

Unholy alliance - The seamen's strike: an analysis - George Foulser



An article by George Fulser of the Syndicalist Workers Federation on the 1966 seaman's strike

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The backdoor agreement

The seamen's struggle of 1966 was beaten before it began. There are plenty of details to show how and why this was so.

Seamen had won a 44-hour week in 1961, following, their unofficial 1960 dispute, by threatening another go if the 1960 aims were not conceded.

By 1964, rank-and-file militancy had achieved the 40-hour week as official Union Policy, also the owners had agreed to giving seamen a 42-hour, week by May 1965 and the 40-hour week in 1966.

In February 1965 Hogarth and Co. signed a backdoor agreement with the owners putting seamen on a 56-hour week of eight hours a day, seven days a week. This was not putting the clock back to 1960, it was shoving it back to Nelson's time. It meant that seamen on daywork could be worked every day of the week for eight hours. Even in sailing ship days dayworkers could look forward to Sunday as their day of rest . . . Hogarth did not consult the NUS membership about the 56-hour Deal. What he did though was keep them in the dark about it until one month prior to the end of nominations for delegates to the AGM. The rank-and-file seamen managed to get their representatives elected in large ports, but with 90% of the membership at sea earning their living, the majority of small ports had no time to organise rank-and-file nominations or effective opposition when stooges were nominated by NUS Branch officials . . . and small ports have enough delegates to dominate any AGM vote.

Seamen didn't wait for the AGM, naturally, after the bombshell of the 56-hour week exploded. They organised rank-and-file activity all over the UK, and then the London boys

gave the lead and "hit the bricks", to be followed by Merseyside next morning. The North East Coast men led by Jim Slater were a certainty, on previous form, to be out by that weekend, and that was to be the go-ahead for most other districts to come out. The 56-hour Sellout would have been smashed before it was to come in force, for seamen are pretty well experienced in militant strategy these days. No longer the complete novices to striking that they were in 1960, they could cripple the shipowners inside a month . . . The owners are as aware of this as seamen are. They know that the only way to stop us is to destroy our unity in action, "Divide And Rule"

We should have won that dispute of March 1965, if we had had 100% unity but we didn't. Jim Slater did not call his NE Coast lads out; this was so surprising that it was almost incredible. Worse than that-due to the trust and reliance seamen had placed in Slater, the lack of Geordie backing in the strike caused Belfast, Glasgow, Hull and other ports to hold fire too. The Cardiff and Newport men were to have come out on strike at a joint strike rally in Cardiff on the Tuesday. However the London lads thought it best to cut their losses in view of the seeming lack of solidarity action elsewhere, and the strike fizzled out on the Monday.

Slater failed to give a lead at that time, and he did no better when the AGM took place in the May of 1965.

Seamen all over the UK including myself looked up to and trusted Slater, and we regarded him as our "sea-green incorruptible", in our struggle against the shipowners and gangster-unionism. After the May AGM 1965, Slater was found to be just another guy who took the easy way out. He kept silent at a time when silence meant betrayal of his fellow seamen. We could take losing the dispute and the rigged AGM, but when the only man we could rely on to give a national lead let us down, rank-and-file morale and militancy sank almost to zero throughout the UK. This gave the enemy a chance they didn't miss, to destroy all unofficial seamen's groups and get us back to the unorganised and unmilitant state that we were in prior to 1960.

NUS changes its tune

All seamen who had been on strike in March were penalised. Those who had been on the Strike Committees had to sign a pledge not to take part in any more unofficial activities of any sort, under penalty of blacklisting by the MN Pool (amounting to deprivation of their livelihood) if they didn't sign.

They all signed in London and Liverpool. We had a Bristol Channel Seamen's Committee but as the strike ended too soon for us to join it, the Pool couldn't do with Channel Committee members what they did elsewhere.

The Pool was not unduly worried about the Bristol Channel anyway. They had managed to silence the Committees of London and Liverpool and (thanks to Slater) the back of Geordie militancy had been broken, so there was no danger of unofficial action by the Channel men. They were noted for being backward in rank-and-file organisation.

A month passed by without the slightest action anywhere in the UK to rid us of the phoney 56-hour Deal. This was now operating and was turning the meekest and mildest of seamen into angry militants. They needed something to help them get together and discuss what to do, but there was nothing anywhere. There was a seamen's paper in South Wales during the March dispute published by the Channel Committee, and the Committee published a second issue in July more as a sort of forlorn hope than anything. The July issue of the Bristol Channel Seafarer analysed the events of March and May, then called on its readers for their views on future policy to smash the 56-hour week.

Apart from the July BC Seafarer, no rank-and-file activity went on anywhere. 1965 drew to its close with seamen no nearer ending the 56-hour week. With 1966 appeared the third BC Seafarer. This went out on New Year's Day to all UK ports of any size where the Bristol Channel Seafarers' Liaison Committee had contacts. It was distributed among rank-and-file seamen and a leaflet accompanied it. The January BC Seafarer stated in its editorial that readers had written stressing the need for rank-and-file unity as in 1960 (the relevant letters were published in that issue), that the Seafarer and Channel Committee agreed, and suggested that the best way to get national unity was a National Rank and File Conference and a National Committee. The Conference for national policy, the Committee for national unity. The Bristol Channel Committee asked all port-areas to notify them as soon as they had elected Delegates to the proposed Conference.

By the end of January one thousand Seafarers and leaflets had gone out and on January 31 the Chairman of the Bristol Channel Committee was paid off his ship at a minute's notice by order of the MN Pool.

About that time the NUS had changed its tune from "Hogarth's Wonderful 56-hour Week" to "Executive Calls for Shorter Hours", after months and months of the former. An EC Resolution then uttered the grim warning that if the owners did not grant the 40-hour week the EC could consider industrial action. No one took this seriously; they knew that the EC would never do anything to upset the owners.

A political axe to grind

However, developments during February and early March showed that if the NUS didn't make some sort of show, it would not only find that seamen were taking action off their own bat, but it was liable to see them in a new seamen's union of their own creation. If the National Rank and File Conference and Committee suggested by the BC Seafarer came to pass it could be the embryo of the new union. Hogarth and the owners knew that during the ballot-rigging exposures in 1964 a new seamen's union was on the point of coming into being. Its formation was stopped by someone who had a political axe to grind. Lenin said in 1920 that breakaway unions are never any good and for that reason this "someone" went out of his way to stop seamen getting rid of the 100% corrupt National Union of Seamen, in 1964.

Gordon Norris is a member of the Communist Party. He did the right thing in the March 1965 dispute by calling for action on the picketline, and was on the London Committee then. Afterwards Norris signed the no-unofficial-action pledge lest he be removed from the Pool and of necessity his cosy status as one of Shaw Savill's regulars (he's sailed in nothing else but Shaw Savill jobs for years-he must be married to 'em).

The NUS clique have always been among the most virulent of Redbaiters, and as recently as 1962 Hogarth used the NUS paper The Seaman to smear Slater as being linked with Communists, etc., because Slater was rank-and-file candidate for Gen. Sec. against Hogarth himself. The NUS leaders never deviated from the anti-. Red line-no wonder Dr. Johnson once said, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel".

Hogarth never cared for Norris at any time and tried to sling him out of the NUS in 1965. They haven't much in common, I know. But they do have a common fear of anyone forming a new "breakaway" seamen's union. Hogarth might have to work for a living, and Norris would be upset, as new unions are anathema to those who use Leninism as a dogma; also King Street still hasn't got off that "affiliation to the Labour Party" kick yet.

Early in, 1966 the support for a Rank and File Conference began manifesting itself, in the Bristol Channel and elsewhere. Mersey-side began reprinting the BC leaflet, and the Labour

Movement Press began publicising what seamen were up to, and urging readers to give us as much help as possible.

Hogarth makes like a militant

In order to save his hide, Hogarth had to make like a militant. On May 16, for the first time for 50 years, the National Union of Seamen took industrial action against the owners. The Sunday Times of April 24 remarked in a seamen's article that the BC Seafarer's call for a National Liaison Committee was the greatest menace to Hogarth, him being a responsible trade union leader, and all, like. The article added that an official NUS strike would steal the Seafarer's thunder.

There can be no doubt that Hogarth and Co. consulted both the owners and the Government about the strike, as can be seen by what took place in the strike itself. The BP Tanker Co. had all ship schedules arranged so that, throughout the seven weeks of the strike, no deepsea BP tanker arrived in a UK port to get strikebound. Normally there would be at least 20 BP jobs a month docking here from overseas. Well, you know who owns the BP Tanker Co., eh? ... the British Government. The other big deepsea firms all managed to keep their ships away from Britain, apart from the passenger-liners. Shipowners are not hurt by liner holdups one-quarter as much as by holdups of freight and oil carriers. The strike helped the big guys with both deepsea and coasting interests, by putting a good proportion of the other coasting firms on the financial rocks. It is noteworthy that the Pool is controlled by big shipowners to suit themselves. For various reasons, the small firms are more decent in their outlook towards crews than the big firms.

Preventing unofficial action

Now, in case you may think that I'm doing a bit of raving when I say that Hogarth called the seamen's strike of 1966 with the approving consent of the shipowners, I shall state here that this is not the first time that a strike has been called to suit the purposes of the bosses against whom it is in theory directed. In the USA, there are several unions which make such strikes a regular practice. Usually it works like this: a shipowning or longshoring firm intimates to the local longshoremen's union that if a strike held up work aboard ships of a rival firm (for example), it would be to the advantage of the union boss (and the firm doing the deal). The East Coast International Longshoremen's Association pulled such strikes as, a matter of course when Joe "King" Ryan ran the ILA, and I don't think his successors have stopped the ILA policy in such a lucrative sideline. Mind you, such strikes are local affairs, and there is no danger of them getting out of hand, especially with the ILA.

A national strike is a far different kettle of fish. No matter how carefully a phoney national strike is planned, there is no guarantee that it will not get out of hand-especially when there is a good rank-and-file liaison in the industry.

What made the NUS mob take such a perilous step? And what was the main reason for their welcoming the backing of Norris and the Communist Party?

It was not simply because of fear of unofficial action. Seamen have acted unofficially often enough since 1960.

Nor was it due to worry lest the National Seamen's Reform Movement might spring to life anew. The NSRM was simply a "ginger" group and never opposed the NUS as a union.

While it is true that the formation of a breakaway union would be abhorred by Hogarth Ltd., in itself it would not be sufficient to force the NUS to put up the smokescreen of an official and phoney strike.

None of the things mentioned above could get the NUS officials rattled, if they occurred singly. However, the situation in the seafaring industry this year had developed to the point of

the probable outbreak of (1) large-scale unofficial action, (2) creation of an unofficial body on 'a national basis (3) more than enough rank-and-file impetus for the formation of a "breakaway" rank and file seamen's union.

Even if the NUS called a phoney strike and then were to sell the men out, there was every possibility of seamen acting with regard to the three points stated. The only thing to stop them would be disunity within the rank-and-file movement-and that is why Hogarth turned so friendly towards the CP. He knew that he could rely on any CP member to work for the retention of the NUS and against the creation of another and really genuine seamen's union, because Lenin told 'em to do to back in 1920.

As for the CP, the CP would back Hogarth in his face-saving act because (1) it would probably obviate the danger of a new union, with Norris and a couple of erstwhile rebels peddling the "no unofficial action" line both during and after the strike; (2) CP co-operation with such a Labour Party stalwart as Hogarth might be the means of attaining the Golden Fleece alias affiliation to the Labour Party.

Hogarth and his allies went flat-out to eliminate all unofficial activity in the time remaining before the "strike". Apart from Norris, of course; he was a "good" seaman, made so by his Party-line.

Support for the sell-out

A campaign for unity of the NUS membership behind the Executive in the forthcoming "grave struggle" was waged by the NUS officials. This was pretty successful as the Strike-deadline drew near. Seamen began to feel that if Hogarth ft Co. had decided to "go straight" and take a militant stand, the membership should do its share by "closing the ranks". They took part in the local Strike Committees (without autonomy in any strategic action, all run from NUS HQ), and so on, co-operating to the fullest degree in what they felt was a history-making action by a regenerated National Union of Seamen.

Recalcitrants were isolated as much as possible. The Bristol Channel Seafarers' Liaison Committee was regarded as dangerous, owing to the stir caused by the January BC Seafarer and the accompanying leaflet. All the BC Committee men were married bar one, and the married men were shipped out aboard jobs that would not see the UK for a few months. The other bloke, the Chairman, could not be shipped so easily, as he was officially blacklisted. No stone was left unturned however and he was finally got rid of by denying him a roof over his head in the Welsh ports. He was barred from Merchant Navy Hotels, Sailors' Homes, etc., and pressure was used to get him out of private lodgings.

By April all effective unofficial rank-and-file activity had ended.

The rank-and-file seamen were now at the mercy of the "Unholy Alliance". The NUS Executive would calmly proceed to call the members out in a strike the effect of which would be to hurt the membership much more than it would hurt the shipowners. When the time came for a strategic sellout, "good" seamen such as Norris would help to sow disunity amongst the rank and file by calling for unity ... in support of the official sellout.

"Brothers, any unofficial action now will only cause disunity- we came out together and we'll go back together." This would help to defeat effective rank and file action for carrying on with the strike and any other action against the interests of the Unholy Alliance, that is against the sellout.

A deadly impression

On the face of it, the Unholy Alliance got a win. The sellout managed to get through OK. A large part of the credit for this must go to Norris, who was worth his weight in gold to the

NUS hierarchy at the time. He called on the lads to go back "as our Union has agreed" and himself led a return to work at the Royal Docks in London behind the NUS banner. Only a score of men out of the 2,000 on strike in the Royal Group were docile enough to accompany Norris on the "march". However bewilderment and disheartenment among seamen generally stopped effective resistance to the sellout in its tracks.

Hogarth had won ... or had he? It seemed that militants could no longer point to the NUS and its leaders as spineless, after an official strike of seven weeks' duration. As the strikers had suffered heavily from the financial point of view, any support for rank-and-file action would not be effective for some time to come. Furthermore, the NUS had been reinforced in its position as the official seamen's organisation as far as the Labour Movement was concerned, meaning that the struggle for another union would be seriously weakened.

But if Hogarth thinks along those lines, he is well out. Seamen are more vulnerable to gangster-unionism than shore-workers, owing to their isolation from society aboard ship for most of their career; but they are far from dumb. The developments during the strike made a deadly impression upon them, and their attitude underwent a complete change from what it had been at the strike's onset. I was in London when the strike commenced on May 16. I went to the Green's Home Branch of the NUS in East India Dock Road to report for strike-duty. As I reached the head of the queue I was staggered to see a pile of Morning Stars on the counter, with Gallagher the local NUS official handing out copies of the paper to all and sundry with a beaming smile. The effect was the same as if it were President Johnson giving them out-I could hardly believe my eyes. A strange alliance indeed, I thought.

Owing to shipowner-victimisation, I'd had six weeks' work in a UK ship in the previous year, and altogether had been unemployed for eight months. The NUS dues are four bob a week, and I'd been unable to keep up to date with my dues. I learnt that this meant that I could not only not register for strike duty (and strike pay), but where I was concerned it meant that I could not even help in any way. While that strike was on I would not even be allowed to sweep the office out.

I sent a registered letter to Hogarth asking to be let take part in the dispute in some way or other, but got no reply-a good job I made a carbon-copy of the letter, I think.

After the strike had lasted a week, it appeared that we were home and hosed for winning our demands. Seamen's and port-workers' unions all over the world told us that if we needed solidarity-action from them at any time all we had to do was ask. The International Transport Workers' Federation itself sent us a letter to that effect.

Hogarth was speaking at seamen's meetings all over the country. Talk about aggressive militancy! He was willing to fight the shipowners and the Government together if need be to win our demands, he said-would all those willing to back him up raise their right hand?-No Compromise!-Give me Liberty or give me Death!-What time's the last race? . . . Elliott of the Australian Seamen's union could hardly have spoken more militantly. The difference is that Elliott means what he says; he backs his words with deeds.

Still and all, the consensus of seamen's opinions at that time was: "Hogarth's doing a great job!" . . . I said so myself. Not being a genius, I was kidded like the rest into thinking that Hogarth had turned over a new leaf.

As for Norris, it was a toss-up who was more highly regarded by seamen then. Norris is a good public speaker and proved a match for TV interviewers when it came to the seamen's case. We had an excellent case of course and Norris made the most of it. Neither he nor any other national speaker, however, had much to say about the Merchant Shipping Act-a bigger bugbear and the cause of more trouble than the rest of our grievances combined. We seamen

all felt on top of the world, the way things were looking on D-Day plus seven. And every one of us had sunk our past grievances. We backed Hogarth (and Norris) one-hundred-per-cent.

Waterfront solidarity

Then came the news of large-scale solidarity action by port-workers on Merseyside. This was what we had been waiting to hear. Waterfront solidarity in a dispute is always complete in Australian ports. We seamen knew of its tremendous power for victory in a dispute.

The Merseyside docks stilled; the Scouse portworkers showed they were willing to help their seagoing brothers in the most effective way.

A strikers' delegation from the Merseyside Portworkers Committee was sent up to London to ask the London dockers and stevedores to back the seamen in the same way as the Scouses were doing. If the London boys had followed the Liverpool lead, that strike would have been much shorter. Ford Geddes would have dropped his recalcitrant act a bit lively and come to terms fast. The strike would then be hurting the bosses more each day than the whole of the previous strike-period.

The Scouses put their case to the men at the Connaught Road "pitch" at the Royal Docks during the lunch-hour period. Jack Dash chaired the meeting, for the London Portworkers Committee. I have met Jackie Dash several times; the first time was in 1960. I was chairman of the London Seamen's Strike Committee (July strike). I liked Jack and the rest of the Portworkers' Committee, of which my brother Wally was once a member.

To me, Dash and Solidarity were synonymous. Like his predecessors Dickie Barrett, Bert Aylward, Ted Dickens, Timothy Marney and others, Dash epitomised the dockers' traditional motto, "Don't work a 'black' ship!"

After the Merseyside men's meeting that day, Dash was wiped out as a genuine militant in my eyes. Not my eyes only. He addressed the assembled dockers after the Liverpool men. This is the guts of his statement: ,

"Strike-action by any portworkers at this present time is unnecessary. The seamen are doing very well as they are-if they' wanted help they'd say so. Strike-action by us is not necessary, and it's also foolish. All we'd be doing is losing our wages for nothing. If you'll just wait, another week's or eight days' time will see the Port blocked with ships and you won't be able to work anyway but you'll be copping your fall-back money-coming out now you'd be drawing nothing!"

Now that seemed reasonable enough and the upshot was that the Liverpool docks lads did not receive any support from the London men. I reckon that by refusing to ask the London men to come out that day, Dash put paid to the chances of seamen getting a favourable settlement of their demands.

"A week's time and the Port will be blocked.. !" A whole month went by, and the Port was still working pretty effectively. NUS ships were moved from cargo berths, after the dockers had finished them to lay-by berths by unregistered men, riggers from the casual rigging firms. If Hogarth had said, "These are NUS ships-you're doing seamen's work-you're scabbing!" he would have done a lot of good regarding putting the squeeze on the bosses. We regarded Hogarth's attitude to ship-shifting by riggers as being too soft-"If he isn't careful we might lose this strike!"

The lack of any signs of a victorious end to the strike got the boys losing their temper. "We need help from the unions outside the UK. If the ships are being kept outside the UK, ask 'em to black all British ships. They told us earlier, all we had to do was ask!"

International appeal

And Hogarth heeded the voice of the membership, and called for solidarity action from all those longshoremen's and seamen's unions which had pledged their aid. Know what we got from all of them (bar the Finnish Seamen's Union, bless their ol' cotton socks)?

Procrastinatory measures, excuses; even a few quid here and there . . . but no action to black NUS vessels as we had asked. The Aussies would have blacked them but they were not asked to do so. "If Hogarth wants us to black 'em we'll do just that, but the bloody Pommy bastard asked everybody except the Australian Wharfies."

The last step by Hogarth before he sold out was an appeal for help to the TUC-what a hope! The TUC put the kibosh on effective help from individual unions by advising them that the TUC did not think that the seamen's case was deserving of help from other unions. This meant that the TGWU- could safely refuse to approve strike action by its portworker-membership, i.e. the vast majority of portworkers.

Now, if ever, was the time for Jack Dash to give a militant lead to the London portworkers, and thus help out with unofficial action. Dash told his fellow portworkers: Hogarth wants NUS ships blacked. Now, if you're allocated to an NUS ship, go to the ship . . . BUT DON'T START WORK!" (That sounded militant!) "Don't start work, get in touch with your Branch!"

Nobody knew better than Dash that every TGWU Docks Group Branch official would tell the dockers, "Our union is not taking action in support of the NUS, that's TUC policy, Brother, so I must instruct you to carry on working the ship!"

So Dash's advice to portworkers was, in effect, the same as the TGWU and TUC advice: "To hell with helping the seamen. Keep working."

The phoney strike

I would give 6-to-5 that Jackie Dash will not be chairman of the London Portworkers' Liaison Committee for much longer. Portworkers are extremely quick to tumble when a militant has started to become un-militant. They knew that whenever Dash wanted them out he would say to them "I want you out." By saying get in touch with the Branch, Dash showed he didn't want them to come out for the seamen-"And if he could pull a stroke like that on the seamen, what about us in the future? We'll have to watch you, Dashie boy." My father and my five brothers were dockers. Their reaction to Dash's advice would be as above. "What about us in the future?"

The last and most ignoble of all the ignoble acts perpetrated in the phoney strike was the sudden sellout using the patriotic gimmick, "We're putting the country's interests before our own, otherwise the strike could seriously damage the future welfare of Britain's economy." Government and other statistics show that the only things seriously damaged by the strike were the seamen's interests.

Hogarth sold us out in 1965 from a 44-hour week to 56 hours. He sold us again in 1966: a seven-week strike for a 48-hour sellout, four hours more than we had worked up to March 1965. Hogarth is now back to normal in seamen's eyes. Once again, he's reckoned to be lower than a submarine's shithouse.

Norris has been a good militant seaman, for example in the 1965 dispute. He could be proud of the lead he gave to the boys then. Norris has nothing to feel proud of about the 1966 strike. He collaborated with Hogarth and helped to bring about the cynically brazen sellout of July. The worst of it is, he means well-he'd do the same thing tomorrow if Gollan, Miller Eastwood and the rest of those sailors and firemen on the fourth floor at 75 Farringdon Road told him to. In other words, he's a mug.

1894 SLAVE ACT SHACKLES SEAMEN

You may be interested in reading something about the Merchant Shipping Act as it affects seamen in general-that is, all hands, from the Old Man to first trip deck-boy.

A merchant seaman joins a ship by signing her Articles. These are Articles of Agreement between the Master and the crew, and are governed by the Merchant Shipping Act. A copy of an "Extract from the Agreement" is put up aboard all merchant ships where it is "readily accessible to the crew". I have consulted such an Extract aboard quite a few ships, and most of the points I mention here are part of the various Extracts, Home Trade, Foreign-Going, Running Agreement, and so on.

A seaman on deep-sea (Foreign-Going) articles is not entitled to receive his wages or any part thereof from the time he joins the ship until the voyage is over and he has signed off the ship's articles. He has no legal right to shore-leave, either. Both cash and liberty abroad are subject to the Master's discretion. If the skipper wants to, he can deny any and all of his crew pay or shore-leave for the duration of an entire voyage, even if the ship stays out for a twelvemonth or more.

"CASH AND LIBERTY ABROAD TO BE AT THE MASTER'S DISCRETION". This clause is part of the "Extract".

ILLEGAL TO STRIKE

When a skipper wants to give a seaman a bad discharge at the end of a voyage, he does so by having the words "DECLINE TO REPORT" stamped in the space in the discharge for Conduct. DECLINE TO REPORT is a bad discharge in the eyes of the skipper, the unlucky chap getting the "DR", and the Shipping Office Superintendent who authorises his getting it. Legally, however, DECLINE TO REPORT is not a bad discharge but merely means what it says: the Master declines to report on the seaman's conduct. Skippers with a grudge against the crew-member can therefore spoil a good record when the man has behaved excellently throughout the trip ... I should know-I got a "DR" for nothing once, in 1944.

A seaman is not allowed to complain. If he does so, whether as an individual or speaking for his mates as well, he can be, and only too often is labelled "AGITATOR"!! If men go to the master in a group to voice a grievance big or small, they can be as orderly as they wish but their action can be construed as mutiny under the Act, and believe me there are skippers still extant who would use that construction to feed their ego or something. Such types are dying out but are not all dead by a long chalk. Under the Merchant Shipping Act, a seaman on articles cannot strike. Striking while on articles in an overseas port is mutiny, and while it is not quite as wicked to withdraw one's labour in Great Britain, it is still illegal, as witness the test-case of the "CASTILIAN's" crew in 1960. They all got a month's imprisonment for striking. It was rumoured that these men were jailed as a deterrent to would-be strikers. In actuality, the "CASTILIAN" case roused more seamen than anything else could have done, and it roused the Labour Movement into action on the seamen's behalf into the bargain.

During a seamen's strike, a seaman speaking at the strike-meeting ashore can be silenced and if necessary jailed under the Act, even when he is not on ship's articles. On application to the High Courts of Justice by shipowners or their representatives, an injunction informs the seaman in question that he must cease from speaking at strike-meetings and from all other activities designed to further the strike, otherwise he is liable to go to prison for contempt of court. A number of us were unable to address our fellow seamen because of injunctions received during the July strike of 1960. These injunctions were still valid in the second seamen's strike that year, August-September, 1960.

It was a July injunction which sent the strike chairman Paddy Neary to Brixton Jail for contempt of court just after the second strike began. Those of us with injunctions against

them all got ready to join Paddy. Fortunately for us the Neary jailing awoke a storm of national protest, and the authorities stopped at jailing Paddy. I should just like to make a point as a gentle reminder, that despite being merchant seamen, we are British after all-or are we? - so why should a seaman who strikes be liable to trial and imprisonment? Striking is legal here. This is a free country -for everyone bar us seamen.

"CREW TO WORK CARGO BUNKERS AND/OR BALLAST WHEN AND WHERE REQUIRED"-This clause is seen in the "Extract".

By means of this clause British seamen have been forced to act as strikebreakers for a foreign employer of labour in a foreign port. Many seamen of course have refused to do such work, and have suffered under the laws of Britain for "refusing to obey the lawful command of the Master". While this clause is not used these days to my knowledge, nevertheless it is still in the articles.

A seaman who misses his ship abroad is not only liable to forfeiture of wages for the entire time he served aboard the ship, he can get jailed into the bargain. Some Merchant Navy Pool Offices have the walls decorated with posters giving such news items as: "AT SOANDSO POLICE COURT RECENTLY A SEAMAN WHO HAD DESERTED HIS SHIP IN AUSTRALIA WAS IMPRISONED FOR THREE MONTHS: HE FORFEITED HIS WAGES FROM THE SHIP HE LEFT ALSO FROM THE SHIP IN WHICH HE RETURNED TO THE UNITED KINGDOM" . . . AMEN!! . . . Serve the rotten swine right for committing sacrilege against the Holy Shipowner . . .

Of course, the above-mentioned seaman does not get away with it as lightly as that-oh no! He usually suffers the loss of his livelihood by removal, either temporary or permanent, from the Register of Seamen of the Merchant Navy Pool. This is an unofficial organisation but controls 99% of British shipping nevertheless.

"DISCIPLINE"

One corner of the "Extract from the Agreement" is devoted to "PROVISIONS FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF DISCIPLINE". Beneath the heading are listed various offences and misdemeanours for which seamen can incur fines of varying amounts plus the loss of from a half-day's pay upwards. Repetitions of an offence are punished on the doubling-up principle regarding fines, etc. The fining system contains the qualifying clause "IF NOT OTHERWISE DEALT WITH ACCORDING TO LAW". That allows the skipper to have the offender dealt with by a court of law. . . . Better for the seaman, surely, you may think. A British court and British justice after all-yes, but for seamen it is justice subject to the Merchant Shipping Act, that is to say, once a man is convicted in a court of law of a shipboard offence committed while on articles, a prison-sentence is mandatory: the Court is not allowed to let first-offenders off or fine them: they must be sent to prison.

Here are some of the offences covered by the "PROVISIONS", etc.:

1. Refusing to obey a lawful command
2. Using insubordinate, etc. language to an officer
3. Striking or threatening an officer
4. Bringing alcohol on board
5. Using bad language
6. Drunkenness.

Obviously there is some sense attached to most of these "offences" being designated as such. Merchant seamen are responsible people, if they were not they wouldn't be doing the job they

do. A ship at sea can have only one boss, not a dozen, and to that end the first-named three offences are more or less in order. The last three are not. A seaman in port with a day off who brings back a sample of the local tippie to share with mates or even to take home can lose a couple of pounds of hard-earned wages for bringing alcohol on board. Protesting to the wrong type of master can bring a few more offences-say, drunkenness (if the Old Man says you, were drunk you were drunk), using bad language, using insubordinate language and so on. Sots are very much in the minority at sea today, just as they are ashore, let me add.

The main fault with all these offences is that their phrasing enables them to be used for "framing" purposes, and they have been so used times without number. GPO cable-ship crews do not come under the Merchant Shipping Act and do not sign articles. The cable-ship skippers and crews do a very good job without one single offence or disciplinary measure being in use. They don't need the Merchant Shipping Act aboard their ships and we don't need it aboard ours, either.

The points I have mentioned here are just a fraction of the grim paraphernalia of clauses which hold seamen in bondage to the master and through him to the shipowners. The Merchant Shipping Act came into being 72 years ago: Queen Victoria was on the throne and my old man was 14 years of age. Even in 1894, merchant seamen were much worse off than anyone else, due to the Merchant Shipping Act. So don't get the idea that we are being a bit hasty when we demand the abolition of the Merchant Shipping Act (1894) in toto.

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N.B. The one humorous note about the Merchant Shipping Act is the seamen's comment on the power conferred in the Master by the Act: "The only thing a skipper can't do to a bloke is put him in the family-way . . . and he'd do that if he could!"

Photo from: <http://petty.me.uk/wordpress/?p=375>