

# THE BULLETIN

## FOR SOCIALIST SELF-MANAGEMENT

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### THIS ENGLAND

The jailing of a bus conductor for nine months because he put a 6p. fare in his own pocket is a savage attack on one of the low paid members of the working class. The reaction of his work mates in Lincoln by going on strike is a heartening one. Just as the dockers refused to allow their stewards to stay in jail, so the Lincoln busmen have said they will not go back to work until their jailed mate is released.

It is ironical that at the same time as the press reported this stupid jailing there were plans afoot by the Government to 'help' the lower paid sections of the working class. But not by raising wages; god forbid that the Tories should think of such a thing. No, the idea is to introduce a so-called 'negative income-tax'. This basically means that those who receive a wage below a certain minimum (as yet to be determined) would be paid money direct to them in their wage packets instead of obtaining family income supplement, rent rebate etc. Of course this will still mean all the usual form filling and bureaucratic nonsense. As with all such schemes it attempts to deal with the worst symptoms of poverty without touching their cause. The real and fundamental cause of poverty and low wages is the huge disparity in the ownership and control of wealth in this country.

The proposed negative income-tax would still leave the lower paid in their same position in relation to the owners of capital and property. The scheme as such would be a disincentive to employers to pay decent wages. On top of this we have the so-called fair rents coming into operation in a few weeks time, which will hit the lowest paid hardest. So we can see just how real the concern of the Tories is for these workers.

No doubt there will be a great deal of Parliamentary hot air blown about on this subject, and this again will only serve to obscure the real problems.

We can see in the building strike that employers will fight tooth and nail against paying a decent wage. So the negative income tax will help all employers in such situations. The miners, dockers and builders have all shown their ability to fight for their rights with a solidarity that has not been evident for a long time; the present plans will try to divide such workers. Always the employers and Government look for ways to split militants from their work mates; in the building industry by hoping to force through the £26 offer in some areas, and now in a more general way by such schemes as the negative income tax. Both attempts need to be resisted.

As for the Lincoln busmen, more power to them. They should be given the maximum support in their efforts to free their mate.

## FACTORY SIT-INS : MANAGEMENT'S ATTITUDE

It is easy to feel a general kind of excitement about the sit-ins and work-ins that have involved, since January, a minimum of 30,000 workers (industrial consultants' figures). There are, however, specific problems that confront the people who use such tactics. These problems have been aired in the left-wing press, but we have little indication of the problems and reactions from the management and state positions. It is too easy to say that their reactions are directly repressive, where possible : in fact, they range from paranoia to benevolent indifference. A recent management-oriented study by a firm of industrial consultants has made this clear.

Since sit-ins take place on private property, and because there is no question of pickets trying to stop blacklegs crossing the lines, there is less chance of open clashes with the police. This was in fact one of the reasons put forward by the AUEW in Manchester for supporting the engineering sit-ins. During the Roberts Arundel conflict a few years ago at Stockport, picketing (from the police's point of view) had 'got out of hand,' with consequences that were, on balance, disadvantageous to the forces of law and order. Another advantage to the employers where sit-ins for a wage claim are concerned is that, since the factory is not going to close, workers sitting in provide free plant maintenance. This is not to exaggerate the 'advantages' from the employers' point of view, but it must be pointed out that the sit-in technique enables management and the law to cool the situation. However, it is an interacting process : they have to cool it, precisely because of the danger of the situation and the mass pressure from beyond the factory.

Managers told the consultancy group that they were under pressure from local police to cool the situation, and that this advice made sense. Where redundancy sit-ins were involved, they said that the workers would not have left voluntarily, and that any attempt to evict them would have caused the entire workforce in the area to turn out to prevent it. Management in its wisdom has also apparently decided that workers sitting in automatically draw more support from the masses (and in the press, amongst local MPs and councillors) than do the bosses who are trying to close down factories in areas of unemployment. One example in the study shows how the 'cool-it' approach is both an admission of working-class power and a better management tactic than direct repression. The direct approach was used by a Lancashire firm, who applied for a writ to evict two dozen workers. The judge at Preston Court granted the writ because the sit-in had begun after their dismissal. However, it was a naked political judgement, as he commented:

'This is a small firm and it would be possible for a small number of people to get them out. But if it was a big factory you might want 2,000 police with teargas. I want to make sure that any order I might make can be enforced.'

The writers of the study, who align themselves with 'forward-looking' management sneer at both workers and scared employers: 'The invasion of the boardroom seems to have been of greater symbolic significance to the invaded than to the invaders. Some employers seemed to take the view that if their employees were prepared to enter the boardroom then they were quite capable of taking over the business as a whole.' That significance is going to be realised, and the sneer wiped off.

## THE MILITANT PRISONER

An organising member of PROP (Preservation of the Rights of Prisoners) with a rich experience of 12 years inside British jails and a long spell as an EPTU shop steward, gave us the following account of the present activities of prisoners.

Prison Conditions: "Of course, there has been unrest in prisons for years over the appalling conditions and overcrowding - as you know, this applies all over the world, and it's often a lot worse elsewhere. What is new is the industrialisation of prison labour, where prisoners are used by outside contractors. Men from Pentonville are being used at the Brookside Metal Co. on the Watford bypass (it won a Queen's Award for industry last year). They're paid a penny an hour for a 40 hour week: when a couple of them protested the management called in the police, who handcuffed them and took them back to jail, where they lost two weeks' remission each. Then you've got this new thing coming up in October, the Community Service Order, where a JP can sentence someone to 'community work' instead of prison: if the JP is linked with an unscrupulous local authority (and let's face it, there's enough of them about), he can sentence someone to work as slave labour on a particular project, thus improving the authority's electoral image by relieving the ratepayer of labour costs. As far as internal prison conditions are concerned, the government are making more frequent use of Rule 49 (solitary confinement for an indefinite period of time), and especially for prisoners who protest about conditions - a special wing is being reserved at Wandsworth for militant protesters from jails all over the place, and some of the hardest old bastard screws in the business are being put there."

The Role of PROP: "From what I've described, you can see that cons who protest have no representation or possibility of redress at all. What we're saying in PROP is that we should be allowed to represent our members, to act virtually as shop stewards, its as simple as that. PROP consists of ex-cons and has prisoners' wives and relatives as associate members - this means for the first time that the communications gap has been bridged. The present events snowballed so quickly because it all went through on the wives-relatives grapevine, and there have been unreported demonstrations at the smallest prisons. Basically, of course the repression and the point of indignation had been reached where the men said, "That's it, mate, we've had enough"; where PROP came in was that we were able to undertake a well-coordinated and planned action, like the prisoners' strike on 4th August. The authorities had 8 weeks notice of it, but they laughed at us. In the event, from six to nine thousand men all over the country took part - we had overcome the difficulty of all previous protests which had always been contained locally.

Then after the strike, things blew up spontaneously beyond our wildest dreams. There's a man named Arthur Stanley serving 8 years in Gartree. The last Sunday in August he was recuperating in the prison hospital, which meant he was allowed to exercise with the fit prisoners. But they left him inside, and so he started ringing his bell continuously. When the screw eventually turned up, Stanley naturally started abusing him, and the screw - a man named Wright - took out his stick and done him bad, busted his head and cut his face and that. As soon as everyone knew they were up on the roof, and it all snowballed from there. The only violence has been instigated by screws."

The Screws: "Much as I hate some of the screws I also know that there are a lot of them who are not satisfied with their own conditions, and they're basically decent human beings. Prison officers have to work under appalling conditions - the rate of pay is terrible and they're forced to do a tremendous amount of overtime. They have to implement someone else's policies (handed down from the

Home Office through the Governor) - they're not consulted, they're just told to do it. When I was in Dartmoor a screw once said to me 'For Christ's sake what am I going to do? I've got to nick you, boy, otherwise I get in trouble'. I felt sorry for him - what is so different about me and him? He goes out of the prison and when he gets home his wife nags him, his kids complain because they never see him, then he comes back in the morning and unlocks me - I mean, who is the prisoner?

The point is, the screws have got to want the change, they've got to know what they are doing. But they don't know how to go about it, and they're totally misled by the executive of the POA (Prison Officers' Association) who speak for the 500 or so real hardcore animals and not for the 11,000 basically decent men. We've talked with their executive, and in private, 'Off the record, old boy, we agree with a lot of what you're saying' - but they don't come out in the open with it. If they did, we could work together. I'm hoping that if the Prison Officers strike on 18th September, as they've threatened, we are going to support them, and the cons will strike in sympathy: we've got to break this barrier down. This is why it's so important that prisoners have been non-violent - not one screw has been hurt.

It shows something else too - the prisons are run on the goodwill of the prisoners, just as the factories are run on the goodwill of the workers and the schools on the goodwill of the students. It applies to the whole of society. Ultimately though, the strikes and demonstrations are not the only important things. With a view to abolishing the prison system completely in the end, we want to turn prisons into working-class universities for training and education, instead of having thousands of men locked up, punching Watney-Mann cards and sewing mailbags. This is why the screws are scared stiff of our demands - they realise that it would put prisoners on a level way above them."

Influences: "Generally speaking, the miners' strike had a tremendous influence, when the police had to contact the Home Office and say 'Look, this thing's out of control'. Especially at Hull and Gartree, there are men in for small misdemeanours who have had experience of trade union work (they are virtually not criminals at all, but have been driven inside by unemployment), and they involved themselves in organising things in the nick, even if it was just because there was fuck all else to do. Speaking more personally, I was tremendously affected by the Attica thing in America. Someone said the convicts at Attica sold themselves cheap. I always felt that if we could have had even one prison protesting in support over here, we would have established an international tie-up. We could have caused so much trouble that the government would have been forced to say to the Americans, 'For Christ's sake do something about over there because it's upsetting our lot over here.' This is the end we're working towards - we've already got contact with prisoners and their unions in America, Australia, South Africa, and various European countries. We want joint international solidarity. If Karl Schmidt gets done over in Germany because he upset some screw or other, we want people on the roof here and in France and Scandinavia."

The Future: "The most important thing is to get links outside. Prisons are only one part of it, otherwise we can still be contained - the very thing we're fighting is so big. There are Wives' Action Groups being formed for each prison, and we're trying to link this with Claimants' Union work on people's entitlements; then there are the international links which I've mentioned. But we've had some big disappointments. We asked the TUC for support but Feather was completely uncomprehending - I remember when I was an ETU steward and Frank

Chapple was my district secretary I gave him documentary evidence of cheap labour being used on our site outside the terms of our union contract, and I saw the same blank look on his face.

It was even more disappointing when PROP took its banners outside Pentonville while the dockers' stewards were being held. The stewards outside were hostile and demanded to know what we were doing there. I told them we were supporting them. I got the impression that the men were fed up with their own rank-and-file leadership - if it had been up to the men, those five stewards wouldn't have spent even one night in prison.

But we've got a few things going for us. One is that the authorities are incredibly stupid. On 4th August, BBC TV cameras were interviewing the Governor of Gartree outside the perimeter and asking him if there was any evidence of a strike. 'None whatsoever, all the prisoners are at work.' At that very moment the whole prison erupted and banners came out of the window saying 'We support PROP' and 'National 24-hour strike'. You see, we know how to manipulate the media. The other encouraging thing is the number of people who are taking on responsibilities they would never have dreamed of, organising things and so on. I've belonged to different political groups, but I believe that as people in a community, a region or a country, and in the world, we ourselves have to say 'this is our problem, this is going to be our life to run, let's act together collectively.' You've got to show people what they themselves can do, then once it's got going, for Christ's sake let them get on with it. Meanwhile, right at this moment, there are men lying battered in Parkhurst....."

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#### BIRMINGHAM COUNCIL TENANTS PREPARE FOR A FIGHT

On Wednesday 13th September Peter Walker told a delegation from Birmingham's Labour Council that they must implement HIS decision to increase rents by an average of 55p a week. If in the highly unlikely event of Walker ever showing up on any of Birmingham's council estates, he will certainly leave a (physically) changed man.

Who is going to smash the Tory Rent Act? Certainly not the Labour Councils most of which have already caved in under the threat of vicious punishment for defying the Tories. The latest move of the Birmingham Council is to ask the Tory Government to do their own dirty work, by sending in one of their hired men, the Housing Commissioner. This could spell a prelude for a sell out of the tenants, with an 'honourable' escape for the Labour Group, but it could open the ground for a real fight - a rent strike.

The Labour Group have found strength to oppose the Tories up until now on the moral argument that it wasn't fair to screw Birmingham tenants any more because they'd already had £3m. profits squeezed out of them last year. There was also some pressure to take a stand from the Trades Council and Constituency Parties. The tenants as an autonomous organised body have been silent.

We've got all sorts of council estates in Birmingham, some have even got what resemble houses on them. The one thing most estates had in common up until a few weeks ago was no active tenants associations. But in the last 6 weeks three associations have sprung up in the South East sector of the city in areas which cover about 8,000 households. The issue which is stimulating this upsurge

is the Tory promise of further continuous massive rent increases. This rapid organising of the tenants for a fight is likely to gather momentum in the coming weeks. If there ever was a time to get a Tenants Association going it is right now.

The real power for defeating the Tory attack lies with the organised tenants, supported by shop stewards committees, union branches, regional and district committees and the trades council. If the Labour Council really wants to defeat the Act it must throw its weight in with these organisations. If the council has doubts about the tenants' willingness to fight a trip to Digbeth Civic Hall for the Rally on September 26th should prove enlightening.

The Tory Act can at this late stage only be smashed by the tenants themselves. This must be a national struggle so that areas cannot be picked off one by one, but it is likely to start in a region or city and escalate over a period of weeks.

The majority of council housing has been well described as 'workers breeding boxes'. The pent up frustrations of many council tenants living in badly designed, badly built estates, with no social facilities, are bound to make themselves felt in the coming struggle against rent robbery. This raises questions of local democracy which socialists should try to develop; limiting the struggles to rent levels alone tends in the long run to play into the hands of the Tories and their fellow thinkers in the Labour Party.

Jim Nettles  
14.9.72

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#### BULGARIAN BACKWATER STARTS TO STIR

Since the Czech events in 1968 opposition to the 'red bourgeoisie' has surfaced in several parts of Eastern Europe. In 1970, Polish workers stood up to the regime and achieved a total surrender to their economic demands and the fall of Gomulka. This year, in 'enlightened' Hungary with its efficient leadership of economists, there have been the first street clashes between police and students since 1956. Shipyard managers on the Baltic have admitted that they 'simply do not know' how Polish workers could be stopped from acting in the same way again; the Hungarian leadership has already been forced to adopt a polemical tone in its relations with Moscow.

It is interesting that this time the crisis in the Stalinist bureaucracies has reached traditionally quiet areas such as Bulgaria, where the instability of the workers is causing problems and conflicts within the ruling elites of government, party and trade unions. The main problems, from the planners' point of view, are the 'excessive mobility' of the workers and absenteeism, which cause labour shortages. Various short-term answers have been sought by the government. It is in the process of obtaining several thousand immigrant workers from Egypt and by means of the trade unions has increased the minimum notice that a worker can give his director from 2 weeks to 4 months (the guilty ones here are the directors who poach each other's workforces unscrupulously). It has allowed selected firms some initiative in solving the problem: at the large ZMM engineering complex near Sofia there is a 5-day week (most Bulgarians work six full days per week), regular consultations between the director and men on the shop floor, and a training scheme enabling workers to operate half a dozen different

complicated pieces of equipment. (Not so much a question of making the job more interesting, but simply of filling the production gaps caused by absenteeism.)

This has evidently not been enough, and trade union and government spokesmen have been forced to be 'strategically' frank to a remarkable degree. At this year's national congress of trade unions it was stated that 'the role of moral stimulants has been underestimated by the workers ... we have to bring forward a new formula.' However, the alternative of material incentives is not actually stated - merely, 'We mustn't advance too quickly, we are still only in the first stages of socialism.' Not only the trade union leadership but the president of the government himself, Zhirkov, has complained that managements 'turn a blind eye to the breaking of norms and pay for work which has not actually been done', and that 'certain directors attach no importance at all to the meetings with workers, do not inform them of their actions or the execution of plans, and even (!) neglect decisions taken by the workers' assemblies.'

The astonished tone of the last remark suggests that the ruling Bulgarian bureaucracy has always proclaimed the supreme importance of the workers' assemblies, and is on the workers' side against 'corrupt' management; what it really signifies is that it is anxious to divert attention away from itself by providing solutions to the very problems it has caused. Is it a question of self-management? "Not yet," according to the secretary of the National Union of Bulgarian Workers, in an interview with a French newspaper correspondent. "There are always men who direct and men who carry out the work, but we are perfecting organisms of management which will gradually make the interests of both sides co-incide." In effect, this means that the workers' assemblies are needed to suggest improvements in production.

'Production conferences' involving some kind of workers' participation have existed fitfully in the USSR, but at the present time in Bulgaria it is obvious that the power of the workers' assembly lies in the fact that it is needed if the economic machine is to run efficiently, quite apart from the subjective attitudes of the workers in their 'indiscipline', their reactions to central planning, their demands for material incentives and so on. What is especially important is the economic and political closeness of Bulgaria to the USSR. If market factors such as labour supply and material incentives can lead to aspirations for self-management in Bulgaria, could not the same thing happen in the USSR as it begins to lurch timidly out of the fairy-tale world of strict central planning and into contact with the world market?

John Diagg.

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#### TERROR IN TEHERAN

A military court in Teheran has condemned to death Mehdi Rezai (Le Monde 30th August), a student 19 years old, who is a militant of the Fighters of the Iranian People's Organisation. The proceedings began on Sunday 27th August and the sentence was given on Monday 28th.

Mehdi Rezai is the youngest brother of Ahmed Razai - killed while fighting the police - and Reza Rezai the only one of the Shah's prisoners who was able to escape from his prison and its torture.

The trials of last March-April were absolutely secret, and the Iranian Government would not accept international observers. About 30 members of the various organisations of the opposition were executed. Now there are further trials - the case of Mehdi Rezai is now awaiting appeal. Due to the pressure of international opinion the Iranian Government is obliged to announce these trials and accept international observers, but the sham proceedings that are announced one day before they begin last only two days. Such is the cynical 'justice' handed down to the Shah's opponents.

We would urge all readers to write to protest against the conviction of Mehdi Rezai and the trials now proceeding. Letters or teleggrams should be addressed to The Ambassador, Iranian Embassy, 16 Princes Gate, London S.W.7.

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