

The Industrial Relations Act and the fight for a GENERAL STRIKE

When a reactionary Tory Government has a stable parliamentary majority and is determined to use it to revoke many of the democratic rights which the British working class has established over decades of effort and struggle, then the labour movement is faced with a sharp choice.

Either it will obey the "law of the land" — the rules which the boss class make up, or rip up, according to their needs and what they think they can get away with at a given moment — and **hope** that a future sympathetic Labour government will change the law sometime in the future.

Or it will fight back here and now, recognising no ruling class right to meddle with the trade unions, believing that any law which threatens strikers with jail for defending the interests of their class is a vile and villainous law; it will refuse to keep within the 'normal' channels of bourgeois politics and resort to direct, generalised industrial action to smash the Tory attempt to shackle the trade union movement.

Those were the choices the working class faced with the passing of the Industrial Relations Bill into law early in 1972.

The first course meant bowing down here and now before blatant class legislation, accepting that politics (all issues of the overall running of society) is totally and uncontrollably in the hands of the bosses, and that major issues between the capitalists and the workers are decided only through elections timed to its convenience by a bosses' government. That course is the traditional social democratic one of slavish legalism and rigid confinement to the rhythms, norms and political processes of a political system deliberately designed to keep control for the employers and their governments and to take all initiative, all political direct action, away from the working class.

Under these rules even the most favourable outcome from an election, a Labour victory, wouldn't necessarily produce the repeal of the Act: Labour MPs wouldn't be under the **direct control** of the workers who elected them; and after all, it was a **Labour** government which started the process that led to the Industrial Relations Act, with In Place of Strife, in 1969.

The second course meant challenging the Government here and now, refusing to let the Act operate as planned (or at all), insisting that the arena of struggle be one chosen by the working class, where we have the strength and the power to act urgently and directly and to challenge the right of the government to make such laws. That meant direct action, at its highest level a general strike to smash

the Industrial Relations Act: necessarily a full scale industrial offensive. Anything less, though it might cause setbacks for the Government, force it to temporise and maybe even finally to look for a 'compromise' with the trade union leaders, would not cleanly rip up the Act and inflict the crippling defeat on the government which the class was capable of inflicting, and which it was in its interest to inflict.

Faced with the Tory government's legislation, the leaders of the labour movement, first and foremost the left trade union leaders, decided neither to knuckle under fully, nor to stand up and fight, but instead to **bluff**. They organised feeble token actions as the Bill moved nearer the statute books and finally settled for a policy of boycotting — and only and no more than boycotting — the NIRC. Impotent and foredoomed, without any offensive policy even in reserve, the boycott could only last until the NIRC used its power of state compulsion to strike at the union treasuries, at which point either the unions mobilised or surrendered. They surrendered: finally even the AUEW. They chose to defend the union treasuries in the National Industrial Relations Court and not in the streets. But the rank and file refused to surrender — and by its actions constrained the trade union leaders to at least continue refusing to register under the Act.

The rank and file militants of the labour movement reacted with violent anger to this Tory Industrial Star Chamber. Instinctively they were for an **industrial** offensive against the Act and the government. Just as the Act became law the miners' strike showed the working class what tremendous elemental power it possesses when it chooses to rouse itself in action. The cynical juggling with "the law" by the middle class reactionaries around Heath (the Official Solicitor act etc) dispelled for many workers the mystique of legality and exposed the **class** interest of the bosses behind the aged and venerable institutions of the British state.

Throughout 1972 the logic of the class struggle, the drive of the militants, was towards a general industrial offensive, a general strike, recognising this as the **only** course of **action**. In confrontation after confrontation successive brass fronts of the Tory government were shown to be mounted on feet of clay. And the strength of the working class was shown to be beyond the power of the government to control — even with the help of foot-dragging union leaders. The powerful flame of direct action that flared in July when the 5 dockers were jailed and which forced a humiliating retreat on the government, demonstrated that mobilisation for a general strike could have — at least — smashed the Act and, probably, the government too. But the release of the 5 halted the strike wave before it had reached the stage of a full

scale mobilisation such as in France in 1968 (which it gave every indication of doing).

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The task of revolutionary socialists in the situation in which the working class found itself was to feel the pulse of the class's movement and gauge accurately the needs and possibilities of the situation; and to attempt, in agitation and propaganda, to raise slogans that would focus the movement towards the necessary action. It was necessary to raise the call for a general strike to smash the Industrial Relations Act and to mount a propaganda campaign to clarify all the **associated** issues: the nature of the state; the role of the trade union bureaucracy; the historical experience of the general strike weapon and the political implications of full scale industrial mobilisation; and above all to explain and explore the open-endedness of any general strike, which once started can take on a momentum of its own, not merely stepping outside the channels of normal bourgeois politics with its rigged institutions, but also having the possibility of organising a network of broad workers committees (probably by expanding the scope and functions of the existing factory committees and linking them together to discharge new responsibilities), its own embryo working class political institutions which can — **if the revolutionaries within them gain sufficient influence** — counterpose themselves to the whole bourgeois system, liberating the political and social energy of the working class and creating the immediate possibilities of a proletarian revolution.

Such propaganda had to take into account the 'hangover' from the failure and betrayal of the one British general strike, of 1926, and draw on the much richer and less one-sided international experience of the general strike. This is what **Workers' Fight** did.

Basing ourselves on the potential of the mass activity of the working class, we attempted to understand and to explain that **working class politics**, spilling out of the banks of normal bourgeois institutions (which is latent in a general industrial mobilisation) can possibly short circuit the bourgeois political system, relating to the overall reality of society not by way of the existing state institutions but, at its most favourable development, through the creation of this network of workers' councils which would, in certain conditions, challenge the capitalist system.

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Against this conception, the 'charge' of "syndicalism" is one that springs all too easily to the mouths of 'Trotskyists' many of whom have absorbed — some of them to the very marrow of their bones! — a narrow social democratic, bourgeois-legalist concept-
ion of working class politics. But historically

syndicalism was often a **healthy** reaction against the legalist routinism of the Second International and its corrupt parliamentarians.

Initially revolutionary, though **limited**, its rump (many syndicalists joined the Communist International which subsumed the historically progressive elements of both syndicalism and the use of bourgeois parliaments) only became harmful when it counterposed itself to the rejuvenated Marxist parties of the early Comintern. To opponents of the use of bourgeois parliaments by the working class, communists never glorified this form of action above direct action. Writing against the Dutch ultra-lefts in 1920, Lenin expressed the true faith of communism: "...action by the masses, a big strike for instance, is more important than parliamentary activity at **all** times, and not only during a revolution or revolutionary situation". (Collected Works, Vol.31 p.61)

Not 'syndicalism' is the issue between ourselves and certain other "Trotskyists", but "parliamentary cretinism" **once removed**. Organisations like the Labour Party adapt to the forms, rhythms, rituals of 'struggle' and institutions of the bourgeois state. The social democratised "Trotskyists" (including some who bailed out of the social democracy in the mid-'60s) adapt to the norms of the social democratised labour movement — and **indirectly to the bourgeois state**. Forever frantically trying to focus every action of the working class towards the 'higher level' of "politics" — that is, Parliament and the doings of Governments and labour leaders — they are the living embodiment of such a terrible historical retrogression in consciousness that they apparently **cannot comprehend** wide scale industrial mobilisation (and by a working class heavily disillusioned with the Labour Party) except in terms of parliamentary politics. They have lost a whole dimension of communist understanding — and a most vital one. They wind up disparaging the power of independent working class action and implicitly elevate bourgeois political institutions into something all powerful, to which the working class can **never** relate except on the bourgeoisie's own terms (and those of its Labour Party agents), passing in good order through the parliamentary toll-gates — with direct action at best forcing the gatekeepers to open them ahead of schedule.

Thus the Socialist Labour League called for a general strike to get a general election — which would obligingly result in a Labour govt. That is, the "safety net" general strike: if things get too hot ... reach for the ballot boxes! (Which is one way to try to reconcile adventurist bombast with a practice of thoughtless routinism and extreme timidity, indeed cowardice, in face of the bourgeois state.)

Marxists relate to the working class with a

general programme for overthrowing the bourgeoisie and transforming society. In conditions less explosive than those which emerged when working class resistance to the Industrial Relations Act upset the equilibrium of political life as 'formally' orchestrated by the bourgeois state, one major tool to help the class break through Labourist politics is the placing of specific demands on the Labour and trade union leaders. For example, the demand to launch a campaign to kick out the Tories and return a Labour government pledged to repeal the I.R. Act. But we **never** counterpose these things to the direct action of the class, to the clear and necessary logic of the class struggle. When direct action on the scale and with the potential force of last year's **spontaneous** mobilisations are occurring (or are likely to occur), such 'demands' on leaders and such attempts to focus on 'politics' become anachronistic, threatening to cut across the drive for direct action.

Demands that the **leaders** act — by definition within the system — can be a weapon in the hands of militants around which to mobilise; but only when such demands do **not leave the initiative in the hands of those leaders**, do **not** mean damping down direct self-reliance, do **not** give the treacherous leaders a weapon against the rank and file, and do **not** mean trying to focus a class wide mobilisation like last July's on 'conventional' government and parliamentary goals which become trivial and diversionary precisely to the degree that the class does mobilise, does even begin to realise its tremendous revolutionary potential.

If on this score the politics of the SLL (and some other tendencies) be "Trotskyism" then we are, indeed, syndicalists; and we would want to be nothing else! In reality their "Trotskyism" consists of a dogmatic bowdlerisation of a few "sacred" texts; and the SLL itself is nothing but an opportunist social-democratised sect in its practice and in its operative conceptions.

Our propaganda for the general strike also had to take account of the peculiar "pedantic" 'Marxist' school of thought on the general strike; which "rests" on both the limited British experience and on a narrow interpretation of the classical Bolshevik teaching in this connection, of the general strike-led by communists and leading to a scheduled armed insurrection. These people conclude that it is wrong, false and adventurist to advocate a general strike **until** revolutionaries are in a position to lead it. In immediate politics this leads simply to **acquiescence**, bowing to both the Tories and the Labour bureaucrats. It is in fact a failure to base oneself on the logic and dynamic of the class struggle and, if one has influence, such an attitude acts as a **brake** on it. It is also to ignore the experiences of such mass strikes as that of France

May 1968. (See "Dare to Fight")

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In the last year WORKERS' FIGHT has given a great deal of space to the clarification of these problems. We did not make the general strike our panacea, nor 'reject' 'normal' politics. Such 'rejection' would anyway be a sectarian conceit on the part of a tiny group, and would be an ideological capitulation to syndicalism, seeing industrial direct action as the **only** weapon, the general strike as the **only** strategy. But we did and do believe that the following are the first letters in the political alphabet of Trotskyism: "To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses no matter how bitter it may be... **to base one's programme on the logic of the class struggle**; (our emphasis) to be bold when the hour for action arrives — these are the rules of the Fourth International" (Leon Trotsky: "The Death Agony of Capitalism"). And we believe that not to base oneself on "the logic of the class struggle", or to refuse, or be unable to see that struggle except through the scales which three decades of relative social peace in Britain has deposited on our eyes, was to cut adrift from the working class and its most healthy responses and to subside — at best — into a quite worthless abstract propagandism, into pedagogic "blackboard socialism" in favour of our own 'nostrums' and dogmatic recipes and preconceptions: that is, into the quintessence of sectarianism as defined by Marx, Lenin and Trotsky.

The articles here reproduced cover most aspects of the general strike question as it has been posed in the last year. Nearly all the articles have anyway an independent educational value, apart from the general strike question. The victory of the Government in Phase 2 of the wage freeze is by no means a crushing or decisive victory. **The struggle will continue.** The combination of limited defeats of the working class and the steady pressure of inflation on the class is storing up new explosions against government policy.

Whether or not the call for a general strike is at any given moment appropriate, an understanding of these questions is important. In one period when the attempt to impose the I.R. Act provoked the outrage of militant workers and led to clash after clash, the call for a general strike was an immediate agitational slogan, in ringing consonance with the felt needs of masses of workers, and not needing preliminary all-round propagandist justification (though demanding, of course, theoretical exploration of all its ramifications). It was the weapon to hand, the **obvious** response, especially after the rousing events of the miners' strike. The cry

was raised time after time as the working class responded to each attempt to impose the Act and invoke its sanctions to club down resistance. If the Act and the NIRC has been virtually on ice for months now, that is a tribute to the power of even the limited industrial action that occurred. It is proof that a full scale mobilisation, a general strike, would have achieved more than the guarded retreat which the Tories have carried out and the deal with the TUC they are aiming for now. A great deal more.

Nevertheless, support for the idea of resorting to the use of a general strike is now more widespread in Britain than at any time since 1926. (With this difference: now it links up with the weapon of factory seizures and occupations which the British working class has recently learned to use. Any British general strike in the period ahead is more likely to resemble the French strikes of '36 and '68 than that of Britain in 1926.) Given the present balance of class forces and the struggles ahead, that is something the ruling class must still reckon with, even if they manage to fully defuse the issue of the I.R. Act, with the help of the trade union bureaucracy.

In addition we republish as an appendix a small pamphlet, now out of print, which analysed the role of the left groups in July '72. Revolutionaries spend their lives preparing for such situations. The performance of the 'revolutionary' groups in understanding and responding to the dynamics of the class struggle both before and after July is the real measure of their worth to the working class and, in our view, of the crisis of the 'Trotskyist' left in Britain.

For ourselves, we are in business to overcome that crisis, to foster revolutionary socialist activity within the trade union movement and to build a revolutionary organisation within the working class which will prevent other defeats, partial or catastrophic, of our class, and which will ultimately help that class build a revolutionary party that will lead it to the taking of state power and socialism.

Rigorous and merciless analysis and, where necessary, exposure and criticism of the political inadequacy of the existing 'Trotskyist' groups is an irreplaceable part of the work of building such an organisation.

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