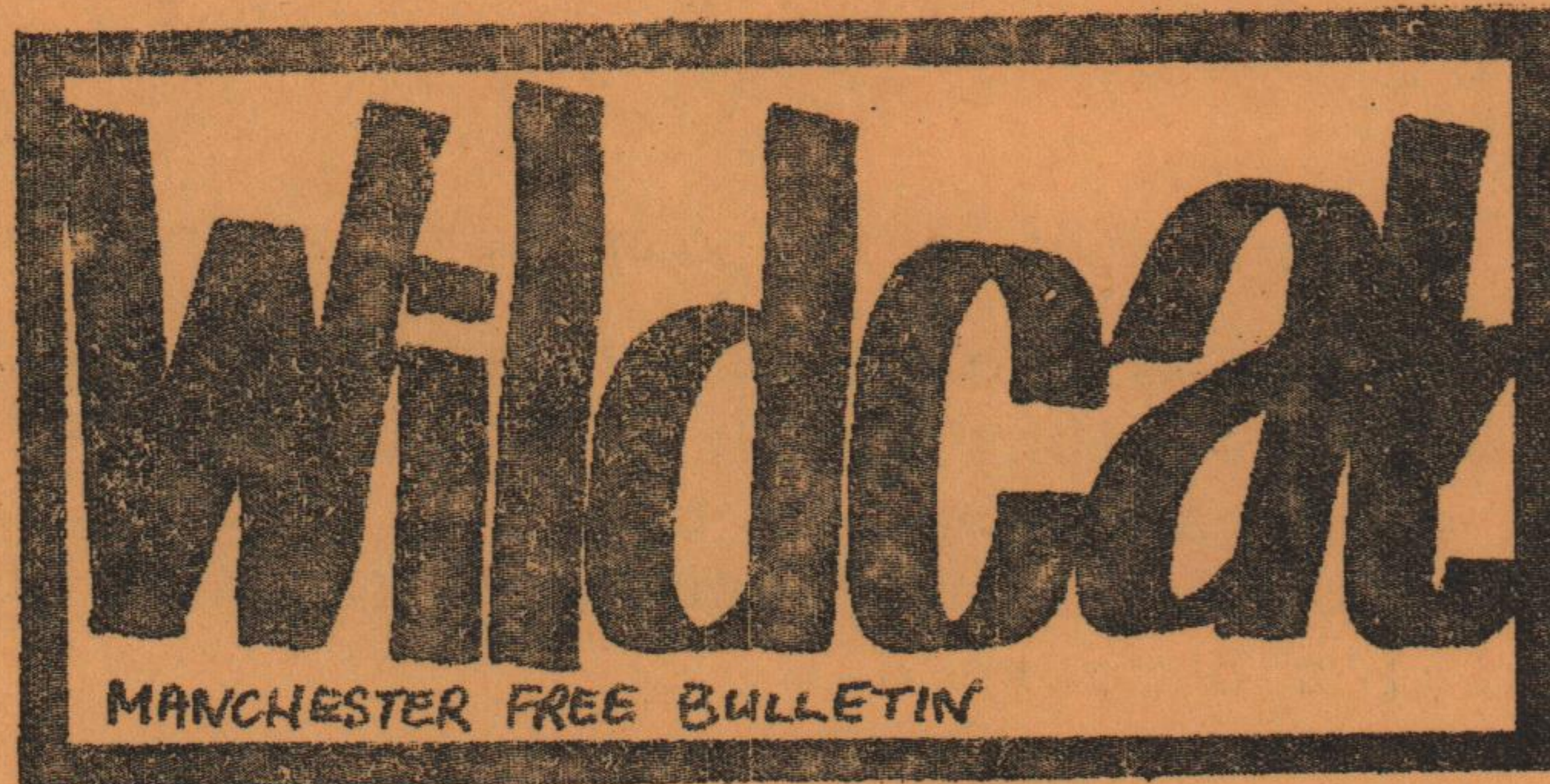


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**FRONT LINE NEWS**

**FROM THE**

**CLASS**

**WAR**



**15p**

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The majority of this pamphlet is written by WILDCAT.  
Two of the articles are taken from the publications  
of organisations which hold similar positions to our  
own on class struggle and the role of the trade  
unions. Their addresses are given following the  
articles concerned.

Published by WILDCAT      January 1984

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I N T R O D U C T I O N  
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We are publishing here four articles about recent class struggle in Britain and Europe. Readers will find that several points are repeated in more than one of the articles. This is because we have chosen them to illustrate what we believe are general tendencies in the class struggle today: in particular the tendency of workers in struggle to confront their trade unions. Or, to put it another way, the tendency of the struggles themselves to break free from the stifling limitations of trade unionism.

People we discuss with often agree with our arguments about the bankruptcy of world capitalism, and with our rejection of the traditional left-wing parties. They may also agree that movements like CND are worse than useless, and that the only way to prevent war is to destroy the capitalist system which creates the economic, political and social conditions for it. But when we say that the future of the world lies in the hands of the working class, they don't believe that the working class has the potential to change anything!

It is part of the nature of working class struggle that it bursts out "from nowhere" after shorter or longer periods when it seems that nothing is happening. Before May '68 and the world-wide mass strikes which followed, it was a commonplace for sociology lecturers to declare that the working class no longer existed. And recently, the capitalist media has learned to keep quiet about struggles which might give other workers subversive ideas. In Britain our rulers have been quick to learn the lessons of the "riots" in 1981, which spread like wildfire at least in part due to the extensive television coverage. So this year, the mass strike in Belgium, which involved more than 900,000 people at its height, has gone almost unreported in the popular press despite the fact that Belgium is no further from Fleet Street than Warrington! In the "serious press" we can find evidence of the concern and fear that the Belgian strike has provoked within the ruling class throughout Europe: To quote from our own Financial Times:

"Strikes have paralysed the bureaucracy, brought public transport to an almost total halt, shut schools ... and let rubbish accumulate in the streets ... The strikes started spontaneously ... It is this spontaneity that is providing much food for thought in European capitals." (23. 9.83)

No wonder they don't want us to know about it!

The example of Belgium alone shows that, despite the recent lull in the class struggle, the potential for mass struggles still exists. However many people find it hard to accept that strikes about "bread and butter" issues such as wages and conditions, are capable of transforming themselves into revolutionary struggles which challenge the existence of capitalism. This is despite the evidence of numerous struggles which have done just that: from the first Russian Revolution in 1905 to the recent Polish struggles against their state-capitalist rulers, both of which started as protest movements against food price rises! The fact is that people who think that "the working class hasn't got it in it" are usually members of the working class themselves. They are expressing the low opinion of themselves which the capitalist education and propaganda machines teach them to have. But class struggle is first and foremost a process which releases the

potential within the mass of "ordinary workers" - and this probably includes you, the reader - which is stifled by the alienating experience of day-to-day life under capitalism.

It is easy to see, if one looks around the world today, that revolution is a necessity. But revolution will not be the stage-managed battle between well-ordered troops that many of the leftist groups would like us to think it will be - with themselves at the helm, naturally. It will take place through the release of the creative energy of mass struggle, during which workers will be forced, in order to defend their basic conditions of existence, to confront the state and the ruling class. And through this process they will discover that they are not the powerless and stupid creatures their rulers would like them to think they are: On the contrary, in the co-operative struggle for common aims, clearly understood, we are a power which is unstoppable.

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THE BIG LIE AT WARRINGTON

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Introduction

The economic crisis of capitalism which now affects every country in the world, and is here to stay, has profound implications for the working class. Above all it has revealed the reactionary nature of the trade unions, and trade unionist ideas. The more the working class comes under attack, the more the unions call upon their members to be "reasonable" and accept these attacks! The bureaucratic nature of trade unions is a sure sign that they are not our organisations, but are imposed on us by the state in order to discipline us and prevent us from struggling effectively. The trade unions are the division of the working class into separate and often competing grades, trades, industries, regions and nations. Trade unionist ideology justifies this division by spreading the lie that there need be no fundamental conflict of interest between capital and labour. According to trade unionist ideology, the combination of a "strong union" and "realistic management" will enable any dispute to be solved with a minimum of fuss, and without needing to involve workers from other unions.

The growing conflict between the trade unions and their members is a clear sign that there is no meeting point between our interests as workers and those of capitalism. Either capitalism will crush us as it descends towards economic collapse, barbarism and world war - or we must destroy capitalism. The struggle to destroy capitalism will be in large measure a struggle by workers to overcome the divisions and confusions imposed upon them by the unions and trade union ideology, and by so doing destroy all unions and union bureaucracies. In their place workers will organise their struggles through mass assemblies uniting all workers and democratically controlled by them.

On one hand the unions are faced with a growing disillusionment, cynicism and hostility among their members. On the other hand, the bosses are less interested in using the "mediation" of the unions to reach "compromises" with the workforce. The crisis is forcing them to take a much tougher line. The trade unions are finding that their usefulness to the bosses is declining, and their powerful position within the state apparatus is coming under attack.

This two-sided crisis of trade unionism forms the backdrop to recent events at Warrington. Now read on ...

### How a Small Dispute Became a National Scandal

At the beginning of July, the printworkers' union, the NGA, called out on strike eight of its members working for a small company in Stockport. The dispute was not about anything which directly affected these eight workers. What was at stake was the power of the NGA in the printing industry. Through its control of the printworkers the NGA has won the right to act as personnel manager for the entire industry; hiring and firing workers as it pleases in pre-entry closed-shop agreements with the employers. This uniquely powerful position of the NGA depends upon the preservation of craft privileges. The bosses need the special skills which the NGA jealously guards within its ranks. The workers tolerate the dictatorial behaviour of the union because of the high wages their craft status brings them. Now high unemployment and new technology mean that the "good old days" are nearly over for one of the last great craft unions.

Mr Shah, chairman of the Stockport Messenger group, at first seemed to be according the NGA the respect its leaders felt they deserved. He signed a closed-shop agreement for his new printing works at Stockport, at the same time, as is customary, joining the NGA himself, along with his fellow directors. This fact should give food for thought to those who think that the NGA exists to defend the interests of printworkers. The NGA is part of the management, and vice versa!

However soon afterwards the Stockport Messenger Group opened two more print works in Warrington and Bury, using non-union labour at cheaper rates. The NGA called out its members in the Stockport works on strike, who were promptly sacked by the management. Having thrust these eight workers into the front line of battle, the NGA proved more reticent about giving them support in their struggle to get their jobs back. With no prospect of an easy victory the dispute quickly became an embarrassment to the union. Two months later, in September, NGA officials said that the dispute was "the biggest issue currently facing the union" ... but not big enough, apparently, for them to do anything about it.

At this stage it seemed that the dispute might well end up like other similar strikes involving a handful of workers, which have dragged on, almost unnoticed, for months or even years. But instead it became, for a few days in December, front page news. It became what Socialist Worker dramatically proclaimed "a battle for the future of working class organisation."

Why was it that this dispute became the battle-ground for the first test-case confrontation over the new union laws?

Partly it was due to the intransigence of the employers, who were determined to use the new laws to stop "secondary picketing" by the Stockport workers at the Warrington works.

More importantly it was due to the militancy of NGA workers which forced union leaders, very much against their will, to take a stand. Many workers in Fleet Street were eager to take strike action. After the success of the first one-day strike, the mass pickets were arranged to divert the energies of the militants into an action which was less effective but (so NGA leaders believed!) less politically damaging.

Unfortunately for the NGA, the police (and the government which sent them in) had their own ideas about mass pickets. An eye-witness describes what happened:

"From early on in the night the pickets were content to block the road en masse. They were left pushing the police backwards and forwards for many hours using up a lot of valuable energy. At this point in time (up to 3 o'clock) the pickets were content to pull pickets from out of the front of the line. They did not arrest them but just gave them a good thumping. We believe that this tactic was deliberate and pre-planned, as it softened up many of the militant members of the demonstration. For a couple of hours before the vans came out the police used baton charges to disperse many hundreds of pickets. When the vans eventually came the pickets were in no condition to fight back. The police tactics had succeeded ... " (From a leaflet published by Middlesborough Direct Action Movement, c/o Box A, 120 Victoria Road, Middleborough)

However, even if the police finally succeeded, the pickets did fight back. Another eye-witness, describing events on the same night of Tuesday, November 29th, reports:

"The police foolishly smashed up the NGA control van, causing union officials to lose control of picketting workers. The picket then defended itself against the police with bricks and bottles, barricades were set up, and local unemployed workers joined in the fight with the police." (From a leaflet published by the London Workers Group)

NGA leaders were horrified by this class violence. Workers actually fighting back against the police! This wasn't what they wanted at all. Even more worrying, lots of the pickets clearly wanted to go back the next night and have another go. Union leaders were determined not to lose control of the struggle again. So they concocted an extraordinary manoeuvre to sabotage the picket. Pickets were bussed en masse to Manchester for a rally. While the workers listened to trade union leaders making militant speeches, thirty miles away the newspaper lorries emerged from the Warrington works almost unopposed.

If the unions had really wanted to win the dispute, there were many other forms of solidarity action which could have been used to hit the Stockport Messenger Group. Workers at Telecom could have been asked to disconnect the phone lines, postal workers to block the post, and power workers to disconnect the electricity ... But at this point NGA leaders wanted nothing more than to let the dispute slip quietly back into the obscurity from which it had emerged. Len Murray's "betrayal" was the answer to their prayers. NGA leaders must have felt like they'd won the pools: now they could call off the action and put the blame on someone else!

#### The Limits of Militancy at Warrington

What appeared as a battle between the Tory government and the unions, or later between the NGA and the TUC, masks the fact that all parties involved are part of the capitalist state with vested interests in supporting the capitalist system. What is at issue in the dispute over the new union laws is: who is going to control the workers? The unions insist that it's their job. Thus Len Murray said of Tebbit: "Is he trying to stir up unofficial strikes? He must know that every union does everything in its power to control a strike."

In other words the unions are jockeying for position within the ruling class. The new laws threaten the power of the trade union bureaucracy and have provoked a real conflict between them and the government. But despite their differences all sides in this conflict have the same fundamental aims. This is why they all wanted to make sure that any confrontation took place in circumstances where, whoever won, the working class was bound to lose.

This is the real reason why it suited all sides that the new laws should be "tested out" in this small dispute in far-away Warrington. They were able to ensure that despite Socialist Worker's grand claim that the dispute had become one between "the working class and the Tory government", the genuine interests of the working class were not represented at all.

The militancy on the picket lines went much further than the unions intended. NGA leaders joined Labour, SDP, and Tory MPs, and the TUC general council in condemning the "violence" of workers defending themselves against the onslaught of military trained police riot squads. Surely if all these people were against them, many people will say, what the workers were doing must have been good! However workers' militancy was not, and at Warrington could not have been directed towards the right aims.

It is important that workers are prepared to use violence when necessary to defend their interests. However the nature of this working class violence is and must be very different from the violence of police riot squads or the army. Working class violence does not depend on military discipline and sophisticated technology of mass destruction: it is by its very nature turbulent and apparently uncontrolled, but in reality based on self-discipline and self-organisation, and fuelled by creativity, enthusiasm and, above all, solidarity. Workers can never hope to defeat the police in a set-piece confrontation such as took place at Warrington. But even these specially trained and well-armed forces must give way to the irresistible pressure of the mass struggle of the working class. When the mass strikes in Poland were at their height, even the Russian army hesitated to invade!

This is why in every struggle the aim of militant workers must be to spread the struggle. "Spreading the struggle" means increasing the numbers of workers involved. It means joining in a common struggle with workers from different unions, companies, industries and regions. And to achieve this it means broadening the aims and raising the demands of the struggle. In this context, it can be seen that the whole question of "secondary picketting" is a red herring. What the bosses and the unions call "secondary picketting" at best aims at limited solidarity action by other workers, such as sympathy strikes, blacking goods, etc. At worst it is no more than a ritualistic act. The aim of the bosses and the unions is to make workers think that each strike is just the affair of the particular group of workers directly involved. To make an issue about whether we're allowed to engage in what they call secondary picketting, means accepting the bosses' definition of what is the legitimate primary area of dispute.

In fact workers habitually go beyond the limits of "secondary picketting" even at times, such as today, when there are not many strikes. The action by workers at Moss Morran described in the following article; the flying pickets sent by Yorkshire miners to call 14 pits out on strike over the victimisation of one man; the picketting by Shell workers in their recent dispute which aimed to spread their strike to the tanker drivers - all these are examples of when workers in 1983 organised themselves to spread their struggles. Unlike the blanket media coverage given to the picket at Warrington, the media keeps quiet about these examples of workers successfully defying the new union laws in a way which went beyond the limits of "secondary picketting" as advocated by even the most "militant" of union leaders. In fact all these actions were actively opposed by the unions. This is why the unions could hardly have used them as the test-case for the new laws. At Warrington on the other hand there was much less danger of the struggle spreading in a way which escaped union control. There was never any question of calling the workers at Warrington out on strike - they had been hand-picked



by Shah for their anti-union views. Nor was the issue at the centre of the dispute - the victimisation of eight workers in a union somewhat isolated from the main body of the working class - have a direct relevance for other workers.

At Warrington the unions were able to take up the issue of secondary picketing as a principle. If through a struggle over secondary picketing the Shell workers, for example, had won their claim for higher wages, millions of other AUEW and TGWU workers might well have been inspired to follow their example. But the last thing the unions wanted was for workers to gain a sense of their class power through putting secondary picketing to practical use in a struggle over wages, conditions or factory closures.

Arthur Scargill could confidently polish up his radical image by calling at Warrington for the "biggest mass picket in history", without any fear that this might affect the outcome of the strike at Monktonhall colliery which was at that time being sabotaged by NUM officials. This is the scoundrel who in 1981 addressed a meeting of striking steelworkers, pledging the support of the miners they desperately needed, while offering them nothing except ... a miner's lamp!

#### The Unions and the New Laws

There is another reason why the unions could feel confident that the dispute at Warrington would not get out of hand. The NGA is possibly a uniquely well-disciplined union. When the NGA withdrew the pickets from Warrington, official Joe Wade was able to confidently predict that "if we give this instruction to our members, they are very loyal ... I'm quite sure that they will accept the advice that we give." Very few other union leaders could have said this. Certainly not NUM leaders, whose members habitually reject their recommendation to strike and then come out against their orders when they are least expecting it! Nor AUEW leaders, who after smashing the strike at Laurence Scott, to name but one, are virtually synonymous with shit in many parts of the North-West. But the NGA can still use its members like well-disciplined troops.

This is something which all unions leaders wish they could do. Indeed they used to be able to: after leading their members in a series of more or less successful strikes in the early seventies, the unions were able to call hundreds of thousands of workers out to demonstrate against Heath's Industrial Relations Act. But having used their power to help get Labour back into power in 1974, the unions collaborated with this government's austerity programme, of which they were the joint architects. They called, and still call, for "realism" in the face of the crisis - which amounts to workers accepting wage cuts, worse working conditions, and redundancies. From the "ordinary workers" point of view they are no longer able to deliver the goods. Their attempt to mobilise support against Tebbit's union laws in the Days of Action was a miserable fiasco. On the other hand when workers do struggle, the unions are often unable to contain them.

The "loss of control" by the unions over their members is essential to an understanding of the new laws. The Tories are well aware of the value of the unions in controlling the working class. But they also know that workers do not have the same unthinking loyalty towards them as they used to. Their credibility is wearing thin. The new union laws are part of an attempt by the government to compensate for this weakness by creating an atmosphere of repression and fear, to frighten workers away from confronting the "tough" Tories. The Tories want to be seen to confront the unions because it fits in with this image: they decisively reject the ideology of "we're all in this mess together" which the previous Labour government used to carry out the same policies as the Tories, with the open collaboration

of the unions during the period of the "Social Contract". The new laws do weaken the power of the unions, which is why they tried - unsuccessfully - to mobilise their members against them. But the unions are still integrated into the decision making apparatus of the state at every level, through their membership of hundreds of committees. The Tories are not seeking to destroy them, but to redefine their role in society in the light of the economic crisis, which forces the bosses to take a much tougher line against the workforce. The unions are no longer to be the "free and equal partners" in all aspects of government, as they aspired to be under Labour, but to have a much more limited role of selling wage restraint, speed-ups and labour discipline to their members, within the framework of an acceptance of the fact that government policies cannot be challenged, since they are determined by "economic realism", and backed up by "public opinion". The new laws restrict the unions' freedom - but offer them in return increased legal restraints against their more militant members who have caused them so much trouble in recent years.

A majority of the unions are now prepared to accept this new role. But they want the decision to collaborate with the government to appear to be forced upon them by their members. They will not be all that dismayed by the "defeat" at Warrington.

#### Where Next?

For the working class what happened at Warrington has a different significance. As the mass picketting was underway, Socialist Worker wrote:

"But it is not just the NGA which is threatened. Based on tight-knit class loyalties. So if the NGA is beaten at Warrington by the use of the law, then very few other groups of workers are going to feel they have the power to defend union organisation under the same threat."

In fact no single group of workers is powerful enough today to win major victories on its own. This idea that workers should "take on the government" union by union, with the "weaker unions" waiting for the outcome of struggles waged by the stronger ones, is an ideological attack on the working class. Its aim is to prevent the unification across union boundaries which is becoming more and more essential as the deepening crisis erodes the economic power of individual groups of workers. The example of the defeat of a "strong union" can then be used to foster demoralisation among the rest of the working class.

The 1981 steel strike provided a classic example. Other groups of workers, while waiting to see if the steel workers could win what was seen as a test-case confrontation with the Tory government, held back from taking the very actions which were desperately needed by the steel workers, and could have led to the success of their strike. Then the defeat of this "powerful group of workers" led to the downturn in class struggle from which we have yet to emerge.

In fact there is no reason why the "defeat" at Warrington should prevent workers from continuing to successfully defy the picketting laws. However union leaders will try to use it to justify their suppression of future attempts by their members to do so - as part of their overall strategy of reaching a compromise with the Tory government. In this they are supported by arguments like those used in the above quote from Socialist Worker, which can only contribute to any demoralisation the "defeat" might have caused.

But what in any case would the union "victory" which the SWP called for amount to? Something 'like the victory claimed by McGahey at the Monktonhall colliery, where none of the workers' original demands were met ... but management agreed to use the "officially agreed negotiating procedure" in the future. In other words, management will work more closely with the NUM before making any further attacks on the miners!

Workers have shown time and again that they are quite capable of successfully defying any picketting laws. But the workers at Shell who had broken the picketting laws without giving them a second thought, were finally defeated by a series of union manoeuvres. The unions are a greater threat to our struggle than any law: we know the law is against us, but the unions stab us in the back. Workers do not yet have the confidence to openly defy their unions. But when the picketting laws are next broken during the course of a major struggle, the unions will line up with the government against the workers, and then the stage will be set for the real battle to be fought.

For more information on the background to recent disputes in the printing industry, we recommend to readers the December/January 84 issue of Workers Playtime, available from the London Workers group whose address is given on the inside back cover.

## CLASS STRUGGLE IN SCOTLAND

### Introduction

Its becoming a common cry these days that the working class in Britain has been passive in the face of the attacks of the crisis: accepting lay-offs, wage cuts speed-ups. And it is undeniable that working class resistance to austerity has been at a low level for the past few years. In past Bulletins we have attempted to explain this phenomenon and state it here again. The class is not defeated: what the relative quiet indicates is that the struggles of 1979/80 marked the end of a stage in the class struggle - what resulted was the realisation that austerity was the inescapable consequence of the world crisis, not just the ideological reaction of one particular faction of the state. It was no longer possible for workers to believe that it was just the greed of the bosses or bloodmindedness that stopped the bosses from coughing up: when they said they couldn't afford it they were speaking the truth!

Inevitably such a realisation has led to a period of reflection, of acceptance of austerity: if 'they' have no choice but to attack living standards, then what's the use of fighting back. Clearly we, as Communists, see very plainly that there is a point, that fighting back is crucial if the bourgeoisie are going to be prevented from dragging the world into the horrors of World War 111. But equally as Communists we realise that the fight back is not dependent simply on workers listening to us, the inescapable surge of austerity itself will drive, and is driving workers back to struggle as unemployment increases, dole and wages are cut and productivity is forced up. Future struggles, and the recent strikes in France, Germany and especially Belgium suggests not too far in the future, must move to a new level: implicit in them will have to be a recognition that the 'system' is bankrupt and that continued struggles must begin to look beyond that 'system'. The myth that capitalism is eternal is crumbling.

### Moss Morran

But if a new wave of struggle still lies in the future there is still today, despite the apparent calm, evidence that the working class is not defeated. There is still bitter, though localised struggle. One example of this took place in Fife in Scotland during August of this year. On the Fife coast, opposite Edinburgh a huge oil complex containing petro-chemical plants, ethan cracker plant and oil tanker terminals is being built.

At the start of August six electricians on the Moss Morran petro-chemical plant had wages docked for refusing to comply with a national agreement on working in bad weather which had been imposed by the employers in the engineering construction industry and the main union, the Electrical, Electronic Plumbing and Telecommunications Union (EEPTU). Immediately 400 electricians working for Matthew Hall engineering on the Shell site walked out in sympathy and pickets persuaded some of the remaining 3,600 to stay out too. (This, by the way was not the first strike at the Shell site - in July 300 pipe fitters had staged a week long unofficial strike in sympathy with 250 colleagues involved in a demarcation dispute at the adjacent Esso ethane cracker plant.) The EEPTU immediately condemned the dispute and ordered the electricians back to work.

Two days later however, with Union/Management threats still being ignored, 200 men employed by Lumas at the Esso cracker plant began unofficial strike in sympathy. At the end of the first week the 400 electricians were sacked - an act which led to 140 men employed by Watson Norie at the Braefoot tanker terminal and 6 pipefitters walking out in sympathy next day.

/cont.

Despite continued threats from unions and management (the Esso strikers were threatened with the sack) the strikes held firm and indeed numbers were swelled by 300 welders and pipefitters employed by John Brown Engineering at the £700,000,000 petro-chemical complex. Faced with such widespread strike action Matthew Hall capitulated three days later, all the 400 electricians were taken back and the original six were fully compensated for their docked wages. At this point the EEPTU, realising that it had to do something quickly to regain some kind of credibility on the site, jumped in and claimed it was seeking compensation for its members for their time out! And this from the union which throughout the dispute was haranguing workers to return to work!

The lessons of this strike are clear for all workers - it is class solidarity that wins fights. And solidarity today can only be expressed in joint action. Declaration of sympathy mean nothing, whip-rounds for cash support mean nothing, workers on strike confront bosses behind whom stands the state, and no matter how much 'sympathy money' comes in the state can always starve out workers in the end; only spreading the strike works. The most serious challenge against such spreading comes from the unions - its no coincidence that sympathy collections and wordy resolutions of support are the unions stock-in-trade when it comes to ensuring that meaningful acts of solidarity don't occur.

The significance of the Fife strike doesn't lie in the winning of one struggle for one aspect of working conditions - the bosses will be forced to carry out more and wider attacks all too soon, and next time we can expect the unions to be a lot more circumspect at Moss Morran; they will be careful not to play their hand too soon so that next time they can be in a position to contain the struggle from the beginning. No, the real significance lies in the lessons learned by workers - that the only way forward lies outside of and against the unions, that rapid and wide spreading of the strike is the only way forward that the confidence and strength generated by joint struggle is an enormous weapon. These lessons are being learned not just in Fife but internationally - albeit in a fitful and localised way at the moment - in South America, Asia and Europe and behind the 'Iron Curtain'. The deepening of the crisis and the strengthening of the bosses' attack internationally will ensure that the lessons are generalised and spread.

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From Communist Bulletin No. 5 (The Article goes on to describe another strike in Scotland, the 'Orange Juice' strike at the Highland Fabrication Plant. Unfortunately we have had to omit this due to lack of space.)

Copies of the Bulletin can be obtained from:

CBG  
Box 85  
43 Candlemakers Row  
Edinburgh,  
U.K.

(or from the address of Wildcat)

## RESIDENTIAL SOCIAL WORKERS CONFRONT THEIR UNION

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The three month dispute by residential social workers began and ended without many workers even having heard of it. "The national media have been unusually reticent about what one would normally expect to have been a ripe candidate for sensationalism", commented Community Care, the social workers' professional magazine.

Why was this? Perhaps because the press were afraid that this struggle by a poorly-paid group of workers for basic and sorely-needed improvements in living standards and working conditions, would remind people of the real issues behind what appeared to be a dispute over a point of law waged by a group of highly-paid workers at Warrington. Perhaps also because while at Warrington the union was by-and-large supported by its members, the residential social workers' dispute, as it developed, became more and more a struggle between the workers and their union.

For a long time the bosses have cynically exploited these workers knowing that, like nurses, their "concern" for their charges would make them extremely reluctant to take action. When the campaign of limited industrial action (in support of their claim for overtime payments for weekend work) started in August Labour councils said they were sympathetic. Many implied that they were prepared to consider local settlements. Brent council announced that "subject to legal and financial advice" they would be suggesting to other councils that "they should enter into negotiations with NALGO to move towards a phased settlement of this reasonable claim." Fine words, which, on closer inspection, promise nothing. The breakaway group of London Labour councils, the ALA, did propose separate negotiations, but (surely) in the knowledge that NALGO, the most bureaucratically hidebound of all unions, would refuse on the grounds that the ALA was "not a recognised body". NALGO did however authorise branches to open negotiations with individual councils, but no offer was ever made by a single Labour council.

Clearly the aim of the "left-wing" Labour councils, probably with NALGO leaders' connivance, was to preserve their radical image by appearing to sympathise, while in fact they never had any intention of meeting the claim and were relying on the Tory and right-wing Labour majority on the "recognised" negotiating body to block any negotiations at a national level.

Later the "left-wing" Labour councils showed their true colours. Workers in Hackney, "Red Ted" Knight's Lambeth and elsewhere came out on strike in response to provocation by their "socialist" bosses. Most spectacularly, Southwark council, which had two years earlier passed a "radical" resolution deploring the existence of the SPG, sent in its successor the Instant Response Unit to remove children who refused to leave one of the homes affected by the dispute. The IRU cops, predictably, smashed the place up. For good measure, Southwark council suspended 32 staff of other departments for refusing to scab on the residential social workers, provoking a walkout by 1,000 workers.

But 1,000 workers is not enough! Roll on the day when "Red Ted" and all his fake-socialist chums in the Labour councils are swept aside by the wrath of the entire working class!

As the dispute wore on, workers' anger was directed against the union. NALGO did not appear to share the growing sense of urgency felt by its

members. As the third month approached, the chief negotiator, taking up a militant stance, said that he hoped the employers would "see reason pretty soon" !!! On 17th November a National Delegates Conference, made up of full-time officials and their lackeys, met to decide on the course of the dispute, against a background of mounting unofficial pressure. Some days earlier hundreds of workers had invaded NALGO HQ to try to force an escalation of the action. As the meeting got underway, hundreds of angry workers in the street outside were refused admission to a meeting to discuss their own dispute, on the grounds that they had no admission credentials! Police arrived to disperse them, saying that they were an illegal picket of more than six people -- providing the first (but we guarantee not the last) example of Tebbit's "anti-union" law being used to protect the unions from their own members!

Later the "pickets" were admitted and watched impotently from the gallery while the conference organised the sabotage of their struggle. In such situations militant workers should kick out the bureaucrats and take over the meeting themselves - and then take steps to convene a meeting of genuine workers' delegates.

NALGO leaders were forced to make a face-saving gesture in order to pacify the militants. A demonstration was fixed for December 7th, when all NALGO members would be "authorised to strike". However December 7th came and went with most NALGO members unaware that it was any different from the 6th or the 8th. News of the demonstration, where more than 50 people were arrested during displays of police violence, was played down by the media. It is clear that local and national NALGO leaderships did all they could to make this "Day of Action" a failure. (For example a circular giving information about the Day of Action was never distributed to most NALGO members in Manchester. By contrast a notice about the picket in Warrington was distributed to every member in Manchester within 24 hours.)

While distracting the militants with this fake "Day of Action" the Delegate Conference refused to discuss the question of an all-out strike. Instead they called a ballot for a minor extension of the dispute, while blaming "lack of support" from the membership for its failure so far. In fact a widespread strike movement was already developing. At the start of November 700 workers were on all-out strike. One month later - despite the news blackout by the union - this number had grown to 1400. The NALGO leadership was haunted by the spectre of what it feared more than anything else: a real struggle which had a chance of success.

However this surge of militancy came too late. NALGO announced that the results of the ballot showed that the proposal to escalate the action had "not been accepted" (although significantly no details of the voting have been published). The leadership will now gain approval for their proposal to end the dispute pending an "enquiry" into the workers conditions.

The results of the ballot seem to justify the NALGO leaders' claim that they were not supported by their membership during the dispute. In fact this "lack of support" was caused by a sense of isolation and powerlessness among the workers deliberately created by the union leaders themselves! The tragedy is that the militants who could have altered the outcome of the dispute contributed to their own isolation. Convinced of their own powerlessness, under the influence of "leftist"

groups like the SWP, the only way they could think of extending their strike nationally was to campaign to "force the leadership to give a clear lead." The militants should have organised themselves to extend their movement by appealing directly to other workers - including other council workers, and residential social workers in the private sector.

When the "clear lead" from the officials failed to appear, as it always does, the SWP denounced the "sell-out". But this was not a sell-out by the union! This was simply the union doing its job as part of the state of sabotaging workers' struggles. Even when - as in the strike in Belgium - national officials do give a "clear lead", this is only in order to gain control of the movement in order to put the boot in at the first opportunity. The only way forward is to refuse to let the unions control us, kick out the officials, and create our own independent, democratically-controlled organisations to organise our struggles.

This is not the fantastic idea it might seem to many workers. This was what happened during the last major successful strike in Britain, the lorry drivers' strike in 1979. There will be no more successful strikes until it happens again, but this time on an even more massive scale!



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**Belgium**

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UNION "GENERAL STRIKE" PREVENTS GENERALISATION

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At the beginning of the two week strike in the public sector in Belgium, there was a clear dynamic towards the extension of the movement.

"The improvised stoppages which took place on Friday on the railways were spread widely over the next four days. There was a real groundswell among public sector rank-and-file workers, without any union preparation or containment. The situation remained rather confused since these actions began spontaneously at the base and the union HQ spent four days trying to catch up with the movement. The general discontent had never been greater." (Le Soir - the Brussels newspaper - 14.9.83)

"The strike began at Charleroi without any union warning or slogans. The strike was immediate. The 9.42 train didn't leave. It stayed on the platform for 15 days. The strike spread like forest fire. By 10am all the railway workers at Charleroi were out. By noon, those in Liege." (Le Monde, 25.9.83)

The forest fire spread to the nearest city without remaining limited to the railways: "Liege groups went to the nearest postal sorting office. They got the postal workers to stop work immediately in solidarity with the movement." (Le Soir, 14.9.83)

In two days, the movement had spread over the whole country, cutting through the old regional arguments between the Walloons and the Flemish, which the unions had carefully maintained over the years.

The Union "General Strike" Against Generalisation

For six days the union leaders kept quiet and simply maintained a watching brief over the strikes. Then they launched a two-day "general strike in the public sector", coupled with inflammatory declarations: "This government must change its policies or get out." (Piton, President of the Socialist Union, the FGTB) "This time its war. If we must die its better to die on our feet." (Hengshen, President of the Christian Union, the CCSP) ... At the same time the unions made sure that the movement didn't spread to the private sector, where stoppages of various lengths had taken place at Cockerill-Sambre, the forges of Clabecq, Glaverbel, the ACEC ...

These days of "general strike" swept the carpet from under the movement's feet: By formally generalising the strike in the public sector in order to keep it locked up in that sector, by decreeing a general strike when this didn't really correspond to the possibilities of the movement, the unions made sure of one thing: that the movement became dependant on them. The strike became a passive strike, where the majority of workers stayed at home, waiting for instructions from the union. This had nothing to do with the extension of the workers struggles, and this wasn't the way the movement generalised between Liege and Charleroi.

The organisation of workers must be built during the struggle itself, through the thousand different forms that this can take, as Rosa Luxemburg described with regard to the mass strike in Russia in 1905:

"... the apparently "chaotic" strikes and the "disorganised" revolutionary action after the January general strike are becoming the starting point of a feverish work of organisation." (Luxemburg, The Mass Strike)

If the recent strikes remained trapped within the boundaries of 'union decisions', it was to a large extent thanks to those who, within the movement, appeared to have understood that you can't rely on these bourgeois forces - the 'rank-and-file' union delegates who, in actual practice, helped to strangle the movement. Even if they cried when the decision to return to work was taken, as at Charleroi, even if they cried loudly for generalisation, their whole work was aimed in one direction: to put pressure on the union leaders. According to them, all the potential of the movement depends on reconquering the unions or building new ones. But what we really see in every genuine workers' struggle is that the needs of the struggle do not demand an organisation that is divided by sectors, branches, or firms, and whose aim is to engage in buying and selling with the state. The real tendency of the struggle is towards a confrontation with the state, and thus with the unions.

The mounting distrust of the workers in Belgium towards the unions is a sign of this: "The rank-and-file not only no longer believe in the least financial promise made by any government, but are beginning to doubt their own union delegates" (Le Soir...23.9.83).

### Perspectives

The reaction of the public sector workers in Belgium didn't come out of nowhere. The unions always present the working class as an apathetic mass, difficult to get moving, discouraged - but still capable of unforeseen and apparently disordered reactions.

However, there is an order in the upsurges of the working class over the last fifteen years, the product of accumulated experience. There is a history to all these strikes and this history centres around the workers' efforts to organise and extend their movements, and the tendency of struggles to break free of the limits of trade-unionism. As Le Soir put it: "The rank-and-file doesn't want any more set-piece strikes or staggered strikes, whose effects are always limited and which never allow the workers to obtain their objectives." We can only understand the specific manifestations of the struggle by understanding the general characteristics of the workers' movement today, a movement that can only express itself through numerous attempts and varied forms, followed by moments of silence: "It is absurd to think of the mass strike as one act, one isolated action. The mass strike is rather the indication, the rallying idea, of a whole period of the class struggle..." (Rosa Luxemburg, The Mass Strike).

Through explosions and confrontation of the kind we've just seen in Belgium, the ground is being laid for more massive reactions throughout Europe.

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Address: BM Box 869,  
LONDON WC1N 3XX

For more information about our ideas and activity please write to WILDCAT at the address below.

Copies of this pamphlet are available at 15p each or £1.00 for ten (postage free).

The following short pamphlets are also available. These are free but donations towards the costs of production and postage will be very welcome!

"LABOURING IN VAIN" -- a critical look at the Labour Party

"How Socialist Is The Socialist Workers Party?"

Our address is: WILDCAT  
c/o The Autonomy Centre,  
8-10 Great Ancoats Street,  
Manchester 4,  
England

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Readers will probably be interested in the publications of the groups listed below:

London Workers Group,  
Box LWG,  
C1 Metropolitan Wharf,  
Wapping Wall,  
London E1

Black Star,  
P.O. Box 153,  
Wolverton,  
Milton Keynes,  
Buckinghamshire

Careless Talk,  
R. Knight,  
c/o The Students Union,  
The University,  
Keele,  
Staffordshire

Practical Anarchy /  
Clydeside Workers Group,  
c/o 488 Great Western Road,  
Glasgow 12

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"INTERCOM" is a discussion journal produced by Wildcat and some of the groups listed above. Available from Wildcat at 30p per copy (postage free).

This pamphlet is produced by WILDCAT

The Wildcat group is a small local organisation of revolutionaries who originally came together to produce a bulletin of class struggle in the Manchester area. We are now involved in a number of other projects and have made contact with similar groups elsewhere in this country and abroad.

We have tried as far as possible to avoid labelling ourselves, since opponenets are only too eager to pigeon-hole us and avoid genuine political discussion. But we have no desire to conceal our political background, which is generally known in political circles as "libertarian communist" or "council communist". Nor do we wish to conceal our political ideas.

We are opposed to all capitalist and nationalist parties, and this includes the Labour Party which has always defended a capitalist programme and served capitalist interests. Unlike the Leftist groups we don't promote the lie that the Labour Party is any less capitalist, chauvinist, or anti-working class than the Tories. The barbarism of capitalism, the spread of starvation in the "third world", of poverty in the developed world, the ever-growing threat of world war, means that it is futile to choose between left and right-wing capitalist rulers. Capitalism in all its forms must be destroyed.

As for the trade unions, we have no illusions that they could be turned into organisations which defend working class interests simply by a change in leadership or tactics. To attempt to do so is a futile exercise. The very structure of the trade unions has developed in accordance with their role in society today, which is to divide, isolate and defeat workers' struggles. We believe that our struggles can only be won through independent working class action, organised and controlled by the people taking part. But all gains won in struggle today can only be temporary, until capitalism is finally overthrown and replaced by a communist society.

The society we envisage is not one where a party takes power and acts as a government, but one in which all people participate in decision making. This society will not follow a "transitional period" of state control but will be achieved in the process itself of overthrowing capitalism. In order to make this possible, workers must organise their own struggles now, operating through democratic mass meetings and the election of revocable delegates, outside the control of political parties or trade unions.

The role of revolutionaries must be to encourage, support and attempt to widen workers struggles. We do this not as a party-building tactic, but because we believe that through the experience of today's struggles workers will learn the necessity for communism - and how these defensive struggles can be transformed into the struggle for communist revolution.

For we have complete confidence in the ability of the working class to emancipate itself. We see communism as the real underlying trend of working class struggle for human needs under capitalism. In the final success of this struggle, communist society will emerge, with the total abolition of nation states and the money/market/wages system, and its replacement by the common ownership and democratic control of the world's resources, for production to directly satisfy people's needs.