

# 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 II. 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, ethane 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. 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. Declarations of sympathy mean

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'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.

### HiFab

The militancy demonstrated at Moss Morran, the willingness to fight, the refusal to accept the attacks imposed on them, all of which perhaps point to the period of bewildered acquiescence in the increasing austerity of capitalist crisis drawing to a close was demonstrated even more clearly in the long drawn out strike at the Highland Fabrication Yard at Nigg in Easter Ross. Here the sheer dogged militancy - the indispensable starting-point for the struggles to come - was starkly defined by the scale of the barriers confronting the workers. They faced aggressive management determined on a policy of hardline "take it or leave it" confrontation, a union hierarchy setting its official face intransigently against them, putting all its strength behind the management, shop stewards who maintained a 'militant' posture in line with shop floor feelings whilst working tooth and nail to stop the struggle spilling out of its union prison plus the very real possibility that the yard would simply shut up shop for good if the strike wasn't called off.

### The Management

The aggression of the HiFab management wasn't simply

another expression of Thatcher's 'new realism' which we've seen increasingly displayed in the past two years or so by management regimes made confident enough by the apparent quiescence of their workforce to make their attacks on the working class with brutal directness. Certainly, there was an element of that in the undisguised eagerness with which the confrontation was provoked, but behind that, there was a genuine desperation on the part of management. The yard had lost £10 million in 1982 were set for even larger losses this year and had only one contract - the construction of a Tension Log Platform for Conoco - which was causing them considerable financial and technical difficulty. Conoco had already threatened to cancel the contract unless the work was speeded up. Faced with this the management decided on drastic and open confrontation.

On the 11th August when the men returned from holiday they found that "in the pursuit of economies" the customary free orange juice and coffee, paid showering time provided for welders and fitters mates working in high temperatures and heat shelters had been summarily removed. The response - a complete walkout - was immediate and almost certainly foreseen (and welcomed) by the management. Within the week they had announced the sacking of all 2000 men and a week later put forward a plan for the selective rehiring of 1600 on the grounds of "merit" - in other words, a weeding out of troublemakers. In addition, everyone had to sign a new 24 point "Statement of Conditions and Terms of Employment" which represented a savage increase in the rate of exploitation and a massive attack on working conditions (including most importantly the removal of free transport which would have cost many of the men £10-£20 per week.) The intention was absolutely clear - a slimmed-down, cowed workforce plus immediate savings of £7½ million per year.

### The Unions

With the exception of token expressions of "sympathy" and "support" in the first week the unions were unambiguously hostile to the strike. As unions always do, they accepted that the workers interests could only be 'defended' by ensuring that the firm was strong and competitive and profits were healthy. They accepted the evident truth of the management's position that the future of the workers could only be "guaranteed" by guaranteeing the yard's future competitiveness which meant lay-offs and increased exploitation NOW. Unions don't attack workers simply because they're corrupt or because they're stupid etc. but because they defend a political vision which ACCEPTS the logic of the capitalist market place. That's the essence of reformism - that workers can be defended within the present system which means accepting the imperatives of the present system which, in turn

means accepting the attacks on workers that a decadent capitalism in the grip of inescapable crisis demands.

Accordingly the unions first response was to engage in delaying tactics about making the strike official in the hope that it would fizzle out. First, the local officials said that they would have to wait for the Scottish national meeting in Perth, which didnt take place for two weeks, and then it had to be put to the national meeting in Brighton on the 2nd September - three weeks after the start of the strike. At that point, with the strike still standing firm the unions decided to "negotiate" on the 24 points which they had already announced to the press were "mostly innocuous". The results of these negotiations were presented to the workforce at a mass meeting on the 5th September as a "victory" with management backdown on the three most "obnoxious" points:

- the management agreed not to reduce the number of stewards.
- they wouldnt change the times of the buses!
- the 400 sackings would no longer be on "merit" but phased in on a last in-first out basis once the strike was called off!!

The unions made no "official" recommendation in the now 21 points but defended throughout the meeting the position that they had defended at length in TV interviews and in the press - that they were convinced that the management were NOT bluffing about closure and that if the package was not accepted there could be no official backing for further action.

### The Workers

The angry and unanimous rejection of this union 'victory' by the mass meeting reflected the profound depth of feeling which had flared into existence from the first day of the strike. Despite the eventual limitations of this militancy its significance shouldnt be underestimated. The strike was embarked upon and maintained for more than six weeks in the full knowledge that the threat of closure was no bluff. There couldnt have been any doubt about this - it was asserted by the management, the unions, the stewards, the local and national press, the TV and underlined by Conoco's threat to remove the entire contract. It was accepted by all, that the gigantic losses and the lack of future orders werent simply management propaganda but stark reality. Despite this the strike went ahead without any hesitations. The workers actions spoke clearly: 'we dont care about your crisis; we dont care about your needs; we dont care about the logic of the capitalist market place. Our needs come first.' It is precisely this logic which was the starting point of the Polish upheavals. 'We know the country is bankrupt but we dont care anymore.' Its a clear sign that the acceptance of the reality of the

crisis neednt lead simply into the cul-de-sac of bewildered resignation but can be the foundation stone of a qualitative development in the class struggle.

Although, in the last analysis, the strike was unable to overcome its limitations, the sheer strength of militancy involved produced more concrete successes than simple pointers to the future. The attempt to break the strike in the third week by bussing in blacklegs who had accepted the 24 points was smashed within two days by fierce mass picketing. Up to 1000 men turned up for each day of the picketing and were joined by many of their wives and families. The willingness to break through the constraints of legality and use collective force was clearly demonstrated by the sabotage of the buses and by attempts to turn over the company vehicles trying to get through the picket lines. Only the efforts by Rab Wilson, the Stewards Convenor, jumping on the vehicles and appealing for calm prevented this from happening. This failure to break the strike with blacklegs eventually forced the management to withdraw the sackings and remove the threat of the 400 lay-offs which the union officials had already agreed to.

Even right at the end of the strike the management still failed to get the acceptance of the full 21 points despite repeated public statements by the unions that acceptance was "absolutely necessary" and any further resistance would be "totally without union support"! and that the workers could "like it or lump it". This was backed up by the shop stewards who recommended unqualified acceptance of 20 points, a "compromise" on the real sticking point - the removal of the free buses. In the end the management had to make do with only the 16 least important points accepted and had to promise to maintain the free buses, cut the canteen rises from 50% to 4%, reintroduce paid showering time and remove entirely the threat of lay-offs. In the end although the workers undoubtedly ended up with tighter working conditions the major thrust of the intended attacks had been successfully, if temporarily, fended off. In that sense the depth of militancy had produced a definite victory.

### The Stewards and the Union Division of Labour

However, if the strike displayed the militancy, the stubborn willingness to fight, whatever the odds, that will be the necessary foundation of the revolutionary struggles to come, it also clearly failed to point the only way forward for such militancy if it is not to be smothered in union cul-de-sacs. The unions were able to display their open and constant hostility to the strike because the militancy was totally contained by the division of labour between the unions and the local stewards.

Despite the enthusiasm for the strike, clearly

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displayed in the very high attendances at mass meetings (something not easily achieved given the large travelling distances involved) and the massive turnouts at the picketing, the direction of the struggle remained firmly in the control of the stewards committee, with no apparent impulse appearing for an elected and revokable strike committee. They decided on the timing of the mass meetings, they controlled the pickets by a system of whistles and they made sure that every impulse to spread the strike was delayed or diverted into useless token activity. The call for solidarity from other local workers, for example, was transformed into a collection from the nearby Ardesier yard by the convenors. The call for a wider solidarity was constantly channelled into a 'fight' to persuade the unions to give official backing. The anger of the workers with the unions was diverted into sending stewards delegations to national meetings of the various unions involved and to the TUC Congress. Always the call was 'Wait until the next meeting', and always the 'next step' was to secure official union backing.

Every time the union officials would demand a return to work and acceptance of the 21 conditions the stewards would noisily recommend rejection, making sure that they remained with the workforce. Despite their strident 'militancy', on every occasion their role was to advocate acceptance of something less than the workers were demanding. Even at the first move of the strike when the demand was for the return of the high temp. concessions, the orange juice, the showers and the shelters, the stewards transformed this into a rejection of management 'dictation', stating that they were quite prepared to "discuss the withdrawal of the facilities in a fair and equitable atmosphere." When the union demand for acceptance of the 21 conditions (including the layoffs) was rejected out of hand the stewards turned it into "no negotiation on the 21 points until the sackings are withdrawn and everyone was back at work". When they managed to persuade an eventual return to work on this basis they presented a demand for acceptance of 20 out of the 21 conditions and on the 21st condition the Convenor had this to say:

*"If the management adopt a sensible attitude there will be some movement on the buses question. We do not think there is nothing left to negotiate."* (statement by Convenor Wilson before the final mass meeting on 19th October.)

However the men thought otherwise and rejected it out of hand accepting only the 16 least damaging

points.

The clear division of labour between the union hierarchy and their representatives on the shop floor - the stewards - was once again extremely effective in keeping the struggle locked within safe limits. However it is a mistake to see it as a Machievellian plot to destroy the struggles of the class, (although at the same time we should never underestimate the cynicism, the cold-blooded posturing, the manipulations and secret deals etc. which undoubtedly exist at all levels of the union machine). The division of labour, which can be (and is) consciously taken advantage of by the bourgeoisie isnt just a scenario enacted by skilled actors. It has a material basis for its existence. The stewards are on the spot, part of the workforce and the community. Their own jobs are at risk and they are subject to all the pressures from their daily contact with the men on the floor. At that level their vision and understanding of the needs of the national economy and the Trade Unions role within it is obviously much more limited than the more complete overview which exists at the upper levels of the Union machine.

Therefore they often react with a 'genuine' militancy which isnt simply cynically faked. A revolutionary intervention in the struggle which states that stewards are simply liars and fakers risks being simply dismissed as patently untrue by workers who are quite capable of recognising the sincerity (or otherwise) of their stewards. A revolutionary denunciation of stewards must rest, not on asserting their insincerity, but in pointing out that however 'militant' they are, however hostile to the hierarchy they are (even to the point of breaking away in rank and file organisations) their 'militancy' will always be contained within a political programme of Trade Unionism, of reformism, of negotiating within the system. Therefore they will always act in a fashion which aims to cripple and divert any class activity which threatens to go beyond that. That is why they will always attack the class.

The HiFab strike underlines once again that the working class struggle to defend themselves, the fight against the bosses and the state, is first and foremost, a fight against the unions and all their manifestations. Militancy, the desire to fight is the starting point, but workers can only go forward by generalising their struggle, by spreading the fight to other workers and by controlling that struggle by themselves.

GM/Cormack

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leaflet

# UNION NEGOTIATION MEANS DEFEAT

This strike has stood strong now for more than four weeks and has defied all the management attempts to divide and break you. But one thing is absolutely clear.

THE UNIONS ARE AGAINST YOU.

The stewards have argued all along that the only way forward is to make the strike official, but that is a GUARANTEE OF DEFEAT. The unions are against your struggle because they accept the same logic of the capitalist marketplace as the management. That's why people like Lafferty and Gray have never been out of the news whining about Hi-Fab's losses. They accept that the management are being "reasonable" in demanding redundancies and in screwing up work rates. Their first priority is the health of the profits and to hell with the workers. That's why the unions support the 21 Conditions which they negotiated and have tried to frighten you by repeating the management threats about closure.

Dont be fooled by the shouting of the stewards. They rejected the 21 points which their own bosses in the union negotiated because they knew that anything else they said at that point would be ignored. As stewards they are part of the unions and in the long run they'll do what the unions want. When you came out on strike your actions spoke loud and clear:

GIVE US BACK THE SHOWERS  
GIVE US BACK THE SHELTERS  
GIVE US BACK THE JUICE AND COFFEE  
NOTHING TO DISCUSS!

Three weeks later what is Rab Wilson saying: "Let us back in and then we'll discuss it." That means only one thing - they'll negotiate how much the management can get away with. Now he's saying that the only way forward is to get the unions to make it official.

BUT THE UNIONS ARE AGAINST YOU.

They will accept the harsh new conditions. They will accept the redundancies which are coming. Just as they accepted the 140,000 redundancies among steel workers in the past three years and the tens of thousands of shipyard workers who have been sacked. Ask the workers at B.L., at Scott Lithgows, at Ravenscraig, at Robb Caledon. And all the other three million who are on the dole. All the unions have done about unemployment and falling living standards is to divert the anger of workers into useless cul-de-sacs - token one day strikes, useless marches to Parliament - and made sure that the strikes they couldnt avoid stayed locked in isolation. This is because the unions and the capitalists believe the same thing - that the economic crisis can only be solved by workers making sacrifices. That's why they attack our struggles.

# the way forward

That's why the strike must be defeated if it is left to the unions and stewards. You've already shown your strength-- the blackleg attempts were smashed and the 400 sackings were reversed, but be clear, this was not achieved by 'union' strength and skill. It was achieved by your own mass collective strength. The way forward must build on that and that means taking control of the struggle YOURSELVES. This means:

- REGULAR MASS MEETINGS
- AN ELECTED AND REVOCABLE STRIKE COMMITTEE  
    NOT A UNION ONE
- REGULAR MASS PICKETS NOT TOKEN ONES (ignore the government picket guidelines. They're designed to defeat you)
- SPREAD THE STRIKE

Isolation is your greatest enemy. Send large delegations to other yards and firms to speak to the workers and to ask for their support. Don't send union officials to talk to union officials. The workers at the Ardesier yard have already given financial support but the only real solidarity is sympathy strikes.

Follow the example of the Fife electricians at Moss Morran. In August 400 went on strike AGAINST union orders when they were ordered to work in the rain. Three days later they persuaded 200 workers at Lumas, a neighbouring yard, to strike in support. Two days later workers at Braefoot Tanker terminal also struck in support. All against union orders. By the 16th of August all their demands had been met. ITS ALL ONE FIGHT.

But even if this strike succeeds the victory can only be a temporary one. The crisis of capitalism is world-wide and will NEVER be solved. Every country is hit - from America to Russia, from Britain to China. We know how the capitalists solved their crisis in the 20's and 30's and they're preparing to do the same again. They have only one answer - attack the workers and prepare for war.

Every time we fight to defend ourselves, every time we say to hell with your interests, every time we put our own needs before the needs of profit, we point to the only way out - the destruction of the whole rotten capitalist system.

NO TO THE REDUNDANCIES!  
NO TO THE 21 POINTS!  
SPREAD THE STRIKE!  
AGAINST THE UNIONS!

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