

Aire Valley Yarns

Twenty two workers have been on strike since March at Aire Valley Yarns, a textile factory at Farsley near Leeds. The strike has been compared with the struggle of 150 workers at Grunwicks film processing plant in North West London seven years ago. Like Grunwicks the workers at Aire Valley Yarns are Asians employed for long hours and low wages in appalling conditions. The standard rate of pay is #1.10 an hour for 12 hour shifts and compulsory weekend work. The machinery is old and dangerous and there is no proper ventilation to deal with the thick dust produced by the yarn.

market. To make a profit these small firms have to exploit their workforce much more intensely than in the rest of the economy. To this end they recruit workers from the most defenceless sections of the working class: blacks, Asians and women. Because the owner of the firm is also the immediate boss of production and because the skills the workers have can easily be replaced there is little need for the disciplining role of the trade unions.

When workers in this sector go on strike they are essentially taking action against their conditions



Strikers picketing Aire Valley Yarns.

Like the workers at Grunwicks who joined a union, the Aire Valley workers joined the TGWU and elected one of their number, Liaquat Ali, as shop steward. When Ali was subsequently sacked the other workers walked out and were sacked too. In spite of a twenty four hour picket of the factory the company has managed to bus in replacements for the strikers, protected by a heavy police presence.

An attempt to black yarn for Aire Valley by workers at Busfields, a local dyeworks, was dealt with by writs issued against the shop steward at Busfields and one of the directors. Similarly at Grunwicks legal action was taken against postmen who tried to prevent all mail moving in and out of the plant. The Post Office workers union quickly bowed to the courts' decision.

There is some substance in calling the strike at Aire Valley Yarns a Yorkshire Grunwicks. But there have been many "Grunwicks" up and down the country.

What characterises this section of industry is a low level of investment and a highly competitive

of work. The Aire Valley workers return again and again to the low wages, the long hours, the dangerous nature of their employment. But because of their isolation and inexperience they are susceptible to the trap of trade unionism. The apparatus of the unions and the left holds out a false promise of a wider context for their struggle, solidarity and support from other workers and experience in organisation. As a worker at Grunwicks said "the union showed us how to organise our strike". Most immediately they can offer financial support with strike pay. Before the workers know where they are their courage, solidarity, and self-sacrifice become perverted by the unions into a struggle for 'union recognition'.

Small firms like Aire Valley Yarns seem like an anachronism in a period when the state is directly responsible for the major part of economic activity in the national capital and when the state regulates the activity of the largest firms which employ over 30% of all other workers. Precisely for this reason

Leaflet

The following leaflet was distributed at the 'Peoples March for Jobs' in Leeds by some members of the Communist milieu including a member of the Bulletin Group.

THE PEOPLE'S MARCH TO DEFEAT THE WORKERS STRUGGLE

A few people marching to London aren't going to do anything to change the fact that capitalism is on its last legs and cannot give us the means to live: workers, factories and raw materials lie idle though there are plenty of workers willing and able to produce wealth. Unemployment is real problem for the bourgeoisie today, and it's even more of a real problem for the working class, part of which is forced to subsist on the dole that gets less every year, and the rest of which accepts real wage cuts and production speed-ups under the threat of unemployment.

It's no good marching to capital cities begging cap in hand for jobs that don't exist. International revolution is the only way out of the crisis of capitalism. While the Tories impose austerity and prepare for World War Three, the Labour Party, the Communist Party and the Trotskyites devise all manner of useless protests to divert the working class from finding its own solution. The People's March is a sham!

We are asked to march with liberals and bishops and pray to end the "evil of unemployment", but it isn't up to Jesus Christ, it's up to us. We can't demand the right to work because there's no such thing as a right to work: we can only sell our labour power if the bosses can profit from it: we may as well demand the "right" to eat off gold plates. After an international communist revolution, in a worldwide communist society (the countries described as "communist" today are only variations of capitalism), work would be very different from the exploitation we know today. We'd welcome new technology for example as something enabling us to produce goods more easily, instead of seeing it as destroying our livelihoods by stealing our jobs. Even then, we wouldn't talk about work as a "right".

The Labour Party and the People's March, whatever the intentions of the individuals involved, are out to confuse the workers and contain their anger within the system, spreading illusions that if the system were managed differently it would be all right. Capitalism dictates to governments, not the other way round. The left in power would be forced by the crisis to take the same austerity measures as Thatcher, just as the Socialist government is doing in France.

The SWP adds to the confusion by denouncing the "popular front" of the People's March and calling for a "united front" of so-called workers parties, for example the Labour Party, Communist Party, SWP and Socialist Action. These parties are in this period as bourgeois as the Liberals and Tories, serving to disarm the workers ideologically and when this has failed, to openly massacre them.

Workers must not leave their own class terrain to ally with the bourgeoisie, whatever colours it wears. The struggles of the past have shown that workers must create their own class and political organs: the workers councils and the international communist party. Our struggles must break out of the stranglehold of the trade unions which, since 1914 and the inability of capitalism in its decadence to grant real reforms, have become unconditionally organs of the ruling class, acting to derail the class struggle.

There is no easy solution to the crisis. The working class must forge its proletarian solidarity across divisions created by capitalism between black and white, men and women, employed and unemployed, and it must break down national barriers. There is no alternative: the choice is war or revolution.

that we face the prospect of the CWO telling us that the WRP is breaking from leftism. Or what about the RCP. If the WRP is debarred because it supports Russia (with the good old Deformed Workers State nonsense) then surely the RCP would fit the bill of party builders with bourgeois political positions breaking from leftism. Would we then get articles in Revolutionary Perspectives or Workers voice on the potential of the RCP or its members for breaking with Leftism? Or the SWP's?

But enough! Let us not take fantasy too far.

The CWO who were once so proud of their ability

to clearly delineate the class lines, surrounded as they were by other fractions willing (according to them) to dilute their theoretical clarity in the search for 'unity', and to point to the huge barrier separating the bourgeois camp from the proletariat, now seem to lack any framework for determining the class nature of an organisation. In their headlong lurch towards Battaglia they seem to have jettisoned none of their dogmatism and sectarianism but a lot of their theoretical clarity. In this area the CWO seem to be heading for a cliff. It is to be hoped that they will stop before they hurtle over the edge.

Ingram.

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these firms become pawns in the ideology of the political factions of capital. To the right wing they represent the spirit of free enterprise, independent of the meddling of the state bureaucracy and the unions and surviving without the handouts which go to the big national concerns. This was the nonsense peddled by the National Association of Freedom which gave legal and financial support to George Ward the boss of Grunwicks. Even the Thatcherite wing of the Tory Party has taken up the cause of the small capitalists as the seed bed of economic growth. Behind this facade of concern and support lies the reality of state capitalism which will allow these firms to go to the wall if economic necessity dictates it.

For the left too the small sweatshops have an ideological use. They are taken to show that capitalism has not changed since the days when unions were first formed, a period which gave unions legitimacy in the eyes of the workers. The struggles of workers in this sector are a convenient punchbag for the Labour Party and the trade unions to show their aggression on behalf of the workers. They can then return to their main function in state capitalism as the agents of the peaceful and uninterrupted extraction of surplus labour. If the spirit of Grunwicks is invoked over and over again in strikes like Aire Valley it is because it was one of the most successful mobilisations of the left in Britain. Union leaders added to their radical image by appearing on the picket line, Arthur Scargill was even arrested. Labour cabinet ministers too found it useful to participate at a time when a Labour government was imposing the austerity of the Social Contract.

The left's message is only reinforced by the involvement in the strike of the Trotskyists. The RCP for example, which is particularly active in the Aire Valley Yarns strike, is critical of the methods of the union bureaucrats. But the main thrust of their intervention is never in doubt, that this is a struggle for the right to organise in unions.



Grunwicks was a long and bitter struggle for the workers involved and it ended in defeat. When the unions had extracted all they could from the strikers, when there was no more to be gained by supporting the strike they dropped it. The final pickets organised by the workers were not against the Grunwicks bosses but outside union headquarters. It may not be too late for the Aire Valley workers to learn the real lesson of Grunwicks - to take their struggle back into their own hands and to appeal directly to other workers for their active support.

Sinclair.
