet. And for that reason, we in the Merseyside Socialist Research Group, are publishing our own much longer account of MERSEYSIDE IN THE THIRTIES, hopefully by the New Year. How badly did the depression hit Merseyside and its local economy? How severe was the restructuring of industry in the thirties on those who still had a job? Who were the unemployed then and how were they treated — how did they fight back? How did the police contend with working class areas then? And what were the organisations of the working class doing on Merseyside — what did the Labour Party argue for? And lastly, what lessons can we draw today from any examination of the "devil's decade", from the "hungry thirties" ....to avoid the farce and tragedy of the repetition of history?

**Merseyside Socialist Research Group**

**July 1982.**

**F**or some, the New Year of 1932 signalled a ray of hope on an otherwise grim horizon. Whether suffering from the after effects of a riotous Christmas or the necessary desire to look on the bright side, Frank Tweedle, the Labour Mayor sent the following message to the local paper:

1931 will pass out leaving unpleasant memories in the minds of many residents of Birkenhead owing to unemployment and bad trade. The dark cloud has not rolled away but there are signs of a break in some directions. That the break may be more sudden than we can see at the moment . . . is the wish of the Mayor to the people of Birkenhead.

He was right about 1931 but not about the year that was just beginning.

The previous twelve months had seen the virtual collapse of world trade, and the ensuing depression affected all capitalist countries. In Britain, unemployment rose to three million while the industries and communities that were most dramatically affected were those dependent on the old basic industries — mining, textiles and metal manufacture — and virtually all port and waterfront towns. The hope of 1929 and the second Labour Government turned sour, a mood that descended towards apathy as unemployment grew and punitive measures increased. And then in the summer of 1931, the government demanded crisis measures and served them up — ‘the economies’.

Philip Snowden, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, had remarked to the Commons in February that what was required were . . .

. . . some temporary sacrifices from all, and those best able to bear them will have to make the largest sacrifices.

The economies deemed necessary in the summer reflected a judgement of those “best able to cope”: the unemployed, government employees, naval ratings, teachers and the police. The royals were even expected to make do with fewer stables. The attacks of the subsequent National Government, plans for which had been laid by the previous Labour administration, were felt throughout Britain. In Birkenhead, they were the backcloth to the dramatic collapse of the local economy.

In 1921, 20,000 people — one half of all men and boys working in Birkenhead — were directly dependent upon the transport and shipbuilding/repair industries. An average number taken on at Lairds was about 8,000 a day with another 2,000 taken on at the stands in the dock estate. So for men, work was concentrated in two industries whose fortunes were directly related to the levels of international trade. As employers were always quick to point out, how could labour be organised in any other way apart from under a casual labour system? Casualism did not necessarily mean weak industrial organisation — indeed, control of the job was achieved by a whole range of work practices. But no form of organisation could control the anarchy of the market.

For women looking for work in Birkenhead, options were even more circumscribed. Yes, Lever Bros. at Port Sunlight took on women as packers and labellers; jobs existed in some of the shops in town and in the neighbourhood; teachers who worked in Birkenhead and Liverpool were taking up residence now in Claughton and Oxton. But one-quarter of all working women in the town were employed as domestic

servants — domestic slaves with no security, no insurance and little freedom.

Birkenhead then, like the rest of Merseyside, developed a very specific tradition amongst those workers engaged in the casual trades, at least where organisation was permitted. It was a tradition that embodied some of the most militant events in labour history — like the 1911 transport strike — combined with long periods of disenchantment with ‘official’ structures. And some of these weaknesses were constantly utilised by employers to attack that control which existed. A contemporary observer records one aspect of the workforce’s weakness — its internal division, accentuated by craft, skill and grade, especially in the shipyards:

. . . outside the firm of Grayson, Rollo and Clover, boilermakers assemble on the extreme left, shipwrights on the right, fitters in front nearer the pavement, labourers at the corner of the street, heater boys in front of the boilermakers and so on.

Cammell Lairds submitted that “1931 had been one of the worst years ever recorded for the shipbuilding industry” with only 12,400 tons launched down the slips at the yard. Only six orders had been secured for 1932, an Admiralty cruiser being the only one of any size. This had initially provided work for 600 from the summer of 1931. In line with the increasingly common practice of replacing adults by cheaper juvenile labour, most of these were apprentices and boy labourers. A further symptom of the malaise affecting the town was evident in the Boilermakers’ General Secretary’s report in September 1931:

. . . with reference to the proposed wage reductions from October 1st, as none of the unions could finance a dispute, it was unanimously decided to ask members to work under protest meantime.

Needless to say, the protest had little effect on management’s resolve.

Faced with this predicament, what was the reactions of sections of the labour movement? Lairds were now employing only one third of its ‘normal’ complement. Billy Egan, the Labour Party leader in Birkenhead, tackled the problem in a locally time-honoured fashion:

With the commencement of the new cruiser, I find the influx of outsiders has commenced already and these men are being taken on while hundreds of residents are standing at the gates idle.

Asked to be more specific, Egan continued;

My objection was to importations from Scotland and the North of Ireland. They were invited to the yard not by the managing director, but by foremen saying ‘I will give your relative a job if he is here, but I can’t send for him.’

The yard had always been noted by many activists in the town as a shelter for those with Orange ‘connections’ from Belfast.

Meanwhile, others organised and agitated for a less divisive end:

This meeting of the unemployed Birkenhead workers views with disgust and resentment the attacks upon our miserable standard of living as proposed by the National Government. We pledge ourselves to resist to the bitter end any demand by the local authorities to econ-

omise through the local services. We demand from the powers that be the right to live; we say that the world contains all the raw materials and the necessary machinery to provide plenty for all. We demand the right to live, and as the suggested economies endanger that right, we put forward the following charter of demands:

1. 2s. a week increase in relief for all parents.
2. 1s. a week increase for every child.
3. 50% rent allowance.
4. 2 cwts. of coal allowance weekly, throughout the winter months.
5. Central premises to accomodate the unemployed, under the control of the unemployed – the unemployed to be responsible for the social rooms.
6. That an unemployed speaker attend the Finance Committee.

This manifesto was put before a mass meeting of the unemployed at the Haymarket in September 1931 and subsequently,

... a large crowd of men followed a red flag through the streets and made their way to the Town Hall, presenting their Charter to the Public Assistance Committee offices in Conway Street on the way.

The organisation of the march, and the dignity of the Charter, clearly had an effect on the Public Assistance Committee (PAC) – a speaker was heard. The speaker was Joe Rawlings. He was a member of the Communist Party and that was used as much as the authorities could do to detract from the 'authenticity' of the demands. So one left-wing member of the Labour Party, Councillor Myles Poland said,

... I am not going to dragged at the heel of the Communist machine

and the Finance Committee noted the demands of the speaker. Whereas the press could not afford to miss the significance of the march being led by a red flag, the unemployed saw matters differently. For them, the Communist Party, and certainly the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) were the only ones who were seen to be fighting for the unemployed, locally and nationally. After all, it was a Labour council in Birkenhead who responded to the National Government's appeal for economies!

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**T**he new year of 1932 did not bring the pious hopes of Lord Mayor Tweedle to fruition. On the first Monday in January, Birkenhead dockers stopped work on the Brocklebank, Blue Funnel and Clan Line boats. The stoppage was unofficial. The dockers' union had negotiated nationally a wage reduction of 10d. a day, bringing the daily rate down to 10/2d. and a whole range of cuts in overtime rates and new agreements enabling the employers to introduce labour-saving methods. It attacked living standards and what little security the dockers had won over the years. The *Birkenhead News* reported that "the officials have made unavailing efforts to persuade the men to return to work". The old story! Merseyside dockers refusing to abide by decisions taken on their behalf, by the leadership – Ernie Bevin. The following day, a mass meeting was held in the Argyle Theatre, attended by 2,000 dockers and it was agreed, with twelve against, to stay out until there was a resumption of normal working conditions. The strike

remained solid. No dockers presented themselves down on the stands. By the following Sunday Bevin had come down. The papers reported the outcome:

His meeting with the men, lasting nearly three hours, ended in uproar. A resolution to accept the national scale (i.e. the reductions) and to return to work forthwith was put to the meeting and 404 voted in favour, 326 against. Less than half those present had been accounted for in the vote, many left the meeting saying they'd refuse to accept the decision.

But by the Tuesday, cargoes were coming over the side again. Bevin had stamped out the trouble. Without support even from Liverpool, prospects of victory looked grim. The wage reductions went through.

Unemployment rates in Birkenhead, male and female (%)

	Male	Female	Total
1929	17.7	11.8	16.7
1930	25.7	21.1	24.6
1931	38.0	27.5	35.6
1932	40.1	22.5	36.2
1933	35.3	21.1	32.4
1934	31.6	19.9	29.3
1938	21.8	14.6	20.6

In two years from 1930 to 1932, unemployment had doubled in the town. By then, over one-third of the workforce were unable to find any form of work, and almost half the men were on relief payments. And for most this meant having to succumb to the means test as administered by the PAC, the body which had taken over from the Poor Law Guardians. The economy measures introduced by the National Government the previous autumn heralded the arrival of the Means Test. Soon the sight of the "means test man", the Relieving Officer, visiting houses, quizzing, recommending how to live, hoping to catch out those with sons or daughters maybe working for a few bob a week, became a common sight. But beside the snooping and searching, there was a more cogent reason to fight against the Means Test. During the first six months of its operation on Liverpool, the PAC examined 29,793 applications under the means test regulations. 4,643 cases were refused altogether. Another 20,562 were reduced. In five out of every six cases, payments were reduced. Hunger and starvation closed in.

It was not surprising then that the NUWM leadership focussed on this aspect of government attacks in 1932. Sid Elias, one of the national organisers wrote in the *Daily Worker* in February 1932:

By mass struggle in the streets, and by tremendous pressure on the Public Assistance Committees, we must compel the authorities to abandon the question of the means test.

And as the authorities later realised (although they still insisted in dressing up the campaign as a 'Bolshevik conspiracy'), the unemployed rallied behind the call.

The local council in Birkenhead had been under Tory control since the previous November — November 1931 — and they showed a new willingness to undertake 'economy measures' in the town. For instance, in July 1932 the Health Committee proposed to reduce spending on blind persons by half. Previously they had obtained passes for use in council services. But as McWilliam, the chair of the Health Committee said:

... it is not our duty to determine and declare who are blind persons within the meaning of the Act. The trouble is that the blind are not blind. I do not wish to be flippant, but I myself have seen one of the so-called blind persons playing nap.

The local Tories were encouraged in their mission by the local press. Throughout the year the *Birkenhead News* carried editorials hailing the Means Test as "performing a service of incalculable worth". After all, it had been responsible for the slaughter of what the *News* called the "dole brides", as for many the only refuge from starvation with their families was to move out and marry.

And when in August 1932 the agitation of the NUWM increased, the hysteria of the local press exploded. After the first large march and petition on 3 August, the *Birkenhead News* editorialised:

While having every sympathy with the more than difficult times through which the unemployed of the town are passing, one cannot help but comment on the impossibility of the requests they have made this week to the town council. The conclusion to which one is forced, and it is a saddening one, is that the direness of their plight *has caused them to lose their sense of proportion*. The concessions for which they ask are tantamount to *arrogant demands* and it does not need a financial expert to realise that, if complied with, the town would be faced with bankruptcy in a very short space of time. (Our emphases)

What had produced such apoplexy? A march from the Park Entrance to the Town Hall of a couple of hundred people carrying a petition signed by only 1,163 demanding the abolition of the Means Test, the replacement of economy measures by public works schemes with rent reductions and no evictions. The turnout may have let down Joe Rawlings and Sidney Greenwood, the march organisers, but the response in the press made up for that!

Naked class struggle was revealed. Birkenhead was *their* town, a town of merchants, financiers and capitalists. It gave them what they wanted — a remoteness from Liverpool, a fine and full list of social engagements and minimum responsibilities to the working class who worked their docks and shipyards and cleaned and cooked in their homes. It was all symbolised in the call for 'low rates'. The policies of the National Government were warmly applauded in Birkenhead because it made sense to them too. No increases in expenditure, and certainly no special treatment for the unemployed — after all, the depression affected everyone!

The campaigning work in the town continued and spread. Towards the end of August, another march of the unemployed was organised to the PAC offices in Conway

Street. Over 1,000 marched behind the banners now, but asking for something different — relief scales for men to be increased from 12/3d a week to 15s, i.e. unemployment benefit rates. It did not start from the traditional meeting place at the Park Entrance — it began at the Clearing House on the Dock Road. The T&GWU organised it with Charlie McVey, the dockers leader, at the front. This symbolised one of the major difficulties of the time — the gulf between the NUWM's supporters and the predominantly Catholic T&G dockers, "Billy Egan's crowd" as Bert Pinguey called them. McVey hinted at this divide when he spoke to the press:

This protest meeting is an entirely trade union demonstration and has no connection with the Communist Party and a Communist who tried to distribute literature was ejected from the meeting.

The dockers delegation was received by the General Purposes Committee of the PAC but they claimed they had no mandate, authority or even potential to act, on increasing scales of relief. In fact they had no desire to!

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September 1932 saw the climax of the fight of the textile workers of Lancashire to defend their pay and conditions against the employers' onslaught in the "More Looms Dispute". The Trades Council and the NUWM in Birkenhead organised food convoys to North East Lancashire to feed the strikers and their families. It was the first national, sustained industrial action since the General Strike. It attracted the attention, if not support, of the British labour movement. But that attention was soon to move to Birkenhead.

Two delegations were organised to the first council meeting in September. 3,000 people and a band of pipers accompanied the NUWM and the T&GWU to Hamilton Square. The Mayor received the deputations and placed their demands before the aldermen and councillors. The Tories were uncertain. To accede would set an unwelcome precedent and there would be no great advantage. After all, speakers haranguing the crowds outside were not from Birkenhead, and it was dubious if one, Leo McGree, Communist Party organiser in Liverpool, was even a workman! The eternal idea was floated — establish a sub-committee. McGree's voice could be heard in the council chamber,

... we'll wait here till we get an answer, and the right answer!

A motion was on the floor that the council would not receive either of the deputations.

One alderman Nathan saw sense. He proposed an amendment that a couple of speakers be heard from each deputation:

... when the council saw the crowd assembled outside, many of them half-clothed and half-starved, I do not think it wise to turn them away without a hearing.

Judicious words. He at least, was keen to get home in one piece. A special council meeting would be arranged for next week, two speakers from each deputation, ten minutes each. So, in Birkenhead, run by Tory backwoodsmen, the unemployed had been granted an audience. A small step, in itself signifying nothing, but a step that had to be taken by the unemployed.

Tuesday, 13 September was the date of the special council meeting. A crowd began to assemble in Hamilton Square, opposite the Town Hall, at three o'clock in the afternoon. The police had made what they termed 'preparations'. Barriers had been erected so as to dissuade any physical assault on the aldermen and councillors. But it served another purpose, and became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The tensions of the town became concentrated around the Town Hall. Drizzle set in towards the late afternoon but by five in the evening, 5,000 people were pressed up against the barriers to cheer in the delegations and abuse the 'elected representatives'. After the council meeting began, a strong force of police moved in and began to push back and clear the crowd. These moves were resisted, banner poles were thrown and "there was a continual recurrence of ugly scenes". The two deputations agreed to press for one main demand each — the NUWM speakers (Mrs Barraskill, with Rawlings, Cooper Beatty and Roberts) would concentrate on the abolition of the Means Test, and the dockers delegation, or more properly the T&GWU, would argue for an increase in the relief scales.

After the NUWM had been heard, the council debated. Joe Rawlings came out onto the balustrade of the Town Hall hatless and speaking through a megaphone:

This afternoon we can record a milestone in the history of the Birkenhead unemployed. In our statements to the Council we laid it down in no uncertain fashion that you, the unemployed, were prepared to fight, and barriers and police would not keep you back if our demands were not listened to. Our first demand has been carried with one dissentient (cheers and cries of 'give us his name') and that is the motion against the Means Test will go down to the National Government from this Council.

The dockers were still inside. A vote was taken and it unanimously decided that they should all stay and await the decision, and to demand the release of Chris May, arrested earlier, the 19 year old leader of Birkenhead Young Communist League (who later died in Spain). The T&G appeared. The council had deferred any discussion of a rise in relief to the General Purposes Committee of the PAC. To shouts of "we are not satisfied" and "we want bread", the unemployed adjourned to a meeting in the covered market, the councillors to their 'well-deserved refreshments'.

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So Birkenhead Council had come out against the Means Test. In some senses it represented nothing. Many other councils not only spoke out against it, but refused to operate it. The PAC in Birkenhead would never take that step. But, whatever else, it indicated that the unemployed did have a voice and could influence decisions. And a small victory like that, purely symbolic so far as the Tories were concerned, gave the unemployed the heart and enthusiasm to continue.

Two days after the special council meeting, the PAC held their sub-committee in Conway Street. Increases in relief payments were on the agenda. A real show of strength was required. Even the press suggested a march of 12,000 to the offices. For once, the *Birkenhead News* is worth quoting to give an impression of the atmosphere of the march:

The procession proceeded in more or less orderly fashion, five or six deep. In the main it was a purposeful gathering, if a mottley one. Men in ragged clothes and worn out shoes; men with clothes faded, yet neatly pressed and shoes brightly polished; here and there an upright professional-looking man; men with washed overalls that had not known the grime of the shipyards for months; old men with white hair and bent shoulders; young boys but shortly out of school; each one ready to shout in the chorus of 'struggle or starve' and 'down with the Means Test.'

As in many accounts of the thirties, the press fails to mention the presence of women, many of whom were active in the campaigns of the unemployed. There was elation amongst everyone, men and women, standing outside the PAC offices because of the size of the turnout, the real possibility of concessions and the feeling that everyone there was helping to produce a decision. After months of work when you walked out and were invisible, now people were taking notice. And the authorities, the Guardians of old, were perhaps on the verge of making concessions.

But hope rapidly broke to anger. The General Purposes Committee could only promise to consider the question of the Means Test on Monday. Leo McGree shouted:

... we must fight to the end — the Means Test will be a thing of the past in Birkenhead on Monday.

But the anger didn't necessarily channel itself into the appropriate actions so far as the leaders were concerned. What to do now, on Thursday?

The march set off back up Grange Road and Oxton Road. The police presumed the dispersal would take place at the Park Gates, after the speeches. But 2,000 marchers carried straight on up Woodchurch Road to Prenton. To the house of Councillor Baker on Bryanston Road. Baker was the chair of the Public Assistance Committee, the administrators of the Means Test. He was not a popular man. And he certainly didn't lose any sleep over the unemployed. At a recent council meeting he had spoken against the raising of relief and his remarks had appeared in the press:

"... many recipients of relief", he argued "had valuable dogs which they ran at races and others had jobs which for which they received payment. An alarming number of young people were getting married and then applying for relief. ..."

To Baker, what was required was not an increase, but greater investigation into *all* those claiming relief, as *all* were no doubt ineligible, one way or another. The two thousand unemployed appeared outside his house. The assizes later heard that not only the Baker family, but all the residents took fright. Doors were bolted, cats brought in and knees knocked. Surprisingly, attention was shown only to the Baker residence. His son appeared, back on hols from college, with a few chums and said his father was not in. The crowd did not believe him or did not care. Shouting increased and a few plant-pots were thrown. Little damage was done. A few speeches were made and some began to drift away. Then some of the Birkenhead police force arrived. After Tuesday's performance in town, the police had not increased their popularity with the unemployed — somewhere between King Billy, or the Pope, and Councillor Baker himself. Fighting began. Reinforcements were called and the crowd moved off towards Borough Road and Tranmere — onto more familiar territory.

The police had shown their strength — disciplined, organised and using 'necessary' force with their batons. The lessons were swiftly learned. A meeting was organised at short notice, that evening, at the Park Gates. One speaker, accompanied by two of the injured from the afternoon's disturbances, said:

This is what the police have done tonight. On Monday I want you all to come armed with weapons and if the police try to interfere with us, we will not be responsible.

They didn't have to wait till Monday. The police started harassing the crowds by the park and the people retaliated. The windows of the Queens pub were put through and Herron's car showrooms went the same way. One PC Peers was set upon in Vittoria Street and only saved by swift action of a Mr Dobson (of Hughes and Dobson!) who was travelling past in his car, which itself did not escape damage.

Later in the evening, a march was attempted to the house of Councillor Fletcher, the only dissident to sending a motion objecting to the Means Test to Whitehall. He resided up Borough Road, but the police managed to disperse the march. On returning, the focus of hostility to the police became the Price Street neighbourhood — a number of shops were looted, including the Co-op and Moss's outfitters. Price Street police station was laid under siege. It was not lost on many that the police were coming under attack, not only for their behaviour in the past few days, but for the continual hostility they showed for the working class populations, especially by the docks.

The Town Clerk and Captain Dawson, the Chief Constable, telephoned Tweedle the Mayor, who was at a boxing tournament in Anfield, to summon him to a meeting at the Central Police Office which would co-ordinate police action for the remainder of the night. The police had re-asserted their control by 1.00 a.m., by which time seven police were injured but 37 civilians had been treated in hospital, "mostly for head injuries", and countless others would not go near the General Hospital for treatment.

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**T**he NUWM took Friday to consider the possibilities. One of the weaknesses that Thursday had showed was that most of the participants came from the Price Street area. This did not only reflect a traditional, cultural division between the predominantly Catholic dockside areas and the South End, mainly Protestant, but also the schism between shipyard work and dock work. Joe Rawlings addressed a meeting at Well Lane in Tranmere to gain more support in that district:

On Monday afternoon all the working classes will have to be in the streets of this town to demonstrate; we don't want 10,000 but 20,000 and 50,000. We will be organised into a regiment and we'll march as we did in 1914. We will march feeling that we are going to attack and that attack is our best defence. Dawson and his thugs won't do anything then. You can be sure of that — if he sends to Liverpool for police he will be a bit unlucky; because our fellow workers there are organising a mass demonstration to keep them busy.

Friday night was calm in town. Monday was the next trial of strength. But the authorities were worried. After years of abuse, the *Birkenhead News* now demanded that . . .

. . . every possible effort should be made by the leaders of the Labour Party in the borough, and especially by Labour members of the Trades Council, to check any disposition to indulge in rioting or any other kind of violence. . . .

The local bourgeoisie who had "warmly commended" the police were now getting rattled, because the police alone were no longer sufficient: call on the 'accepted leaders' of the working class, and lock up those who are in the vanguard of the struggle — the old English ruling class two card trick. Seven leaders of the Birkenhead NUWM were arrested at one in the morning on the Saturday.

It seemed that the prophecies of Billy Egan eight months previously were coming dramatically true: "we are going to have a European situation on our hands". Saturday night around Price Street saw the outbreak of hostilities again. No matter how cosy the 'ring-leader' thesis may appear to the ruling class, its validity was demonstrated to be totally false. A contemporary account suggest why:

The renewed rioting broke out at dusk on Saturday night, after bodies of men had prowled around the darkening streets of the disturbed area which covered a network of streets in the vicinity of Price Street, Vittoria Street and Cleveland Street. Members of the mob, some of them using hammers and chisels, had earlier been seen tearing up railings for use as weapons against the police. An air of tension brooded over the districts, groups talking in hushed tones at every street corner. A large crowd was rapidly gathering in Price Street which was patrolled by posses of police, each numbering about a dozen. At intervals, before darkness had settled over the town, there were occasional scurries away from approaching officers, and the edge of the crowd included a large number of young boys, girls and children.

After ten o' clock, a constant series of what the *Birkenhead News* termed "guerilla" conflicts were carried on. As the police advanced up a back street, wash basins, bricks, flat irons and full bed-pans were thrown at them from the upper storeys. A wall in Back St. Anne's Street was demolished for ammunition. Private cars were stoned and police vans attacked. The premises of the Bull Inn and 14 Price Street shops were looted. But the main effort of the people was directed at pushing the police out of the area. By the early morning, 60 reinforcements were called from Liverpool so that now more than 200 police were on the streets. Despite that strength, it was only exhaustion that drove most people to bed towards three o' clock.

Sunday dawned to scenes of scattered debris and the gentle tap-tap of carpenters' hammers with their boys boarding up the broken windows, and giving a pub the benefit of corrugated-iron sheeting. The main streets were filled with sightseers. Another large meeting was held at the Park Gates and was allowed to continue, despite a police ban on meetings. A policeman was felled by Park Station afterwards and a civilian was mistaken for a plain-clothes man and beaten up. Tension was again rising. The police force was determined to put down the district.

After midnight, they attacked in well-drilled formation. In Wood Street, they met the fiercest resistance. Street lights had been extinguished, manhole covers removed and wires stretched across the street in the dark. Such methods only proved success-



ful for a while. The police vans were brought in, headlights shone and the street was captured. But there was still Morpeth Buildings to contend with. This was an old four-storey block of tenements, mainly lived in by those working around the docks. Relations with the police had never been idyllic — now anti-police feeling was running extremely high. On Sunday night, everything went down onto the police — pans, sideboards, even an iron bedstead. But the police invaded, storming from landing to landing. The following statement was carried later in the *Daily Herald*:

About 1.30 a.m. we were all fast asleep in bed, having had no sleep the previous two nights, and my husband was very poorly. My old mother, 68 and paralysed, could not sleep, she was so terrified. I have five children, a daughter of 19, one 15, a son 17, one of 12 and one 6. Suddenly my old mother screeched, she's unable to speak. We were all awakened at the sound of heavy motor vehicles, which turned out to be Black Marias. Lights in the house were lit, windows opened to see what was going on. Policemen bawled out 'lights out' and 'pull up those fucking windows'.

Hordes of police came rushing up the stairs, doors commenced to be smashed in, the screams of women and children were terrible. We could hear the thuds of the blows from the batons.

Presently, our doors were bashed by heavy instruments. My husband got out of bed without waiting to put his trousers on and unlocked the door. As he did so, twelve police rushed into the room, knocking him to the floor, his poor head being split open, kicking him as he lay. We were all in our nightclothes. The language of the police was terrible. I tried to prevent them hitting my husband. They then commenced to baton me all over the arms and body. As they hit me and my Jim, the children and I were screaming, and the police shouted 'shut up you parish-fed bastards.'

Mr Davin, an ex-serviceman, was taken to hospital and found to have six open head wounds, one over the eye, and body injuries. The assault on Morpeth Buildings was the police revenge and a last attempt to cow the people before the military were called in.

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**M**onday was quiet, with over 100 Liverpool police and the whole of the Birkenhead force on the streets. The Public Assistance were to sit and decide on the increases for relief. There was no march, no 50,000 in the streets. In many of the houses around Price Street, little cardboard signs proclaimed that 'this house is on rent strike' — where the police had been active, there were few windows left.

The PAC sat and decided, either through their own good sense, or more likely (as good sense was in short supply in the PAC!), acting on orders received, to raise the transitional payments rate to 15/3d. a week for a man and to 13/6d. for a woman. The following day, a special council meeting met and drew up proposals for the Finance Committee to consider regarding public works schemes. So two of the demands had been won — the council had been defeated by the unemployed. But at what cost? Ten of the leaders arrested, with no chance of bail. 46 arrests after four nights of streetfighting, with many showing the scars of the arrests. One man was brought into court on a stretcher having sustained a broken pelvis in the police

station. Some were found not guilty by the magistrates but many others served terms of imprisonment. And of course, innumerable assaults and beatings had been dealt out by the police.

But the local bourgeoisie, the Tories and the press had been winded — their defence had been breached. The PAC were forced to submit. After complaining that the 'mobs' had no regard even for the Sabbath, the *Birkenhead News* — still hardly noted for its compassion — sang a different song:

Winter is approaching, with unfortunately, no prospect of a substantially better outlook in industry and, severe though the strain upon taxpayers and ratepayers is at the present time, they will be willing to bear still more rather than that real privation and suffering should be the lot of their fellow townsmen and women, and especially of children. They ask in return, however, that there shall be no indolent leaning on the dole, or other forms of relief, if work of any kind is available.

The male unemployment rate in Birkenhead that month was 38.1%. And still the press demanded there should be "no indolence"!

In the arena of class struggle, all gains made by the working class are never permanent. The victories of the Birkenhead unemployed and the NUWM were no exception. Nearly two years later, the PAC were paying the new, top rate of 15/3d to only 500 out of the 9,000 on relief — due mainly to the continued operation of the Means Test. Within a matter of weeks, comments were made in the local press, together with 'pictorial representation', of the amount of food that could now be bought by those out of work. The good Councillor Baker also added his own comments. The obvious impression was that 15/3d was altogether sufficient, if not positively harmful. All Communist Party meetings in the town were banned. And the National Unemployed Workers Movement was effectively prevented from continuing with its agitation.

Eight of the ten who were arraigned at Chester Assizes at the end of October were sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from four months to, in the case of Joe Rawlings, 20 months hard labour on charges of conspiracy to riot. Justice Charles heard the cases. Addressing Sidney Greenwood he said:

... you are misleading and drawing into riots, violence and bitterness men, who, if they were left alone, would be decent men and decent workmen and who really in their heart of hearts hate the cowardly sort of attack which was made on the house of Baker.

His ideology was all too apparent. If the NUWM didn't exist, then the consequences in human terms of unemployment, would be acceptable, not only to the ruling class but to the workers as well. In giving Rawlings his sentence, his anger and prejudice against the NUWM was well to the fore:

You are, you say, the secretary of the National Unemployed Workers Movement and an organiser of these grave disturbances. I know from my experience, having sat in other Assize courts on cases of this sort, of riots engineered and deliberately engineered by the society of which you are the secretary, that they are the worst and most bitter enemies of decent workmen.

Rawlings was dragged from the dock shouting "my body goes to prison, but my

spirit lives in Birkenhead”.

After the immediate counter-attacks, it was a Labour politician, George Lansbury, who was leading the party temporarily, who articulated more worrying lessons of the Birkenhead riots. The NUWM was organising the first National Hunger March to London for the end of October 1932, culminating in a mass rally against the Means Test. Lansbury addressed, or better, advised MacDonald, the leader of the National Government, as to the correct course of action:

... I have said that respect for political democracy, which you support and I support, is in danger of being wiped out altogether, and for this reason; at Birkenhead after the riots a great concession was made to the unemployed who had gone to demonstrate and at Belfast, the same thing happened. I know that the Prime Minister will say that if concessions are made within the next few days (because of the big rallies) it has nothing to do with the disturbances. . . . Do not let us go on leading the people to believe that the only way to get concessions is to have disturbances of this kind. . . . I repeat that these concessions after violence do give those who do not believe in political democracy the right to say, 'you riot, and you will get some concessions made!'

He was warning the Tories to be more judicious when confronted with mass action. And certainly don't give in to their demands after disorder, because it makes it more difficult for us in the Labour Party the next time around. And in the case of the Belfast unemployed's strike against task work three weeks after Birkenhead, that was certainly in the front of their minds — after mass meetings, the shouts were "Up the Soviet Union, Up Birkenhead!"

So far as Birkenhead was concerned, all attempts to get a Home Office inquiry into police conduct failed — so a workers' inquiry was organised under the auspices of the International Class War Prisoners Association. The story of the police siege of Morpeth Buildings was brought to light, but the inquiry's effect was minimal. Birkenhead was left to carry on the fight against the effects of mass unemployment, as the rise of fascism at home and abroad took predominance. The drive to re-armament was meant to combat unemployment, but even in the summer of 1939 the town still had one in five of its workers on the dole.

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## POSTSCRIPT ON LIVERPOOL

By Monday 19 September, the battle had been 'won' in Birkenhead, but the torch was passed across the river to Liverpool, where a demonstration had already been planned for the meeting of the PAC on Wednesday at which the Annual Report was due to be discussed. The report contained the customary moral condemnation of working class life and is worth quoting at some length:

Since the advent of dog racing, gambling has enormously increased, and this is not to be wondered at when tracks are permitted to be erected in the midst of densely populated areas. Gambling resulting from this sport, especially by persons who are receiving assistance from the public purse, is to be strongly deprecated. The higher scale for sickness granted to sick men attracts quite a number of applicants from unemployment depots, and there is good reason to believe that a number of these cases are malingering. A few years ago the public were shy of applying for 2s or 3s to supplement their incomes, but nowadays they are urged to make application for their 'rights'. It cannot be too emphatically stated that this system is sapping the national independence, and is in effect distinctly detrimental.

Labour members of the PAC attempted to have the report debated immediately instead of referring it to the Finance & General Purposes Committee and, when this proposal was defeated, shouted down all attempts to proceed with other business. The meeting was adjourned for a week. To what extent this was just an attempt by the Labour members to maintain credibility with the people demonstrating outside — to avoid being left behind in the calls for direct action being made by the NUWM — is difficult to say, but in any event those on the streets now took up the fight.

When the demonstration had first assembled in Islington Square, it made its feelings towards the police clear by passing the following resolution:

This mass meeting of Liverpool workers condemns the action of the Liverpool Chief Constable and Watch Committee for their connivance in sending Liverpool police over to Birkenhead to help baton down workers who were demonstrating against the starvation Means Test.

We recognise these methods of uniting the forces of capitalism as seen in the despatch of police to the Burnley district, as the attempt to break the fighting spirit of the workers by physical violence.

We demand the immediate withdrawal of Liverpool police from the Birkenhead and Burnley areas.

We call upon every worker, every trade union branch, and every workers' organisation to join with us in the demand.

As the march returned to Islington via Moss Street, a shop there was attacked and the march split into several sections. The first went up Brunswick Road attacking business properties up to and including the Midland Bank at the end of Everton Road; another went up Shaw Street and into the streets on either side, particularly Radcliffe Street and William Henry Street; and another section went back down London Road attacking shops there. The crowds were eventually dispersed and were again driven out of Islington Square in the evening by police baton charges. By the end of the day, 15 people had been arrested with one constable and six demon-

strators injured. According to the *Daily Post* a . . .

. . . striking feature of the demonstration was the prominent part played by women, who egged on the mob whenever it seemed likely to fall back.


During the following evening, there were a series of smaller riots in Islington Square, Bidder Street and Christian Street. As police tactics changed between the riots of early and late July 1981, so they changed on the second day of rioting in 1932, with the introduction of the then 'new technological means of riot control' — the motor cycle combination. As the armoured transit vans were driven into crowds in late July 1981 killing David Moore, so now the combination bikes carrying five or six officers with batons were driven into the crowds. When close enough, the police jumped off and charged, while the remaining officer in the side-car laid about him as the driver pursued demonstrators. This new procedure was, apparently, "irresistable" according to the press, but at least nobody was killed.

Strong criticism of the police use of motor cycles, ostensibly purchased for the pursuit of car thieves, were made in the Watch Committee, but lacking any majority, motions calling for the Chief Constable to account for their use were defeated.

The rioting was far less extensive in Liverpool than in Birkenhead and there were fewer injuries; nor did it appear to have any real impact on the PAC. When the adjourned meeting re-convened on 28 September, they did hear a delegation of two from the NUWM who demanded the abolition of the Means Test, the granting to all of full benefit rates and an extra 3/6d a week winter allowance for all. The demands were referred to the Finance Committee, and there they remained. At meetings in November, the Liverpool PAC did decide to allow extra relief on the same scale as 1931 for the two weeks at Christmas but would not make any increase in relief scales because, they said, the cost of living had declined in recent years. The unemployed, it seemed, were fortunate to receive what little they got!

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