

Galvanising the steel strike, 1980 - Solidarity



An article from Solidarity on the British Steel Corporation strike of 1980, which was one of the early blows of the Thatcher government against workers' organisation in the UK.

The advance publicity given to the steel strike promised us yet another confrontation between the government and the trade unions. It was a confrontation which the unions were determined to avoid, and the government equally determined to provoke. With its *obsolete political ideology*, the Thatcher faction has convinced itself that the unions are unnecessary for the integration of the working class into the system of exploitation. The Left, unwilling to surrender the prize for senility without a struggle, descended on the picket lines to call for the defence of already discredited unions. This was the dual strategy of capitalism: where blue serge failed, blue denim stood ready to move in.

Both before and during the strike, union leaders emerged from their 'patient negotiations' to sound warning against the social unrest and economic chaos which would result from monetarist intransigence. Again and again they insisted that their aim was not to confront the Tories, but to collaborate in ensuring the viability of the steel industry. With considerable pride they pointed to their record of aiding in the restructuring of the industry while averting industrial action. Since 1965 the number of workers in British Steel Corporation (BSC) plants has dwindled from 817,000 to 184,000 last year, largely due to the introduction of new technology in the form of electric arc furnaces. These have not only brought a dramatic increase in productive capacity, but have also made the steel industry less dependent on coal, no doubt in preparation for the Bennite nuclear future. In short, the unions were willing to implement redundancies in exchange for state investment, while Labour governments were willing to invest in the knowledge that a steel industry in private hands did not have the financial resources to maintain production in periods of recession and so guarantee the supply of steel if and when markets expanded once more. Despite this touching faith in the future survival of capitalism, the Labour Party was unable to prevent stiffer competition from countries such as Korea, Japan, and Brazil. The result was that the BSC faced massive interest charges (currently running at £208 million a year), a redevelopment programme that was only half complete (and required a further 52,000 redundancies), a declining share of the world market, and a new government that was ideologically opposed to nationalised industries.

In insisting that the BSC should force the pace of plant closures and redundancies, the Tories were merely accelerating a process which had previously been masterminded by the Labour left. However, a confidential report submitted to a Tory policy group in 1978 had suggested that a future Conservative administration would be able to withstand a lengthy strike in the

steel industry. Recent statements by Joseph have confirmed that a combination of plant closures and asset-stripping is to re-establish the profitability of the industry (while rewarding the private sector with an increased share of the market). As long as supplies of steel were readily available — and this was guaranteed when the unions dithered for six months before calling a strike - then industrial action by BSC workers could only serve to hasten the restructuring process. Confident that it had nothing to lose from the strike, the government imposed its cash limits and withdrew to await developments. Despite anguished pleas from union negotiators, the BSC went ahead with the rundown at Corby, insisted on a further 52,000 redundancies at least, and finally made its two percent pay offer. While the unions and the left squabbled about production statistics in an apparent attempt to prove that British steelworkers are more docile than any others, the BSC management carried out job reduction exercises and identified 2,300 ‘non-core’ jobs in the profitable Sheffield steelworks group alone. This points to a sustained campaign of informal resistance which has successfully lowered output and imposed manning levels decided on by the workers themselves. Others chose to opt for voluntary redundancy, a timely rejection of fraudulent appeals for ‘unity’ from careerist shop stewards with an eye to the supposed dignity of labour.

The secret talks in which the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) saw its last hope of reasoning with management and hoodwinking the steelworkers foundered on demands for unconditional surrender. Not even the ISW could find any enthusiasm for the dismemberment of entire plants, particularly in view of its conviction that managerial ineptitude (the crisis of leadership!) was forcing the industry into irreversible decline. This has led the union leaderships, far-sighted in matters of preserving capitalism, to see themselves as its saviours until the return of a Labour government. Dismayed by the overt class hostility of the Tories, who are more interested in demonstrating their ability to rule like latter-day colonialists than in pandering to uppity workers or bailing out the nationalised steel industry, the unions moved in to rescue the situation. Their problem was how to do this without losing the already uncertain allegiance of their members, which they still need if they are to have a plausible claim to share in the functions of guiding and managing the economy as a whole.

Anxiety about the state of the economy turned to aggression as the bureaucrats found themselves squeezed between the intransigence of the government and the mounting anger of the steelworkers. Speaking at a Trades Union Congress (TUC) demonstration, Murray reasserted the unions’ claim to be the ‘authentic voice’ of the working class and issued a raucous threat: ‘We are here to demonstrate our unity, and anyone or any organisation which in any way, whether by utterance, action or by seeking disruption, destroys that unity will have to answer to the working class of Britain.’ The belligerence of this statement was in marked contrast to the plaintive warnings about social unrest. With the mass pickets outside Hadfields and elsewhere taking on the character of workers’ assemblies, decisive action was necessary to re-establish control of the strike.

It was soon to become evident that the strike would have to pass beyond the control of the unions and into the hands of the steelworkers if it was to achieve more than the accelerated restructuring of the industry. In the first week the ISTC issued instructions that the private sector was not to be interfered with, and throughout the strike the various unions notably the NUM, TGWU, AEUW, and NUR took it in turns to order normal working.

The local strike committees, although sporadically more militant than headquarters, also demonstrated their concern for normality. Little more than juntas of shop stewards determined to maintain their managerial prerogatives, they issued orders and shunted pickets around the country with as little effort to consult and inform as they had shown previously when taking decisions behind the workers’ backs or negotiating redundancy agreements. The effect of this was to leave token pickets scattered about the country in isolated groups of three

or four. Individual workers were able to discover what was happening only by courtesy of the media, as was shown by the ISTC's use of newspaper advertisements to urge rejection of BSC pay offers.

Even so, the pickets took to using their own initiative when deciding which goods should or should not be allowed through. This deplorable disruption was ended either by withdrawing pickets entirely, as at the British Leyland plant at Bathgate, or by issuing specific instructions that only consignments of steel were to be turned back.

Where direct instructions failed, or where mass pickets converged, the unions made militant noises and sent vague appeals for solidarity through their bureaucratic channels. When it looked as if the strike might spread to miners in South Wales (whose jobs are also threatened), Murray stepped in to cool the situation and promised a day of token protest on 14 May, converting the threat of direct action into an ineffectual march against Tory policies. As one steelworker put it, 'Len Murray and the TUC are only *talking* in support of us. That's no good, we don't need budgies, we need help on the picket line.' Time and again the unions had to ward off justified suspicions that they were dragging their feet. Faced with a demand for action from Yorkshire miners, [NUM leader Arthur] Scargill was able to post himself at the head of a flying column and march on the police line outside Hadfields, where he was able to exchange pleasantries with his uniformed colleagues. There was little else to do, since the day shift had already started work a couple of hours before.

The hostility and cynicism aroused by the unions made it all the easier for managements to address appeals to the workers over the heads of union leaders. As at British Leyland, the workers were faced with an unenviable choice between two gangs of unresponsive rogues who were clearly in collusion with each other. When Sirs sat down to secret talks with the chairman of Hadfields and agreed that the firm should be given immunity because of its financial problems (as if the workers had none!), this merely reinforced the climate of anxiety and suspicion. ISTC officials at Firth Brown, another Sheffield firm, were later reprimanded by the managing director when they suggested that the company would collapse if there was not an immediate return to work.

This was only one of a series of comic-opera reversals during the strike. We saw the 'right to work' slogan being brandished by both sides, one eager to cash in on the opportunity afforded by the strike, the other seeking support (or meaningless and mystifying slogans, both convinced that an obedient involvement in unremitting production and occasional reproduction) is the only right and proper activity for the working class. Flying pickets were dispatched to ISTC headquarters in London and Scargill's command centre in Barnsley — at the request of Hadfields' bosses. The BSC made reformist demands for more democracy in the unions and held its ballot about a ballot, the pinstripe (or should that be poloneck?) equivalent of the campaign being mounted by the Liaison Committee for Constitutional Reform(!), a ginger group within the ISTC. This time it was the government, not the unions, that was denounced for wrecking the economy, and Hadfields Chairman, Norton pranced and capered like any hysterical shop steward.

Aspiring state capitalists of the left persuasion would do well to note that their plans for 'workers' control' are by no means assured of success, now that the shop stewards who are to control the workers have lost their monopoly of populist militancy and appear more and more in the guise of boilersuited bosses.

With the traditional labour movement reduced to muttering in dark corridors, it might appear that its authority is irretrievably lost and that the way is now open for the emergence of self-activity and self-organisation on the part of the workers themselves. But the appeals to outdated loyalties will continue, along with the oafish conduct that seeks to contain

spontaneous activity within bureaucratic constraints. These pretensions will be enthusiastically supported by a left which has for years refused to recognise the elementary truth that the unions have become the major enemy of the working class.

In the meantime, the unions face an additional complication in the impending laws on secondary picketing which will flush them even further into the open. Prior's Employment Bill proposes to penalize those unions which fall in their attempts to curb effective industrial action. If it becomes law, it will mean more rigorous controls on local initiatives and spontaneous resistance, or overt collaboration with the police in removing troublesome pickets. Either way, the unions will not be able to avoid still more disaffection in the future, with a corresponding shift towards autonomous activity as traditional loyalties continue to disintegrate. And when workers come to confront these obstacles to their own emancipation, their actions will have to assume the character of a revolt if they are not to remain the victims of a luckless past.

We may leave the final word to Prior himself: 'You can pass all the laws you like, but if you cannot get the consent of the people you cannot enforce these laws'.

P.S. (Sheffield)

In 'Solidarity' - May/July 1980

Text taken and slightly edited for clarity of some terms by libcom from a larger document on www.endangeredphoenix.com. They commented that this article "reflects some of the limitations of revolutionaries of that time to imagine the enormity of what was coming down."