

Trade Unions and Strikes

On the 20th of October Britain is in ~~for~~ for another big strike. The nation-wide Amalgamated Engineering Union is calling out its one million members. Whatever the outcome, one thing is certain, It will produce a vast outpouring of criticism of Trade Unions in general and of the AEU in particular. In this ~~image~~ era of "images" the Trade Union movement has a bad one, and it is getting worse. Trade Unions are said to be responsible for all Britain's ills: they are selfish, dictatorial, irresponsible, inconsiderate of the public and of their own rank and file; they hobble industry through restrictive practices and they ~~cause~~ cause inflation by greedy wage claims.

Are they really that bad? First, what is a ~~union~~ trade union? Some critics paint a picture of doctrinaire agitators spending their time keeping workers from doing work that they are only too anxious to do. But a union cannot make men strike when they do not want to strike. Shop-stewards or strikers can bring a certain amount of pressure to bear on a minority who refuse to join in (just as employers can, and do, bring pressure to bear on strike leaders). But these pressures are only possible when there is already a majority in favour of striking.

In the long run both ~~shop~~^{shop}-stewards -- unpaid volunteers who do union work within the factory in addition to their ordinary work -- and full-time union leaders have to be re-elected, and so cannot go completely counter to the wishes of the members. This applies more to the shop steward, who is continually in touch with the men than it does to the full-time official. The latter ~~whose~~ whose post also usually comes up for re-election less frequently, can escape almost as far from the control of his electors as can an elected government between elections. But, as with ~~the~~^{the} government, this almost always works in a conservative direction. Bureaucrats are not naturally adventurous. And it is much easier to prevent a strike occurring than it is to force out men who don't want to strike.

In fact 90% of the ~~strikes~~ ^{file} strikes in Britain are unofficial. The rank and ~~file~~ ^{file} are much more militant than their leaders are.

But why strike? The most important point about a strike, and the most often forgotten one, is that it takes two sides to make a strike. It takes somebody making a demand and somebody refusing it. The strikers, who are making the demand, always seem to be the "aggressors", but you can only really tell who is to blame if you consider the reasonableness of the demand. Whatever else they strike for, people don't strike for the pleasure of it. For the simple fact is that people work in order to get paid, and when they are on strike they don't get paid. They may get a union allowance, but it is small; during the seamen's strike the strikers got £3 a week strike pay.

Of course, the employers don't ¹refuse demands because ~~by~~ they enjoy doing so, either. Strikes ~~do~~ hurt both sides. But the employers have a built in advantage in that they have larger reserves and so they can, if the worst comes to the worst, carry on longer without producing than can the workers without earning. And, to come back to "image", they have a built in image advantage too. Although either the workers (wage-demand), or the employers (increase in work intensity) may take the first private step in ~~to~~ the process leading up to the strike, it is always the workers, ~~make~~ who take the first public step. So newspapers headline "Seamen Hold Nation To Ransom", but never "~~Ship~~owners Hold Nation To Ransom", although they may well be refusing a raise, and thus causing a strike, not because they cannot afford it, but because they are convinced that a nervous government will come in on their side if they hold out long enough.

What are strikes about? In Britain about half the strikes are not about wages at all. They have to do with questions of organization and discipline-- tea-breaks, work speed, who is to do what job, and so on. A lot of this comes under the heading "restrictive practices". Some so-called restrictive practices revolve about the problem of work intensity. It is, within reason, in the worker's interest

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The other form of restrictive practice at first seems much less justified. This is "feather-bedding"; the process whereby, for example, the US railwaymen's union was able to force the railway to continue employing coal-shovellers on trains long after they had switched to the use of oil-fired engines. In this way unions protect their member's jobs, but certainly at the cost of social efficiency. On the other hand it is perhaps unreasonable that some members of an industry should suffer as ^{the} result of technical improvements in their industry. Nor is it very reasonable of critics, and especially editorialists, to morally condemn people unwilling to become redundant so as to sacrifice themselves for the national good, when the critics and the nation are unwilling to spread the sacrifice by providing adequate ~~retraining~~ retraining facilities, ~~saxtnt~~ ~~Workers~~ Workers skilled only in the use of out-of-date machines have to be able to acquire the new skills that they need. Otherwise, and especially in a period of high unemployment, restrictive practices will certainly increase, however many ^{serious} ~~sera~~ one preaches against them.

The other major sin of which ^{unions} they are accused is ~~that~~ of causing inflation by forcing up wages. A rise in wages need not necessarily mean a rise in prices. It could mean a fall in profits or dividends. But as ^{matter} ~~atter~~ of fact it very rarely does. In Britain the ratio of wages to profits has remained more or less constant throughout ^{this} ~~the~~ century. There is no obvious reason why this ratio should be considered

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Apart from this ~~we~~ wage increases ~~have~~ do have at least one good long-term effect. By ~~making~~ making wages a relatively more expensive factor of ~~the~~ production they encourage employers to increase efficiency by mechanising. From this point of view it is arguable that the Labour government's present policy of wage-restraint plus unemployment is tailor-made to prevent any increase in the efficiency of British industry!

Incidentally, wage demands or wage gains are often exaggerated, both by the ^{unions} ~~unions~~, in order to impress their members, and by the ^{employers} ~~employers~~, in order to shock the public. A relatively small weekly increase, when multiplied by the number of people in the industry, and by the period the agreement is to run for, may swell into what seems to the man in the street to be an unreasonably greedy number of millions, but is still in fact a small amount in comparison with the money involved in the whole industry.

Within the context of capitalism there are two ways in which one can justify trade unions and strikes. From the point of view of Welfare State ^{Capitalism} ~~Capitalism~~ it can be argued ~~that~~ that the employer has a responsibility ~~to~~ to every ~~member~~ ~~of~~ ~~his~~ ~~factory~~ member of his factory, and that the employee has a right to take action if this responsibility is being neglected. On the other hand, in more traditional ~~terms~~ terms, it may be said that the employer's only responsibility is to himself, and that it is his right to try to make as much money as possible, in any possible way. But then he can hardly blame the worker if the worker tries to use ~~his~~ power he has to ~~get~~ get as much ~~as~~ as he can for himself.

A capitalist ^{society is} ~~society~~ a ^{competitive society} ~~capitalist society~~, so it seems unreasonable to object when the ^{worker} ~~worker~~ tries to compete too. This doesn't mean that ~~the~~ unions and strikers are always right. But they aren't always wrong, either.

~~No strike~~ ~~ADD~~ Turn

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Any strike in the UK has at least one predictable result; ^{relevant union} it will produce a vast outpouring of criticism of Trade Unions in general and of the ~~AEU~~ in particular. In this era of "images" the Trade Union movement has a bad one, and it is getting worse. Trade Unions are said to be responsible for all Britain's ills; they are selfish, dictatorial, irresponsible, inconsiderate of the public and of their own rank and file, they hobble industry through restrictive practices and they cause inflation by greedy wage claims.

Are they really that bad? First, what is a trade union? Some critics paint a picture of doctrinaire agitators spending their time keeping workers from doing work that they are only too anxious to do. But a union cannot make men strike when they do not want to strike. Shop stewards or strikers can bring a certain amount of pressure to bear on a minority who refuse to join in (just as employers can, and do, bring pressure to bear on strike leaders). But these pressures are only possible when there is already a majority in favour of striking.

In the long run both shop stewards - unpaid volunteers who do union work within the factory in addition to their ordinary work - and full-time union leaders have to be re-elected, and so cannot go completely counter to the wishes of the members. This applies more to the shop steward, who is continually in touch with the men, than it does to the full-time official. The latter, whose post also comes up for re-election less frequently, can escape almost as far from the control of his electors as can an elected government between elections. But, as with the government, this almost always works in a conservative direction. Bureaucrats are not naturally adventurous. And it is much easier to prevent a strike occurring than it is to force out men who don't want to strike.

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Of course, the employers don't refuse demands because they enjoy doing so either. Strikes hurt both sides. But the employers have a built in advantage in that they have larger reserves and so they can, if the worst comes to the worst, carry on longer without producing than can the workers without earning. And, to come back to 'image', they have a built in image advantage too. Although either the workers (wage-demand), or the employers (increase in work intensity) may take the first private step in the process leading up to the strike, it is always the workers who take the first public step. So newspapers headline "Seamen Hold Nation to Ransom" but never "Shipowners Hold Nation to Ransom", although they may well be refusing a raise, and thus causing a strike, not because they cannot afford it, but because they are convinced that a nervous government will come in on their side if they hold out long enough.

What are strikes about? In Britain about half the strikes are not about wages at all. They have to do with questions of organisation and discipline - tea breaks, work speed, who is to do what job, and so on. A lot of this comes under the heading "restrictive practices". Some so-called restrictive practices revolve about the problem of work intensity. It is, within reason, in the worker's interest to work as relaxedly as possible - even if only so as to have enough energy left to enjoy his spare time - while it is in the employer's interest for him to work as quickly as possible. I say 'within reason' because it is not in the worker's interest to work so slowly that his employer goes bankrupt. Nor is it in his employer's interest to work him so hard that he drops dead. Many conflicts result either because the employers try directly to speed up previously accepted work norms, or else because the introduction of new methods and new machines either seems to, or does, require

greater intensity of work.

The other form of restrictive practice at first seems much less justified. This is "feather-bedding" - the process whereby for example, one US railwaymen's union was able to force the railway to continue employing coal shovellers on trains long after they had switched to the use of oil-fired engines. In this way unions protect their members' jobs, but certainly at the cost of social efficiency. On the other hand it is perhaps unreasonable that some members of an industry should suffer as the result of technical improvements in their industry. Nor is it very reasonable of critics, and especially editorialists, to morally condemn people unwilling to become redundant so as to sacrifice themselves for the national good, when the critics and the nation are unwilling to spread the sacrifice by providing adequate retraining facilities. Workers skilled only in the use of out-of-date machines have to be able to acquire the new skills that they need. Otherwise, and especially in a period of high unemployment, restrictive practices will certainly increase, however many sermons one preaches against them.

The other major sin of which unions are accused is that of causing inflation by forcing up wages. A rise in wages need not necessarily mean a rise in prices. It could mean a fall in profits or dividends. But as a matter of fact it very rarely does. In Britain the ratio of wages to profits has remained more or less constant throughout this century. There is no obvious reason why this ratio should be considered sacrosanct. One might well ask who is causing inflation then; the workers by demanding higher wages, or the employers by insisting on not cutting dividends?

Apart from this wage increases do have at least one good long-term effect. By making wages a relatively more expensive factor of production they encourage employers to increase efficiency by mechanising. From this point of view it is arguable that the Labour Government's present policy of wage-restraint plus unemployment is tailor-made to prevent any increase in the efficiency of British industry!

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Within the context of capitalism there are two ways in which one can justify trade unions and strikes. From the point of view of Welfare State capitalism it can be argued that the employer has a responsibility to every member of his factory, and that the employee has a right to take action if this responsibility is being neglected. On the other hand, in more traditional terms, it may be said that the employer's only responsibility is to himself, and that it is his right to try and make as much money as possible, in any possible way. But then he can hardly blame the worker if the worker tries to use what power he has to get as much as he can for himself.

A capitalist society is a competitive society, so it seems unreasonable to object when the worker tries to compete too. This doesn't mean that unions and strikers are always right. But they aren't always wrong either.

3. However, it is important to distinguish between the basic running costs of the union and the costs of ancillary services required by the union. The union requires training for its shop stewards and executive members. Much of its work will be taken up with handling workers' complaints, and this will often require legal advice, and not infrequently will require legal action. Both training and legal aid will be costly. It is obviously desirable that these services be available on a common basis to a number of unions. Financial aid offered to unions, therefore, should be used to set up such ancillary services.
4. These services would also help the unions to provide important benefits for their members, and to encourage unionisation, but at the same time they would not remove the incentive to the union officials to build up membership in order to ensure the financial strength of the union.
5. Also, assistance of this type would be able at least partly to avoid problems arising out of inter-union conflict. In several centres there already more than one union appealing, in theory at least, to the same constituency. This is obviously highly undesirable, but in this situation it must be left to the workers to decide which of the two unions they wish to support. It must not be decided by a foreign funding body. This can only be avoided if a common service is offered to all unions in an area. A body providing legal aid or training could be supervised by a board representing all the relevant trade unions in an area. (In South Africa, it is probable that for the time being at

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Are they really that bad? First, what are unions? Some of their critics talk as though the unions are dictatorial bodies which spend their time keeping workers from doing the work they are only too anxious to do. But unions can't make men strike when they don't want to strike. Strikers or shop stewards can always, of course, bring a variety of psychological pressures to bear on a minority who refuse to join a strike, (just as an employer can & do bring pressures to bear on strike leaders). But these pressures can only work when there is already a majority in favour of striking. In the long run, both shop stewards - unpaid volunteers who

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Of course, the employers don't refuse the strikers' demands for pleasure either. Strikes hurt both sides. But the employers have a built-in advantage, in that they have larger reserves & so can, if the worst comes to the worst, carry on longer without producing than the workers can without earning. And, to come back to "image", they have a built-in advantage in image too. Although either the workers (by demand) or the employer (by increase in work intensity) may take the first ^{public} step in the process leading up to the strike, it is ~~always~~ the workers who take the first public step. So newspapers headline "^{Seamen} ~~Maritime~~ hold nation to ransom", but never "Shipowners hold nation to ransom", although they may well be refusing a raise, & thus causing the strike, not because they can't afford it but because they are convinced that a nervous government will come in on their side if they hold out long enough.

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Among all their other sins, unions are accused of causing inflation by forcing up wages. A rise in wages need not necessarily mean a rise in prices. It could mean a fall in profits or dividends. As a matter of fact it very rarely does. In UK the ratio of wages to profits has remained more or less stable throughout this century. But there is no obvious reason why the present ratio should be considered sacrosanct. One might well ask who is causing inflation, then: the workers by demanding higher wages, or the employers by insisting on their not cutting dividends? But apart from this wage increases do have at least one good long term effect. By making wages a relatively more expensive factor of production they encourage employers to increase efficiency by mechanising.

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