

HOW LABOUR GOVERNED

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"I look around my colleagues and I see landlords, capitalists and lawyers. We are a cross-section of the national life and this is something that has never happened before."

Arthur Greenwood, Labour Lord Privy Seal,
Hansard, August 17, 1945.

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Atomic insanity

THE war in Europe ended on May 5, 1945. As a result of the General Election that followed, the Labour Government took office on July 26, 1945. Eleven days later, on August 6, the first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The second atom bomb devastated Nagasaki on August 9. The total casualties from these two insane acts will never be known, but the death roll was certainly upwards of half-a-million and, eighteen years later, victims are still dying from radiation sickness. The dropping of these bombs was not solely an act of American policy. President Truman has stated that he obtained the agreement of the British Government before the mass-murder was committed and the Labour Government had observers, including Group-Capt. Cheshire and nuclear scientist Sir William Penney, at the bomb dropping.

"The first task of the Labour Government was to complete the winning of the war against Japan and the general anticipation had been that this might prove to be a long and difficult one . . . but the use of the atom bomb at Hiroshima brought the war to a sudden end. It was, of course, an immense relief."

Attlee, *As It Happened*, p. 150.

Japan surrendered on August 15, but not all the Allied leaders agree with Attlee's cold-blooded justification of the use of the atom bomb. Rear-Admiral Zacharias, Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence, USA, writing in the American publication *Look*, asserts: "Japan would have surrendered by August 15, 1945, without the use of extreme measures."

Admiral Zacharias broadcast on July 21, 1945, offering Japan the chance to surrender unconditionally. Tokio's answer was, he says, "in effect an open invitation to begin surrender negotiations on the terms we had proposed."

Later, because of the work of spies in Britain, the USA withheld atom bomb information and the Labour Government began work on its own atom and hydrogen bombs. Before this was completed, the Tories had displaced the Labour Party and it was Churchill's

task to announce the success of Britain's own bomb, though he graciously admitted that his Government had only plucked the fruit from the tree planted by another:

"All those concerned in the production of the first British atomic bomb are to be warmly congratulated on the successful outcome of an historic episode and I should no doubt pay my compliments to the Leader of the Opposition and the party opposite for initiating it."

Churchill in the House of Commons,
Hansard, Oct. 24, 1952.

And Attlee, from the Labour benches, bowed and smiled his thanks for the compliment.

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Military blacklegs

"No conscript should be required to take duty in aid of the civil power in connection with a trade dispute, or to perform, in consequence of a trade dispute, any civil or industrial duty customarily performed by a citizen."

Labour amendment to the Military Training Bill,
Hansard, May 12, 1939.

WITHIN six days of the Labour Government taking office in 1945, it sent conscript troops into the Surrey Docks, London, to break a ten-week-old strike against a wage-cut that J. Donovan, National Secretary of the Docks Group, Transport and General Workers' Union, admitted had placed them "in a worse position financially than the workers in industry generally . . . the dockers' basic wage of 16s. per day represents a rise of only 23 per cent during the war . . . the lowest of any industry."

Three months later, at the beginning of October, an unofficial national dock dispute swiftly brought more than 43,000 militant portworkers out on the stones. The Labour Government's reply was to use 21,000 conscript troops to break the strike, which lasted until November 5. The portworkers demanded an increase of 9s. on their basic daily wage of 16s. The final settlement was for 19s. a day.

"The action of the strikers cannot be defended," raged Minister of Labour George Isaacs. His reply came from a docker's wife:

"Eight kids and a husband are a lot to feed. In a full week at the present rates my husband earns just under £5. If there is no work, he gets £3 2s. 4d. for signing-on money."

News Chronicle, Oct. 11, 1945.

In the House of Commons, Isaac's refusal to meet the strikers'

leaders provoked an indignant outburst from Labour backbencher David Kirkwood (Dumbarton). "Why," he asked, "should not Ministers come down off their pedestals when it is a question of dealing with the working class? This has been the lot of the workers right down the ages."

The only port not to support this strike (on the ground that it would "bring into discredit the Government they helped to elect") was Southampton. Nine months later, in July, 1946, the Labour Government expressed its gratitude by using troops to break a strike of Southampton dockers.

The portworkers, with their strong traditions of working-class solidarity, were to be the main—though not the only—target of the Labour military force.

"I take the opportunity of making it quite clear that this Government, like any government as an employer, would feel itself perfectly free to take any disciplinary action that any strike situation that might develop demanded."

Sir Hartley Shawcross, *Hansard*, Feb. 2, 1946.

The next round came in June, 1948, when London portworkers claimed the usual special payment for handling zinc oxide. Eleven men were suspended for a week and their guaranteed week suspended for thirteen weeks—a possible loss of wages for fourteen weeks.

In reply to a spontaneous protest strike, the Labour Government drafted freshly-conscripted troops into the docks and brought out the old Tory Emergency Powers Act—the nearest to martial law ever reached by the Tories. Merseyside joined the strike against the harsh tyranny of the National Dock Labour Board and more than 31,000 men took part in a sixteen-day fight.

There were many other disputes in dockland during those years, but we must pass on to May, 1949. The Canadian Seamen's Union was leading a strike against wage-cuts, when the *Montreal City* arrived in Avonmouth. Dockers refused to unload the black ship and a second attempt to discharge cargo brought out all Avonmouth dockers. When the employers declared a lock-out, tug and lock-gate men joined the struggle. The Labour Government sent in troops to break the strike, causing crane drivers to down tools. The crews of some British ships refused to sail because of the military strike-breaking.

The fight spread to Merseyside, when a Canadian cargo was smuggled to Liverpool. By early June, 11,000 dockers were on strike there. Two Canadian ships, the *Argomont* and *Beaverbrae*, were switched to London, where 14,000 portworkers struck. Once again the Labour Government invoked the Tory Emergency Powers Act and on July 11 the number of Thames-side strikers

increased to 15,500. The strike ended when the CSU obtained certain concessions and asked the English dockers to end their action.

The Army having failed to break the dockers, judges, jailers and all the intimidations of the capitalist machine were brought into play and the battle shifted to the Old Bailey, site of the old Newgate Jail. In February, 1951, portworkers were offered a rise of 2s., bringing the minimum to 21s. a day. Discontent with this offer and the dubious manner of its acceptance by the T & GWU led to a strike on Merseyside and at Manchester. Few men in London came out. On February 9, seven London and Merseyside members of their respective Port Workers' Committees were arrested. Their homes were searched by the police without warrant, and they were charged with conspiracy to contravene Order 1305, a wartime measure forbidding strikes, framed by Churchill's Government.

The accused were committed to the Central Criminal Court, where the Attorney-General, Sir Hartley Shawcross, tried his brilliant best to get them heavy prison sentences. While a demonstration of dockers massed about the Old Bailey, the jury gave a verdict of Not Guilty on one major count and mortified Shawcross dropped the remaining charges.

Against the workers

In August, 1951, the beaten Government withdrew the hated Order 1305 and introduced a much milder Industrial Disputes and Compulsory Arbitration Order.

But portworkers were far from being the only victims. Smithfield Market lorry drivers, electric power station men and gasworkers were also subjected to strike-breaking by conscript military labour.

London gasworks maintenance engineers, after demanding a wage increase of 4½d. an hour, received a rise of 1½d. in September, 1950. Dissatisfied workers at Beckton struck and, within a few days, 1,500 men at fourteen gasworks were out. Ten members of the Strike Committee were arrested and charged under Order 1305 and the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act, 1875—a relic of the days of Mr. Gradgrind and the *Hard Times* of Dickens. On October 5, while naval blackleg labour was sent into Beckton and Bromley gasworks, the ten men were each sentenced to one month's imprisonment at Bow Street Magistrates' Court. On appeal, the sentences were varied to a fine of £50 each.

Similar action was taken on a number of occasions by the Labour Government's National Coal Board against striking miners.

Following a big Yorkshire coalfield strike in August, 1947, which started at Grimethorpe Colliery in protest against an increased working stint, forty Grimethorpe miners appeared in Barnsley Magistrates' Court on December 19, 1947. The NCB claimed—and was awarded—damages of £304 against them under another 1875 relic, the Employers and Workers Act. The Court announced that this money would be deducted from their wage packets, at the rate of 10s. a week, from January 16, 1948. On that very day, Seaham Harbour (Durham) magistrates granted summonses against 191 miners at Vane Tempest Colliery for having taken part in a strike during the previous August. At Neath County Court, on March 18, 1948, two miners were each fined £39 for taking part in a stay-down strike. On May 26, in the same year, the *Daily Mail* reported: "Nearly 600 miners of Auchincruive Collieries, Ayrshire, described as 'habitually striking,' have been sacked from the Priory Pit, Blantyre." These are but a few of dozens of such cases.

The Labour Government was ever ready to take action against the working class. Not so against the employers. The clause of Order 1305 prohibiting lock-outs, as well as strikes, was not invoked. As one example, the London Society of Compositors was seeking a new basic wage during the summer of 1950. The employers using delaying tactics, the union imposed "work to rule," an old but effective Syndicalist method. The London Master Printers' Federation then issued dismissal notices to the workers engaged in producing local newspapers, trade journals and some magazines. The employers' lock-out began on August 26, but Order 1305 was not enforced against them. The workers, however, won the fight.

The wage freeze

Behind many of the bitter industrial disputes that took place during the period of office of the two post-war Labour Governments lay the Wage Freeze—or "Wage Restraint" as it was called by the politicians. Under this policy, which had the support of the Trades Union Congress, workers were forced to take "unofficial" action if their standard of living was to be defended, let alone improved, in a period of steadily-rising prices.

The end of the First World War in 1918 had been followed by a period of rising wages and the signs in 1945 pointed to an even more optimistic period for wage labour. From its first days, how-

ever, the Labour Government showed its anxiety to restrain and neutralise the economic trend.

"Social reform" was to be used to help regulate wages at a low level. Always the "hard cases," lowest-paid workers, men with large families and men subject to sickness and accidents from their work, had been used as arguments for **general** wage increases and, indeed, pressure often came from such sources. A sop to such hard cases would mean less pressure for all-round increases.

First of these measures was family allowances—5s. a week for each child after the first. This was not Labour's own idea and before the war it had been opposed by the Labour Party and TUC. Its chief sponsors in Britain had been the Family Endowment Society, whose chief spokesmen were Sir William Beveridge (Liberal), Miss Eleanor Rathbone and Mr. L. S. Amery (Tories). Family allowances had been introduced in Europe by Hitler and Mussolini.

"If a system of Family Allowances were introduced now, it would not only relieve the existing hard cases, but would afford a logical basis upon which a stand could be made against all further [wage] increases, except to the extent that they are directly justified by a rise in the cost of living."

L. S. Amery, Conservative MP, *Times*, Jan. 14, 1940.

Family allowances had been recommended during the war by the Beveridge Report and accepted by the Churchill Government. On February 16, 1943, the Lord President of the Council, Sir John Anderson, announced the Government's intention of introducing them when the war had ended. Some Labour men still expressed their doubts of this policy, but they toed the new party line.

Chief ally, after the employers, in the Labour Government's wage freeze was the TUC. At successive post-war Congresses, union officials and delegates voted for a continued wage freeze. Few people now remember how low wages were during this period and much of the poverty and misery of certain sections has been forgotten, but it was revolt from below, expressed in unofficial strikes and Syndicalist methods of attack, which forced one union after another to break away from the TUC resolution and, finally, to end the wage truce.

Most notable were the struggles of the dockers, railmen and building workers. The railmen, in 1947, asked for an increase of £1 a week. The claim was refused. In 1948 they asked for a 12s. 6d. increase and later a minimum of £5. These claims, too, were rejected.

Work-to-rule strikes, first used in England by Syndicalist railmen on Tyneside, began to spread by 1949 and in that year the NUR

voted by 71-8 in favour of work to rule, while in the North-East locomotive men began week-end strikes against worsened conditions such as extension of lodging away from home turns. In 1948 most of the building unions had broken from the wage freeze policy and demanded a wage increase. In engineering, discontent at the slowness and smallness of wage increases, combined with a rising cost of living, had so incensed the workers that the demand for a strike ballot was defeated by only 28-23 at the National Committee of the AEU in June, 1948, while unofficial strikes, factory by factory, were breaking out all over the country.

In the coal industry, which was excused from the TUC's wage freeze, there were strikes, the most notable being that of the Lancashire miners against a reduction of their "free coal" in May, 1949. More than sixty pits closed and about 50,000 miners were out. Brick by brick, the Labour cold store was being broken down.

The wage freeze did not, of course, apply to the elected "representatives of the people." On April 30, 1946, the Labour Government announced that it accepted the recommendations of the Select Committee of the House of Commons to raise members' salaries from £600 to £1,000. Among rises for Ministers were £2,000 for the Postmaster-General, bringing his salary to £5,000, and £1,000 each for the Minister of Pensions and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, making their salaries £3,000.

The wage freeze was nibbled round the edges by individual workers, who left their jobs and bargained for more than trade union rates with other employers—not usually big firms, and never State-owned industries. The Labour Government's reply to this practice was to introduce industrial conscription.

On August 6, 1947, Attlee announced that the Government had decided "to reimpose the control over the engagement of labour which was almost universal during the war, but had since been removed from all industries except coalmining, building and agriculture."

The Order proved unworkable. Only twenty-nine compulsory directions were made. Shortly after its introduction, most Labour Exchanges found it impossible to operate and told men to find their own jobs, then return and ask for permits to go to them. Bogged down in bureaucratic red tape, the Labour Exchanges were overworked giving permits to work, while industry was being braked for lack of labour. Even the Labour Government had to recognise this at last and, on March 9, 1950, Labour Minister Isaacs announced that the Control of Engagements Order would be revoked.

Nationalisation

The Labour Government's nationalisation measures have been fully examined in another 'Direct Action' pamphlet, *Nationalisation and the New Boss Class* by Tom Brown, and we shall not, therefore, repeat here our criticism of the essentially anti-working-class nature of these acts, which—though more extensive—were not different in principle from those sometimes favoured by Tories and Liberals.

"There is a broadening field for State ownership and enterprise, especially in relation to monopolies of all kinds."

Winston Churchill, BBC broadcast, April 14, 1943.

This attitude is more readily understood when it is seen that the interests of the holders of stocks and shares in the concerns to be nationalised were paramount.

Before nationalisation, stockholders in the Bank of England had for some years received a dividend of 12 per cent on their capital. The Labour Government safeguarded their interests by issuing 3 per cent Government bonds in exchange for Bank stock and guaranteeing stockholders the same income as before by exchanging £400 of Government bonds for £100 of Bank of England stock. Similarly with the railways:

"The Government is buying out the British railway and canal undertakings under its nationalisation proposals for a sum which can be roughly estimated at £850 million. Those who have bought railway stocks within the last few days will make considerable profits, as in nearly every case the compensation prices fixed are higher than the market prices ruling last night."

Daily Herald, Nov. 11, 1946.

The trade unions, seemingly yielding to constant Syndicalist propaganda for Workers' Control, had sought to change the character of State ownership by advocating a bastard form of it, through union representation on the boards of nationalised industry. Once in office, the Labour Party opposed this:

"In 1932, when London Transport was on the way to becoming a public corporation, our own Union pressed for some direct trade union representation on its management. We have since dropped the idea. Herbert Morrison talked us out of it."

Record, Transport and General Workers' Union,

Feb., 1959.

