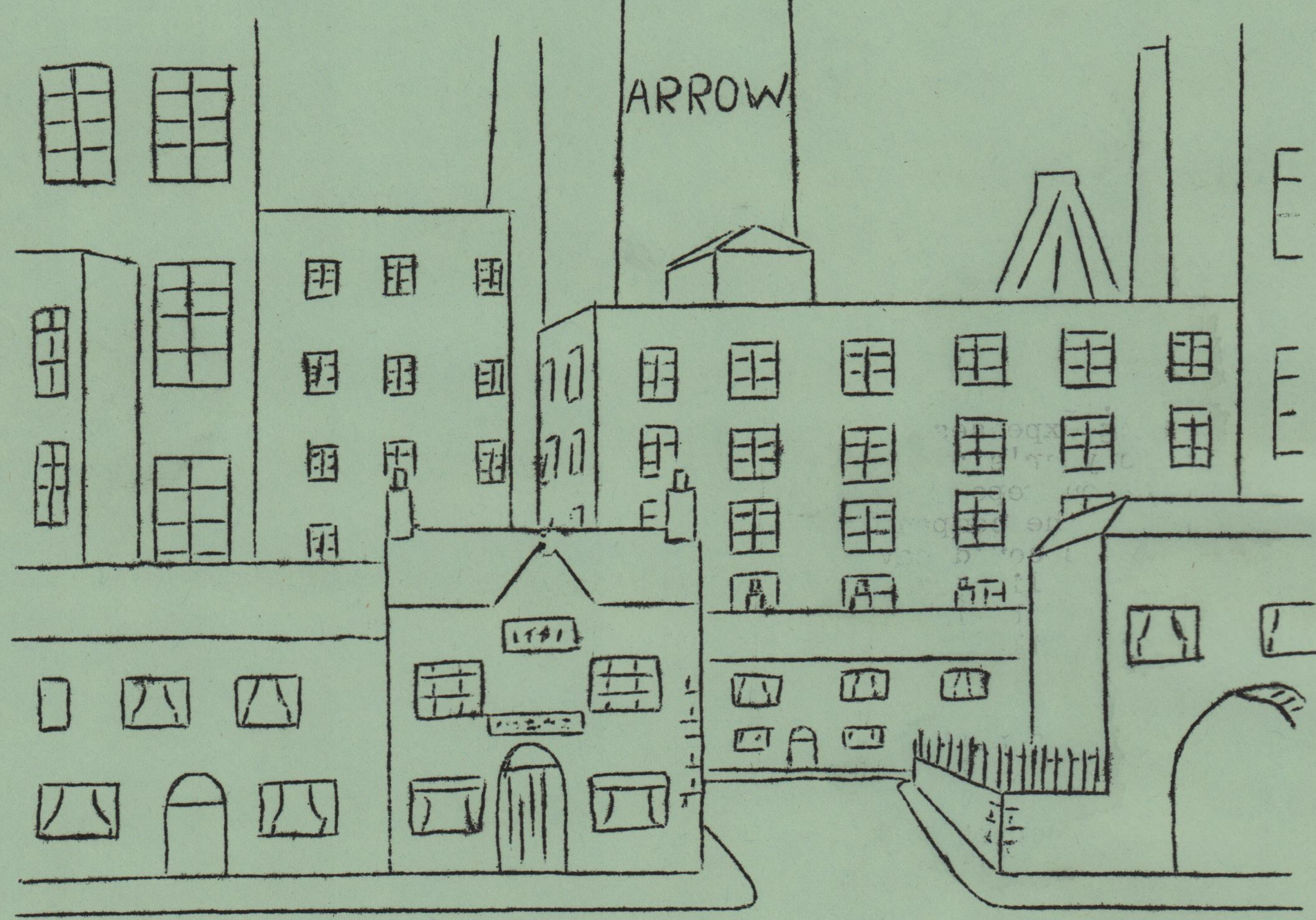


THE ARROW MILL SIT-IN



-A CASE FOR SHOP
-STEWARDS IN
TEXTILES

THE ARROW MILL SIT - IN

A CASE FOR SHOP STEWARDS

Introduction

The Arrow Mill sit-in occurred on May 9th. 1971 and lasted about two hours. It was caused by the sacking of four men who were later reinstated. This sit-in was the first of a series of sit-ins and factory occupations by workers in this country which have now become a feature of the British Trade Union Movement. Yet, so far as we know, the Arrow Mill sit-in was the only one of its kind in which the police were used to break the strike and arrest a striker. Would we wonder, the police have been brought in if the workers hadn't mostly been Pakistani and members of a deadleg textile union.

The Multi-shift

Every Sunday morning the Pakistani workers on shift at Courtaulds Arrow Mill, Rochdale, listen to a programme in Urdu and Hindi called "make yourself at home" on a transistor in the toilets. On May 9th. last year the workers on "B" shift assembled as usual to hear the programme and to have a brew and a bit to eat away from the noise of the machinery. At the same time two English blokes were eating butties and reading "the News of the World" in the rest room. (On multi-shift with its 12 hour rotating shift operating the plant on a non-stop basis 7 days a week the workers are entitled to a break - or are they?) It is a tough system which tends to produce tensions which have led to violence on occasions. This time there had been some trouble over the implementation of a piecework agreement which the doffers didn't really want. From the management point of view production wasn't high enough so they forcibly introduced piecework and a bonus scheme. The doffers weren't taking this and were doing the same amount of work as before and not biting this "BONUS CARROT". This was the extent of their "work-to-rule" but they were still bullied into operating the piecework system by the management in the face of a dormant union.

The Sackings

They say that before a house falls in you hear a warning crack. At Arrow we heard the first warning cracks in January, last year, when an assistant supervisor told one white worker that if he let the Pakistani workers elect him works' councillor he'd be down the road. Then, GEORGE NORMAN, a manager, told several Pakistanis that the management didn't want this white worker on the works council.

One month later - Mohamed Tariq, a militant speed frame operator, was made redundant two weeks after he had successfully tried to get the management to reduce the speed of the machines. (The UNION did nothing !)

In April - the works councillor on "B" shift was told not to talk to more than one person at once or else he would be accused of holding an unofficial meeting and sacked.

By May - supervisors and the works study bloke were moving round the department and openly bullying the spinners and doffers into working harder. (the management still intent on increasing production without a corresponding wage increase). The situation was becoming so bad that the doffers decided to have a strike if things didn't improve. BAMFORD, the works councillor got wind of this and contacted JOE KING of the TEXTILE & ALLIED WORKERS' UNION. Amazingly he fixed a meeting with the management for May 13th.

On May 9th. - the management was clearly determined to break the workers'

resistance to piece-work and other schemes. At 8 am the supervisor on "B" shift had a phone call, he had already been told to get tough with the doffers. By 8-40 am he had sacked all four doffers and organized the spinners to doff their own frames (two jobs for one worker). The doffers had been in the toilets as had some of the spinners but no spinners were sacked - they're too useful ! The doffers had been sitting ducks and the management had probably planned it like that.

The Sit - In

Around 9am a sit-in strike had been organized by the spinners, doffers and labourers. The frames were stopped and the workers went into the rest room. Then two managers arrived about 10 O'clock and tried unsuccessfully to get the workers back to work. When the men also refused to leave the premises GEORGE NORMAN sent for the police. The four police officers who arrived didn't do much better than the managers so, the works manager HEAPS was sent for. HEAPS took a tough line saying that anyone who didn't get back to work would be sacked. At this point four spinners and two labourers went back to their frames which HEAPS had confidently started before issuing his ultimatum to the workers. The four doffers and the works' councillor, who had been sacked, still refused to leave the premises. Then HEAPS & SIMMS (the two managers) after some hesitation made a half hearted attempt to remove Bamford. This was the ideal time for the police to intervene (on the side of the ruling class of course). They dragged and part kicked Bamford across the floor to the lift. Pc. KERFORD took particular enjoyment in the job and handcuffed Bamford as he knelt on his neck. It is known that as a result of KERFORD'S action some of his police colleagues sent him to Coventry afterwards.

Mohammed Ali enters the ring

It was 1pm. before Bamford was released by the police. By that time the call had already gone out amongst the Pakistani workers to meet at Malik's house, a councillor on "D" shift. At 4pm. Most of the workers on "A", "D" & "C" shifts had assembled, plus one or two other Pakistanis from other departments at Arrow. A phone call was put through to the "B" shift spinners and labourers still working since the morning's events. The caller used the name Mohammed ALI(!) and informed the workers of the meeting. These "B" shift workers then left their jobs but, since it was Sunday they had to get somebody to open the gates to let them out. (Not only are they locked out after work but they are locked in whilst actually working). On the way out they met Mr. MAXWELL, the personnel officer, who, it appeared, to the Pakistanis, had been drinking heavily. Out of fear and so they would let them out they invented the story that if he didn't do so their wives and children might suffer. This story was later used by the management and union to discredit the strikers. At Malik's house the meeting was informed of the situation and an oath was read over Allah's name after which all the workers indicated their determination to stay on strike until the five sacked men had been reinstated.

The Strike

Next morning no pickets were on duty but no Pakistanis reported for multi-shift at Arrow. At the union office brother BELFIELD, Rochdale secretary of the Textile and Allied Workers Union, refused to back the strike and without hearing Bamford's side of the story said that he was only interested in getting the doffers back. He had heard the management's case at 9-30pm. the previous night. Later that morning Bamford, who was approached by several Pakistani workers who were ready to give up their jobs with him, recommended a full return to work if the doffers were reinstated. The management naturally jumped at this. Bamford was widely criticized for this soft stand both by the Pakistanis and some outsiders.

The criticism seems justified since it was known that the Pakistanis in other Arrow departments had announced their willingness to strike in sympathy.

Where Bamford and the Pakistanis went wrong was in failing to formulate their demand after the strike was started. For example. There will be no return to work until :-

- 1 all the workers were reinstated.
- 2 the management grant the multi-shift workers their long standing demand for £5 across the board increase in pay. The management had offered £1.
- 3 there is proper shop floor representation of the workers interests, that is, shop stewards.

Labour Relation at Arrow Mill

After the strike the management and the union bosses were still worried that the workers might strike again if Bamford wasn't reinstated. So the personnel officer, Mr. ~~he appeared to have been drinking heavily~~ MAXWELL rung up the local community relations officer Mr. Haq, and begged him to call round and calm down the Pakistanis. MAXWELL told Haq that Bamford was an anarchist who thrives on strikes. Haq refused to get involved. Labour relations at Arrow were never any good on multi-shift.

The managerial system there is paternalistic too. Workers are hardly ever taken seriously or consulted but are treated like zombies and are told, usually in the naicest of ways, what's good for them. According to HEAPS, the works manager, this is the only way to get things done. There is a works council but this is used by the management to find out what the workers are up to and is little better than a glorified suggestion box. The workers on multi-shift had tried with petitions, leaflets and meetings to draw attention to their problems. A bond had begun to develop between the white and coloured workers on the shift. Bamford, a white worker, had been elected by the Pakistanis to represent the "B" shift on the workers council. Later another white worker, McNulty, was elected by "C" shift and Malik and Nasee were put forward by "D" & "A" shifts. Strangely enough McNulty was dismissed for absenteeism two days before the others were given the boot.

All these people had to be sacked before the meeting between JOE KING the general secretary of the union, and the management due for the following Thursday May 13th. when the management would have to make concessions if McNulty and Bamford had been present. As it was only Quume, a Pakistani from "A" shift managed to stop the management forcing the spinners working their breaks.

Some of the Pakistanis were dissatisfied with KING, another paternal type, and they didn't like to see him wining and dining with the management before their meeting. When some Pakistanis raised the question of Bamford sacking King said that he didn't want men like 'that' in the union. After the meeting KING never took a vote or seriously tried to find out if the workers were satisfied with him.

Pressures on Malik

MALIK SOON BECAME THE NEW WHIPPING BOY - for the management who demanded with the union that he should represent the multi-shift workers in the future. Malik resented this saying that it was for the workers to choose their own representatives. But men like HEAPS & HILTON, the president of the union, were dab hands at getting their own way. They know that everyone has a weak spot and they found out that Malik had been slightly involved in some trouble in the past. Nothing serious in itself but if mixed with the threatening telephone call which the management claim had been made during the strike, then it was deadly enough to frighten Malik. Both HEAPS & HILTON wasted no time in impressing the situation upon Malik, and HILTON, who once said that he would like to exterminate

the anarchists, even asked him if he had made the call. The fact that he didn't make the call and that Barber, the worker who took the call, has since denied that any threat was made, is unimportant. Malik is an immigrant worker with eight children and obviously fears the possibility of deportation in the same way that some workers fear the sack. He took the job of go-between and was appointed by the management, not elected by the workers, and got an extra £2 per week. The main thing that concerned Malik was that Bamford had been convicted of assault during the strike and he believed that the management may have roped him in.

In the case against Bamford, two managers had testified for the prosecution, and HILTON (yes, the union man) had also assisted the prosecution case. Six of Bamford's workmates had testified for the defence. Though with MARCROFT (the manager of another local mill) on the magistrates bench the workers didn't stand a chance.

The Mill Workers Shop Stewards Campaign

While all this was going on at Arrow some young mill workers in Oldham had been campaigning to get shop stewards in the mills. In January they had their first public meeting, it was well attended and HILTON WAS THERE. The meeting agreed that supporters should put forward resolutions for shop stewards at the branch meetings on July 27th. 1971. At Shaw, and another Oldham branch this was easily done, but at Rochdale HILTON prevented Bamford from putting the resolution by a crude piece of rule bending, after which the police were called in an all out attempt to stop the resolution being put. Six days later Bamford was unlawfully expelled from the union and this was kept a secret from Bamford for two months. He was reinstated this year after a legal battle.

The campaign is now waiting while the shop steward motions are being considered by the union executive. Motions have been received sympathetically by three union branches including members of the Rochdale branch.

NB - Even Courtaulds (who own Arrow) have reported that they have nothing against shop stewards in principle.

Why No Stewards

Most local textile union officials today are little better than office minders, gathering in the union dues and moaning at the state of the trade. Such men are really rubber stamps for the bosses. Officials like BELFIELD & HILTON of Rochdale and BROWNING at Oldham are so out of touch with their members in the mills that they sleep through their negotiations with the management. This is making them rely more and more upon the work study engineer, instead of trying to earn more money and other concessions for their members by tougher negotiations.

Professor Hatner in his book "Comparative study of the cotton unions" maintains that 'the efficiency of the textile unions is impaired by their lack of mill representatives. This lack of shop floor representation in textiles stems from the depressed state of cotton after the 1921 slump. At the time when most other unions were developing modern structures and shop stewards were becoming officially recognized, the cotton unions were declining as the recession hit them. Unemployment in the industry rose at least to 47% by 1930. But if only to keep the union officials clued up there is an obvious need for shop stewards. Increasingly tied to the job by ever increasing work loads and out of contact with his workmates, because of the clatter of machinery, the mill workers needs for shop floor representation is as great as that of any other worker in other industries. Hatner thinks that proper union representation is feared by the union bosses since it will give the shop floor more power. Over the years of fluctuating demands and trade cycles in textiles, these union officials have presided over an industry whose workers have been pushed around in a sickening fashion. The antique unions like the Textile and Allied Workers Union are totally unfit to tackle large combines like Cortaulds.

Poor Pay

The low wages in the textile industry are the product of the outdated structures of these antique unions and their conservative officials. The policies of these weak-kneed officials and the persistent short time working in the mills has resulted in many of the cotton industry's most skilled workers leaving the industry for steadier jobs elsewhere. We have now had cases of mills having to close, not out of lack of orders, but because of the shortage of skilled workers. With this lack of skilled workers leaving the industry the mill managers have used married women and coloured immigrant as a ready supply of cheap labour. Then by playing white off against black, and women against men these firms have dictated conditions on the shop floor and kept workers wages down.

Over the years the workers wage packet has always been the first to suffer. Even before the war and during the inter-war slump under-employment owing to short time cuts the weekly wage of some weavers to less than the public unemployment benefit. From 1951 to mid 1959 wage rates in cotton rose by only 30% while wages nationally averaged a rise of 50%. And prices went up by a third in the same period. Professor Hatner has argued that in cotton the unions acceptance of a lag in wage rates, which are hardly keeping up with the cost of living and usually fall well behind wage rises granted to workers in other industries has done nothing to help cotton recover and has merely helped to prop up the most backward firms. There has, in our experience in Rochdale and Oldham, been a failure on the part of the unions to take an active part in the plight of the members on the shop floor. They seem to make very little effort to consult the members or discover their feelings about new practices being introduced by management until after trouble arises or after complaints are made. Negotiation about MULTI-SHIFT at Arrow Mill seems to have been non-existent.

The Arrow Mill Treadmill

In the same way that dictatorships are often the most unsuitable form of government, so management, who dictate to their workers are usually the most chaotic and disorganized systems. When a lift man at Arrow asked for more pay they sacked him and put his lift onto automatic control. - When a speed frame operator at the same mill successfully got the speed of his machine and other machines reduced they sacked, sorry, made him redundant! Imagine a management having a free hand to increase the speed of the machines without previously informing the workers or without consulting the unions, where radical schemes and changes in the productive processes are forced through without regard to the workers. Where workers are made redundant without telling the union beforehand. Where workers, particularly the Pakistanis, are railroaded and bullied by half a dozen managers at once into accepting managerial plans and piecework against their will. Where some workers on multi-shift have to work 72 hours in six days - that is six twelve hour shifts on the trot without overtime - worse still the system involves 24 hours night work plus 48 hours day work with a 24 hour break to change over just because the management cannot be bothered to plan a better work system. It is hard monotonous work and the conditions produce dangerously high noise levels. Think of rats in a treadmill and you will have a good idea of what it is like to work at Arrow Mill, where the workers are manipulated more like animals performing in a circus rather than treated like human beings.

Boot licking - a dying art

"We don't want to get like the car industry with strikes and shop stewards and all that", HILTON president of Rochdale's Union of Textile and Allied Workers ~~xxx~~.

Part of the problem in textiles has been that most women in the industry tend to look on mill work as a way of escaping from the bore-

dom of the home and as a means of fetching in a bit of pocket money. As such they have not been ready to strike for more pay or resist high pressure managements.

Fortunately the bootlicking tradition in textiles is now being eroded, especially in the man made fibre industries. This is happening as the small mill owners are being taken over by the big combines like ICI and Courtaulds.

Many of the old mill hands resent these combines with their new fangled work study, and modern techniques of production and personnel relations, which have made labour cuts and bigger work loads possible. These workers long for the old days of the mill parties and 'footings', with the mill football matches, and the 'Overmanning' of jobs, with all the mateyness of what one sociologist has called the 'indulgency pattern'.

The man-made fibre industry is now in many ways more like the car industry, which Albert Hilton dreads, than like the old style cotton mill. The market for man-made fibres tends to be much more stable than the market in cotton goods. Also as combines introduce many of the practices of so-called scientific management of a type we have come to associate with the car industry, they are becoming more capital intensive and bureaucratic, employing faster and noisier machinery in their mills.

At the same time a new class of worker is coming into the mills, often from traditionally more militant industries. This worker attracted to the shift work and nights in the prosperous man-made fibres, is more interested in decent pay than in the quaint customs of the old cotton mills. Most immigrant workers come into this category.

This new type of worker expects his union to deliver the goods, and when this doesn't happen he takes matters into his own hands. This explains the strike at Arrow, the doffers' work-to-rule and last years shop stewards campaign at Oldham. The Rochdale Pakistanis who were planning to form their own union, after the Nat. Union of Textile & Allied Workers bungled the Arrow strike, were reacting in the same fashion; as were the mill workers in Wigan who recently warned that the next mill that closes there will be occupied by the workers.

This kind of thing is quite common in France, 600 textile workers having taken over a mill at Troyes, near Paris in 1970, and where the men often end up locking the boss in his office until their demands are met.

Industrial Action in the Mills.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS mill workers, as we shall see, can and do fall back on certain forms of undercover action which don't appear in any set of strike statistics.

Since strike and sit-in at Arrow the management, the union and the supervisors have been in some disarray. George Norman, the manager who sent for the police during the sit-in, was first demoted for 'health reasons' and has now retired. Heaps, the works manager at the time of the strike, is being moved to a cotton mill in Shaw as this pamphlet goes to press.

The supervisors on multi-shift at Arrow, have more than once been in dispute over their own pay and jobs, and one of them has openly complained about the amount of 'buck passing' the shift managers go in for. Some supervisors have also protested about alleged damage done to machinery by operatives; pre-doffing was said to be particularly

prevalent, though it is known that some supervisors actively encourage predoffing when they are short of ~~work~~ ^{men} their shift.

A number of workers, both English and immigrant, have been accused of sabotage by the management. Other signs of dissatisfaction on multi-shift have been the high labour turnover and a fair bit of violence on the shop floor. In the view of one writer 'the existence of a frustrating atmosphere in a factory may easily be diagnosed by the presence of such symptoms as excessive criticism of management, malicious gossip, the voicing of superficial grievances, damaging of equipment, militant political attitudes, absenteeism and neurosis.' (1)

Breakdowns give workers a breather and a few minutes freedom from the dictatorship of the machine. Machine breaking has had a long history in England, not least among Lancashires mill workers. (2). When organised trade unionism was weak, workers often took to wrecking machinery in order to resist wage cuts, and to get the bosses to grant concessions. Such defensive strategies as 'job spoiling', 'cross booking', machine breaking, and other job fiddles are still very widespread in many areas of British industry. One writer (3) has said that 'such action may usefully be regarded as a defensive strategy which increases job security, prevents competitive conflicts between workers and by increasing the unpredictability of their actions to the management, enlarges workers' control over the environment'.

In textiles where the unions are unbelievably feeble, and union officials openly side with the bosses, there is clearly much undercover action of this kind. It is natural that when workers don't get the organised support of their unions and they lack the means to express a collective grievance through shop stewards, they will turn to individual action and unofficial job control of the type described. If the mill managers and their pals, the textile union officials, continue to resist the mill workers right to be represented by proper shop stewards, they will be paving the way for chaos on the shop floor. The lesson of Arrow Mill is plain, if the mill workers have no constructive means of voicing their discontent, then they will find destructive ways of making their feelings felt.

The underlying conflict between those of us who want shop stewards and the union bosses goes deeper than the question of shop floor representation. What is really at stake is whether the textile unions should be left under the virtual dictatorship of a handful of full-officials, or whether they should be brought under the control of the membership.

An active shop stewards movement would reduce the need for some of the fulltime officials, who are at present appointed for life. In Rochdale, the Nat. Union of Textile & Allied Workers has more paid officials than most other unions in the town, and the coming merger between N.U.T.A.W. and the Amalgamated Weavers Assoc. seems unlikely to cut the paid staff in either union.

In view of the difficulty of bringing motions of no confidence against the officers of most textile unions (all motions in the rules of NUTAW

(1) J.A.C. Brown 'Social Psychology of Industry'. See also 'Strategy for Industrial Struggle' Mark Fore. The emphasis is ours.

(2) E.J. Hobsbawn 'Labouring Men'.

(3) David Silverman 'The Theory of Organisations.'

~~at Rochdale~~ must be OK'd by the president and secretary of the union before they can be put to a meeting of members), it would be in the members best interest if the union officials had to fight regular elections, if only to prove they have the confidence of the members.

It really is undemocratic that union officials should be allowed to cling onto office until they retire or are overtaken by some misadventure, like secretary of one local union who fell off a train after a long reign, or worst still until they are offered management jobs as happened to one of the union staff at Oldham last year. The idea that all union officials should be made to give up their office after a set term of say two years, and for them to go back to work in the mills, seems the way to stop the union leaders becoming soft and parasitical.

Appendix.

Closures. Courtaulds Better Than Expected Profits in Year of Mill

ON THE STOCK EXCHANGE Courtaulds shares rocketed to 163pence on the announcement of its pre-tax profits of £45,500,000 in May 1972. This at £3,590,900 more than last year's final profit, was much more than had been predicted. Courtaulds shares at 169½pence are now 62½pence up on last year's price, this means that shareholders stand to make well over 10/- a share, not counting divi, in a year in which many of Courtaulds workers have been laid-off, made redundant and subjected to short-time working.

The Chairman of Courtaulds, Lord Kearton, who announced this years profits, gets a wage of £36,732 a year. That's over £600 a week not counting expenses, fringe benefits and other fiddles. Lord Kearton, in this year's address to shareholders complained that the Monopolies Commission report on Courtaulds in 1968, had had the effect of cramping the company's style and that if it hadn't been for this, Courtaulds could have bought out one of its biggest competitors-

English Calico, and then the Courtaulds profits would have been even bigger. By buying out English Calico, perhaps they could have closed down more mills like they did with Moorfield at Shaw, and in so doing cut competition and capture a big interest overseas, in North America. Lord Kearton has already hinted that Courtaulds might consider building its next major plant either on the Continent or in the Far East.

A recent report in the 'Times' showed that because of Courtaulds capital intensity a small rise in company sales would bring a large rise in profits for shareholders in future. Meanwhile, large numbers of mill workers have been made redundant, and many factories have been closed in the last year alone, while work loads for the majority of mill workers have been vastly increased.

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