

# THE BLSP DISPUTE

## I. INTRODUCTION

We shall deal in some detail with the British Light Steel Pressings dispute because it has raised many fundamental questions. Basic issues of a real socialist character were more clearly embedded in this dispute than they are in all the jargon and slogans of the so-called 'left' of today.

Two worlds and two ethics were here opposed. On one side the philosophy of systematic overtime, of mass sackings, of ruthless exploitation and of the ever greater subjection of men to machines. Men are regarded as mere servants, capable only of obeying instructions, accepting what the boss hands out and saying nowt. This is the world of capitalist exploitation where boss and trade union bureaucrat stand hand in hand.

On the other hand, the world of sharing work and of sharing earnings, of solidarity and of the placing of human values above those of production. In this second world lie the real seeds of socialism.

Our attitude to the trade union bureaucracy, our views on their relation to the factory orga-

nisation, are quite clear. We don't think it is much good calling for strikes to be made official if this places policy control in the hands of men whose interests are not those of the workers. We think the determination and application of industrial policy should be in the hands of those who have to apply it - and have to carry the can - that is the men on the shop floor.

We are for keeping the trade union bosses out of the factories. Let them stay where they belong - in their offices - or possibly cleaning the streets (road sweepers would work with them).

We think it foolish to build up false hopes that victory can be achieved by declaring disputes official, through procedure or through the Rule Book or Corruption of the Union. The BLSP showed this very clearly. The strength was in their unity and militancy, and in the solidarity class consciousness of workers' stewards in other factories and jobs.

The various enemies of freedom each scrabbled to plant a knife in the back of the BLSP men: the employers with their attempted stockpile to be followed by sackings, the trade union leaders with their threats of expulsion and their back stairs deals, the yellow press - both Tory and Labour - with its distortions, its half-truths and its lies, IRIS (American financed and supported by the trade union bureaucrats) with its lying, witch-hunting press releases. These are our enemies.

On the 'left': confusion and self-interest, each sect mouthing slogans of support and trying to get what it could out of the dispute. The Communist Party said: 'Our officials are better than those in office. Vote for us next time. Long live Brother Berridge!'. The Trotskyites said: 'Nationalise the car industry!'. Tribune said: 'Declare the strike official!'. None of these slogans really meant anything. These demands, even if achieved, would have solved nothing. What counts is the consciousness of the men in struggle. And this is the one thing which had reached an extraordinarily high level at BLSP - where equal wages for skilled and semi-skilled had been achieved. This had greater socialist content than the entire programme of the sectarians. That the strike was defeated was due primarily to the fact that this consciousness had not reached such heights elsewhere. It is the aim of this pamphlet to assist in this process by drawing all the lessons of the dispute.

## 2. THE ROOTES GROUP

The Rootes Group is one of the smaller combines in the British car industry. It produces Humber,

Hillman, Sunbeam and Singer cars and Commer commercial vehicles. The production of the group rose from 117,135 vehicles in 1957 to 160,000 in 1958, a growth of 36.5 per cent. This was a larger percentage increase than any other major British car producer. During the same period, profits rose from £3.6 to £5.5 millions. It is virtually a family business. Five out of eight directors are members of the Rootes family.

The Group directly employs about 11,000 workers. It also subcontracts much of its work to other firms employing several thousand other workers (such as Pressed Steel Bristol Siddeley Engines and other firms). The Group has factories at Luton, Dunstable, Canterbury and Maidstone. It owns Thrupp and Maberly's at Cricklewood. The two largest factories of the group are the Coventry factory and British Light Steel Pressings itself.

These factories were linked by a strong Shop Stewards Combine Committee. The Combine met monthly or more often if required. It consisted of delegates from the various factories. Its secretary was Tom Dwyer. There were very wide differences in the level of militancy in the various factories, for example Luton and Dunstable (where Commer lorries are assembled) had a far less militant record than BLSP or Thrupp and Maberly's.

One of the high points of the Combine Committee's record was its able and efficient organisation of the successful two week long national Rootes strike in October 1960 which paralysed the whole group. It was at the Combine Committee that the BLSP stewards uncovered the falsified schedules. By comparing the projected

output of completed vehicles in the other factories (from figures given them by the stewards from the other plants) with the projected output at Acton, a discrepancy of almost 100 per cent. was discovered.

### 3. BLSP: THE MEN

The British Light Steel Pressings factory at Warple Way, Acton, employed just over a thousand men. It produces Humber Hawk and Super Snipe bodies, Commer cabs and suspension units for the rest of the Rootes Group.

The men at BLSP had one of the tightest and most conscious shops in the London area. This is illustrated by their record, both in relation to the number of their disputes and to the issues on which these disputes centred. The men at BLSP also have a record second to none in support of other workers in struggle. During the Smith's strike in June-July 1961, they levied themselves 10s. a week each for the Smith's strike fund. They have levied themselves in support of disputes on many other occasions.

It is worth recalling some of the issues on which they have fought. In November 1958, the men threatened strike action if the firm (who were advertising for sheet metal workers) didn't employ Joe Parker, a militant who had been blacklisted by the employers in the Acton area. They forced the management to give way. Joe Parker was taken on at BLSP. (For more information, see 'Solidarity' No.8, 'The Renault Story').

In October 1959, there was a six-day strike against the arbitrary

action of the firm in moving from night work to days and putting him in another gang without consultation, thereby reducing the work earnings of the other 19 in the gang. This was the so-called 'honeymoon' strike.

In August 1960, the men struck in protest against a 10% earnings due to flood damage in the plant.

In October 1960, BLSP played a leading role in the 4 weeks long Rootes strike, in support of the men at Thrupp and Berly's, who were striking against a large scale redundancy. The dispute was similar to the recent dispute. The management had been to build up a stockpile. After a long dispute the men were able to establish the principle of work sharing in the Rootes' Group.

According to figures given by the management there were 82 'stoppages' in the first 8 months of 1961. These involved 27,000 man-hours of production workers' time, with a consequent loss for hourly-paid workers of 17,000 man-hours. The total loss was 44,000 man-hours. Since the figures given average only 524 man-hours each 'stoppage' it follows that these must have been usually of very short duration. The overwhelming majority of the 'stoppages' were in fact time taken off for mass meetings or time lost during

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\* See 'What Next for Engineers' by Ken Weller. 'Solidarity' pamphlet No. 3.

refusals to start work until the management cleaned up the plant properly. \*

One unnamed trade union leader quoted by the Sunday Times (October 22, 1961) stated 'over lunch last week': 'Every past dispute at Acton has been a victory for the shop stewards. This has made them into tin-pot gods who have been worshipped by workers as the beginning and the end of the unions'.

The consciousness of the Shop Stewards Committee was very high. They had very few illusions about the part played by the trade union officials. When the strike started the Acton Gazette quoted a statement from Arthur Hunt, who said: 'We don't want or expect any interference by officials. We don't want the type of assistance the union officials gave us last time we stopped work over a short time dispute (the national Rootes Group strike of October 1960). On the first day we were ordered back to work without anybody considering why we had come out'.

The Shop Stewards' Committee had 29 members. It is worth making the point that not one of the stewards - press reports notwithstanding - was a member of the Communist Party.

The Communist Party had a small factory branch at BLSP with about 12 or 13 members. They were by no means the most militant section of the strikers. We understand they in fact voted for a return to work early in the course of the dispute. They

presumably were embarrassed by the fact that the local officials of three of the four main unions involved were members of the Communist Party. By virtue of their positions in the union machine, these officials had to instruct the men to go back to work.

## 4. CONDITIONS

The conditions at BLSP were amongst the best in the London area. The production workers were formally on piecework. In fact, through rigid control of prices, rates of work, and by setting a ceiling to piecework earnings, the men virtually got a fix weekly rate. The piecework limit was 8/9 an hour, for both skilled and semi-skilled men. Added to these piecework earnings was 'clock money' which is the nationally agreed basic rate, which contains a built-in differential. If this differential only came to a few shillings a week. On day work skilled men earned 11/4 an hour and semi-skilled about 11/1. On night work the rate was about 13, an hour. The equalisation of earnings was established several years ago when the men decided that workers had the same social requirements and responsibilities whatever the grade of work they were doing.

The piecework prices were fixed by discussion with the management. Here is an example of the procedure. The management would offer the men 6/10 to fix car doors. The men would offer to fix them for 50 s. The men would not allow the rate fixers to use a stop-watch or other means of timing. They would

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\* Management in large factories often try to economise on cleaners, since they consider them non-productive and therefore expendable.

however allow the rate fixer to watch them fixing the doors. They would of course then strictly work to the firm's specified methods and safety regulations. In the case mentioned the rate fixer gave up in despair after watching the men do the job for three and a half days.

The normal working week is 42 hours. The management were continually trying to squeeze a few extra minutes of production out of the men. They would start the line sooner and sooner after clocking on time. The men would start work at their previous normal time, regardless. After having a number of vehicles reach the end of the line unfinished, the firm began to learn the error of its ways. Unfinished vehicles have to go through the whole line again and this causes chaos with production schedules. The management learnt the hard way that the men were not robots, to be switched on when they wished.

The men would refuse to start work until they were satisfied that the shop and all facilities (such as lavatories, etc.) were properly clean and up to scratch. The gangways in every factory must be clearly demarcated by white lines between which there should be no obstruction. This regulation is constantly being bypassed because of overcrowding, and this is particularly true of car factories. This practice is a very dangerous one. At BLSP the men will refuse to walk around any work going on in the gangway, and will in fact stop work. Fork-lift truck drivers will not start work if there are patches of oil on the gangway.

Another example of the control exercised by the men was in the system of hiring. If a foreman wanted to

employ more labour he would ask to the shop stewards. If they know of a suitable man in need of a job, they would inform him and he would apply. If a suitable man recommended by the stewards was not employed, the men would take action. They did this in the case of Joe Parker, and on a number of other occasions. The significance of this method was that most of the new workers employed had no records as militants.

## 5. THE STRIKE

In August 1961 the Shop Stewards' Committee at BLSP delivered, after checking with the Combine Committee of the Rootes Group, that the management was stockpiling car bodies at a rate of 50 per cent. of production.

At the same time the firm was asking for overtime to be worked to keep up fictitious schedules.

The men remembered what had happened at Thrupp and Malvern in October 1960. The firm had built up a stockpile of overdone units and other parts and had confronted the workers with a large scale redundancy. The BLSP men correctly assumed that sackings were being planned at the Acton factory. Between August 14 and August 28 the stewards met the management on a number of occasions and informed them that in their opinion the management was in the process of stockpiling with a view to creating a redundancy. The stewards pointed out that this was against the agreed policy of work sharing.

The only answer they ever got was: 'We are not prepared to discuss this'. The two-faced attitude of the management on this question of stockpiling is well shown by the facts reported in the box on this page.

On August 30 the stewards called a mass meeting of all production workers. It was unanimously agreed to take the day off as a protest against the management's refusal to discuss. The further proviso was made that if the management still refused to negotiate by Friday, September 1, a further meeting would be called to discuss future action.

Following the management's further refusal to negotiate, the mass meeting on September 1 passed a resolution - with only four votes against - 'to remain on strike until the management declare "no redundancy" and start negotiations on a shorter working week, short time working or work sharing'.

The strike started on September 4. The men decided they would not meet again until a week later.

The Executive Council of the AEU almost immediately instructed the North London Divisional Organ of the AEU (Bro. Reg Birch) by telegram to tell the men to return to work straight away. This telegram was sent out by the Executive Council before it had even received a reply on the stoppage from the London (North) District Committee - their sole 'official' source of information. Similar instructions, from their respective union headquarters were issued to the local officials of the various other unions involved. Under the circumstances the men voted to refuse to listen to officials, at meetings which the men themselves had convened, although of course they had no objection to the officials convening as many meetings of their own members as they liked.

'A Commer executive said production was virtually at a standstill. British Light Steel Pressings supplies cab bodies, petrol tanks, and other components to Commer.

'The rest of the Commer labour force will be retained unless the strike continues for a long period. The Commer executive said production had been maintained up to now because the company began stockpiling cabs and other components before the strike began.'

The Times, September 28, 1961.

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ON THE SAME DAY, REGINALD ROOTES, IN A CIRCULAR TO THE WORKERS, DENIED THE COMPANY HAD BEEN STOCKPILING!

\* See Appendix II for NUVB letter to its local official.

On September 6 the management offered a short time agreement, but only on condition the men first accepted 'a substantial redundancy'. This proposal was immediately rejected by the Strike Committee as contrary to its mandate.

On September 12 Carron, the President of the AEU, informed the Press that he was ordering his members to return to work, and that if they refused they might face expulsion from the union. He made this threat in defiance of the national policy of the AEU, which decided in 1957 that 'all members must oppose redundancy with all the means at their disposal'.

The reaction of the Strike Committee to Carron's threats is well illustrated in the following passage from one of their leaflets:

'... then followed Mr Carron's intervention on the s of the employers, on the 12th September, by giving his membe in dispute an ultimatum to ret to work or face expulsion. At time he had not had a report f the London District Committee. He was obviously following his initiative and siding with the ployers.

'The annual policy Conference of the AEU, in 1957, wene record that "all members must c redundancy with all means at th disposal". Mr. Carron's attitu cannot therefore be reconciled union policy, the more so since ultimatum was conveyed through Press before the District Commi or workers were informed.

'It is argued that the

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The London (North) District Committee of the AEU consists of lay members with a full time secretary. It is dominated by the Communist Party but in general reflects the views of militants. It twice ended the strike and donated £100 towards the strike fund. The Executive Council of the AEU, still stinging from the rebuff to their threat to expel the AEU men on strike, wrote a letter to Arthur Spencer, the District Secretary, instructing him to send them the names and branches of the stewards at BLSP, presumably in order to victimise them. We understand that Brother Spencer replied that since the men at BLSP had been sacked, they consequently had no stewards. In view of this, he could not forward any information about stewards to the E.C., thus hoisting the Executive Council with its own petard!

We understand that the District Committee had, in any case, decided that under no circumstances would they in any way help the Executive Council to victimise the BLSP men.

question could have been settled by procedure. It could indeed if we were prepared to put our members onto the dole. The example was in June, at Pressed Steel, where "procedure" only took five days to make 300 redundant. York and back in five days has not been bettered since the time of Dick Turpin! !. \*

The next major move by the employers was to send a letter to all the strikers telling them that if they did not report for work on September 28 the firm would regard them as no longer in its employ. One of the results was the decision of the London

branch of the National Society of Sheet Metal Workers and Copper-smiths to grant dispute benefit to its members on strike! The local committees of the AEU, of the NUVB and of the NSMM had all passed resolutions supporting the strikers and calling for the dispute to be recognised.

The firm's ultimatum was an attempt to frighten the men back to work. It proved a dismal failure. The Daily Telegraph (September 27, 1961) put matters quite bluntly: 'The group's decision to dismiss the strikers is clearly a gamble.'

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This statement is very telling, particularly when it is remembered that when workers go 'through procedure' it takes eighteen months. And even when procedure is followed, only a minute percentage of cases are settled 'in favour' of the Trade Unions. According to the figures published in the 'AEU Journal', there were 84 references to 'the Central Conference' at York in the six months period from March to August 1961. Only three of these were settled 'in favour' of the Trade Unions.

The ridiculous farce of the 'Provisions for avoiding Disputes' is annually condemned by the National Committee of the AEU and the 'policy-making' bodies of other unions. Nothing ever results. We seem to have an unholy alliance of trade union 'leaders' and employers in defence of the 'Provisions'. For instance in May 1961, while the 'policy-making' bodies were protesting, the 'leaders' of the trade unions were signing an agreement with the employers in the motor industry which stated:

'We have fully and candidly considered the various procedures for handling disputes, and we have satisfied ourselves that they are generally adequate if operated in the right spirit.'

The Economic League - an enthusiastic supporter of the 'York Memo' (See 'Economic League Leaflet, 1961 Series, No. 20) - Mr. Carron and some of the other Trade Union leaders all seem quite united on this issue.



It could not hope to replace 1,000 skilled and semi-skilled men in London quickly, so that its hopes of being able to resume normal working must rest on the majority returning for work.'

The strikers were given less than 24 hours to accept the management's ultimatum. This was done by way of a letter sent to each of them individually, giving formal notice that their employment would cease if they failed to report for work the following day (September 28). In a statement the directors stated, tongue in cheek: 'this action had been taken with the greatest regret but they feel they have no alternative if the proper understanding and relationship between management and labour are to be ensured'!

The reaction of the Strike Committee was immediate: 'The threat will make no difference to our policy. It might help us, for people who have been sitting on the fence might be tempted to side with us, now they can see what is happening'. The employers' move had been carefully timed. Reg Hooper, Chairman of the Strike Committee, said: 'This is the most diabolical trick the management could have pulled... We think this action will strengthen the strike by making the men more adamant in their resolve to stay out.' \* An official statement issued by the Strike Committee commented: 'We deplore the action of the Rootes Group in their attempt to intimidate the workers of British Light Steel Pressings..... We intend to resist this threat to our maximum ability and adhere to our

original mandate of last Friday that our next meeting will be Friday afternoon.

'We think the threat the sack by the Rootes management is a punitive action. It's bound to get the boys' backs up. The management knew full well that were meeting on Friday afternoon and by timing their dismissals Thursday they were trying to intimidate the workers into going

'Even if we wanted to hold a meeting before Friday afternoon, we could not do so because we could not contact all the strikers before then and it would be fair to those we could not in touch with.'

Brother L. Buck, London District Secretary of the National Union of Sheet Metal Workers and Braziers, which had instructed members to ignore the warning 'We don't accept threats sent the post to our members, no matter what the pros and cons of the pite.'

Confronted with the employers' ultimatum and despite militant stand of the men, the reaction of the 'leaderships' the unions was to instruct 'the members to go back, cap in hand and apply individually for the jobs back!

On the day the firm's ultimatum ran out the men picked the gates en masse. Only four disabled workers were allowed go to work. They were in a special position due to the regulations governing the employment of disabled persons. One of the men,

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\* Evening News, September 27, 1961

Ben Drousiotis, a middle-aged blind man, told the strikers: 'I want to stay out on strike with all of you, but if I lose my job, I will lose all my belongings too'. Reg Hooper, Chairman of the Strike Committee, took him by the arm and led him into the factory. 'You are perfectly free to clock in for work', he said. None of those reporting for work were able to start that day. The scabs were immediately sent home.

On September 28, the Strike Committee had proposed a compromise solution to the management, to enable the men to return to work. This involved (1) labour loading to be worked out according to programme requirements;\* (2) hours of work to be worked out on a work sharing basis; (3) the devising of ways and means to avoid sackings. The firm immediately rejected these proposals, stating that only the union 'leaders' were competent to negotiate. The Strike Committee reacted by stating: 'To date the Engineering Employers' Federation has refused discussion with the unions' London officials. They are prepared to wait until some deal is cooked with the national officials. They will wait in vain. The BLSP workers know who are on their side and will not be "sold" on this issue.'

The management's attitude to the question of negotiation with the stewards is worth noting. The letter containing the stewards' "peace plan" was handed in to the Company's headquarters in Piccadilly. Trade Union officials, who had been in touch

with the strikers, thought the peace formula was 'moderate and reasonable'. Yet 'two hours later the Rootes management bluntly announced that it had rejected the offer.'\* The management stated that it would only deal with the union officials and that the stewards were 'not competent to negotiate'. One can well understand their attitude. The stewards genuinely represent the men. They have their confidence. They know their grievances. They are liable to recall at any time. From the management's point of view the union officials are much tamer game and much easier to 'deal with'. As the Daily Telegraph (September 29, 1961) cynically put it: 'With the rejection of the strikers' proposal Union officials will now have an opportunity to regain their influence

As the strike progressed, more and more workers employed at other Rootes Group plants were laid off. The figure eventually reached over 10,000 men. Despite this, the men at the other plants, through the Combine Committee, declared full support for the struggle of the BLSP men.

On October 12, the firm threatened that the men at other plants (Coventry, Luton and Dunstable) who had been laid off on fall-back pay, would be sacked if the strike continued.

On October 13, 1700 men employed at Pressed Steel, at Thea, were given 7 days' notice of dismissal. It has been estimated that Rootes were spending £57,000 per week on fall-back pay and that they had to pay well over £300,000 in fall-back pay alone during the strike.

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\* In practice this means 'no stock-piling'.

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\* Daily Telegraph, September 29, 1961

On October 17, the employers played their trump card. Sir Reginald Rootes, deputy Chairman of the Rootes Group, announced that 8,000 men at the other factories (about 7,000 at Coventry and 1,000 at Luton and Dunstable) would be sacked a week later. He stated that the Group had 'virtually ceased to exist as a productive unit'. The only vehicle still being turned out was the 'Walk-Thru' delivery van, which was mainly being produced by a sub-contractor.

As is usual in such cases, Sir Reginald blamed 'a handful of irresponsible people' who had 'deliberately fomented the strike for political ends'. The stoppage, he said, was 'an indication of the canker in our industrial midst which would have to be removed if Britain was to retain its competitive position'. He stated that 'the avowed aim of the strike leaders is to force the Rootes Group to 'give in' to an assurance of no redundancy. 'I should like to make it quite clear', he concluded, 'that we shall not do so. It is an attempt to frustrate law and order in industry. We certainly did not seek the position we are in, but we do not intend to be coerced by methods bordering on industrial anarchy'. Sir Reginald went on to say that if the stoppage continued, assembly plants in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Argentina, Japan and Ireland would be affected.

On October 18, an official deputation, led by members of the Executive Council of the A.E.U. were permitted to meet Rootes' management ... and came back empty handed. The management was firmly resolved not to re-engage all previously employed labour. Here was surely an opportunity for the union leaders to assist their members in the fight for

their livelihood. Instead, the continued to denounce the strike instructing them to go back to (if the management would have t

On October 20, a massing of the BLSP men resolved to continue the six-week old strike. Joe Patterson, a Humber assembly line worker and a leading member of the strike Committee put the issue quite clearly: 'This is fight... and the emphasis is on fight'.

The management attempted to split the men and to prevent solidarity action developing in the Midlands. It announced that if resumption of work took place at Acton before the dismissal notices expired for men at Coventry, Luton and Dunstable, the notices would be withdrawn. Despite the terrific Press campaign designed to show that the actions of the BLSP men were threatening the livelihood of thousands of Coventry workers, Coventry Shop Stewards said that 'they supported the 1000 Acton workers in refusing to return unless all of them were re-engaged'.

On October 24, the Executive Council of the A.E.U. sent a deputation to ask the Minister of Labour to intervene in the dispute. The Minister refused, stating through Mr. St. John Wilson, Chief Industrial Commissioner, that 'such intervention in an unofficial strike could only result in undermining the authority of the Engineering Industry's long-standing machinery for dealing with disputes'. The Tories seemed quite as keen as the trade union officials to respect 'procedure' which nearly always goes against the interests of the men.

## 6. COVENTRY

A few workers had drifted back during this period. Using them, together with people not normally employed on production, the management had been able to get a few components - mainly suspension units - produced. To these should be added two lorry-loads of suspension units stockpiled at BLSP and four lorry-loads stockpiled at Thrupp and Maberly's before the strike began. These components all had to be got to Coventry.

On October 29, an agreement was reached between the Company and the transport drivers - about 14 men in all - who normally carry these components. The agreement, which was for a full resumption without victimisation or redundancy, was only reached after the firm had taken a group of lorry drivers, by car, to Coventry, where they were talked into scabbing by Mr. Douglas Fairbairn, Coventry District Organiser of the Transport & General Workers Union. On the following day some of the men had had second thoughts about crossing the picket line, but had been talked into it again by Company representatives, in the hallowed precincts of the 'Kings Arms!' The transport drivers did not consult the strike Committee about this decision to resume work.

As a result of this deal the Rootes management were able to announce amid a barrage of Press and Television publicity, that they would re-engage between 1250 and 1750 Coventry workers. This had its effect on morale.

Other events also played a role. At the start of the dispute, the Rootes Combine Shop Stewards' Committee had decided that all work from

Acton would be considered 'black'. As late as October 31, a combined meeting of Rootes Sheet Metal Workers had carried a resolution that 'Members will touch no production work at Coventry until such time as the dispute is resolved with our members at Acton'. This stand had been endorsed by the Executive Committee of the Union. But despite the decision of the Rootes Combine Committee to consider all work from Acton 'black' a joint Shop Stewards meeting of the Stoke, Ryton and Canterbury Street factories at Coventry (also held on October 31) in fact sought to evade the earlier commitment - as will be seen from the resolution published in the box opposite.

While condemning this action of the Coventry stewards, we consider their primary faults were not so much these particular decisions as what they had failed to do during the whole previous period. They had not held a single mass meeting in Coventry since before the 1960 National Engineering Strike! They had even failed to ensure a wide distribution of the leaflets produced by the London men and given to them.

Their decision not to 'black' the work from Acton was due in the most part, not to a lack of militancy on their own part, but to the fact that they felt that they could not carry the men with them in a decision to 'black' the work. This would have

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\* As the Strike Committee's 'Report on the Dispute' states: 'Components produced by blackleg labour force most of whom had never been employed on the job before and a proportion of this work, prior to the dispute, performed by members of the NUSMW were in official dispute'.

1st November, 1961.

ROOTES GROUP OF COMPANIES, COVENTRY.

Joint Shop Stewards Meeting, Stoke, Ryton  
and Canterbury Street.

Held on Tuesday, 31st October 1961, at 10.30 am.

It was resolved:

'That at this stage, the work received from Acton is not considered 'black'. In view of the declaration by the Sheet Metal Workers Union, however, the Executive Councils of the Unions involved should be immediately contacted for a declaration of future policy and a decision as to what work is considered 'black' and should therefore not be handled.'

Carried by an overwhelming majority.

It was also resolved:

'This Joint Shop Stewards Meeting of Stoke, Ryton and Canterbury Street, with representatives from Thrupp and Maberly and British Light Steel Pressings, call upon the Executive Councils of Unions concerned to meet in the immediate future in an attempt, through the Ministry of Labour if necessary, to obtain a full and honourable settlement of this dispute, which is jeopardising the livelihood of thousands of workpeople.

Carried unanimously.

It was further resolved that a Mass meeting of Humber, Stoke, Ryton and Canterbury Street should be held on Stoke Green, Binley Road, at 10.00 am. on Friday, 3rd November, where the above resolutions would be submitted for approval.

meant virtual sympathetic strike action.

This illustrates a principle which is of ultimate importance. Militancy on the part of stewards is not enough. There must always be regular report back meetings. The men involved in each decision must themselves decide on the main issues. This has a dual function: (1) it welds the men and stewards together, in action (2) it results in a collective heightening of consciousness on the part of both men and stewards.

The Coventry stewards had allowed themselves to become relatively isolated from the men. This was partly due to the lack of such report back meetings and partly to other factors. The stewards were therefore powerless.

## 7. LAST FEW WEEKS

What happened in the last few weeks of the dispute is best summarised in the following extract from the Strike Committee's 'Report on the Dispute':

'During the following weeks the workers at BLSP waged what has been described by the National Press as the toughest industrial strike in the motor industry, and was conducted in the full glare of a hostile press, the radio and television lending their full weight to the half-truths and misrepresentations concerning the strike.

'With every day that passed, our members in dispute came under growing pressure.

'The belligerent attitude of the A.E.U. Executive Council threatening disciplinary action, misrepresentation in the press, on radio and T.V., teams of foremen daily visiting workers in their homes, using all manner of intimidation and cajolery, in a most depicable way, were all used in the attempt to drive us back to work.

'After 13 weeks, with members facing serious financial problems, the Strike Committee felt compelled to accept and recommend the harsh conditions imposed by Rootes management.

'At the final mass meeting at the Ealing Town Hall on Nov. 2 with a substantial minority voting against, the members regretfully accepted the strike committee's recommendation.' (For terms of settlement, see Appendix I )

## 8. STRIKE ORGANISATION

The Strike Committee consisted of the 29 stewards plus a number of co-opted members. These were mostly ex-stewards, 'old war horses', whose experience proved of great value to the strike committee. Their presence brought a number of members of the Strike Committee up to about 40. The Strike Committee had a sort of sub-committee of five men which took the hourly decisions. All major issues were referred to the Strike Committee or to a mass meeting of the men.

The picketing started on a strict rota system. As the strike shook itself down, it was modified so that those living near the plant covered the gates in the morning and those living further away covered them in the afternoon. A number of men were excused altogether. Picketing wasn't a real problem since of over 1,000 employed only 21 inspectors, about 10 women and about 4 disabled men (the latter with full permission of the strike committee) crossed the picket line.

The Acton Labour Exchange started sending applicants for jobs immediately after the 'dismissals' had been announced. A large number of these were West Indian and Polish workers. The Strike Committee's reaction was to delegate Jim White, a Jamaican shop steward (NSMM) and a couple of Polish strikers to approach them and to convince them not to take employment. In this, they were very successful. They even picketed the Labour Exchange!

A good example of the realistic attitude of the Strike Committee was the way it dealt with the maintenance men and electricians. These remained at work on the specific instructions of the Strike Committee. After the firm had 'sacked' the men in dispute, the maintenance men and electricians came out in support but were again asked to return to work by the Strike Committee. The view of the Committee was that since the maintenance men were contributing heavily to the strike fund, and since the Strike Committee was getting regular reports on developments within the factory, these men might as well stay on at work. The electricians also ensured that there were no unqualified people working machines.

For example when the management attempted to get production started in one section by using inspectors as machine operators, the fuse to the machines involved were immediately pulled. This brought production to a stop.

The Strike Committee organized a number of meetings to discuss the strikers' case to other engineers. It also organized a number of other demonstrations, for example at Devonshire House, Piccadilly; (headquarters of the Rootes Group) on September 13. There was also a large demonstration at the BLSI works and a meeting at Acton Town Hall on October 6. The Motor Works was also picketed.

## 9. RANK AND FILE SUPPORT

The attitude of the trade union bosses aroused great feeling amongst workers. The Shop Stewards Committee of E.N.V.'s, a large engineering factory in North London, called for a demonstration on October 10th to protest at the role of the A.E.U. Executive and of other Union leaders. The idea was to march to the Headquarters of the A.E.U. in Peckham Road. About 100 men turned up. Delegates had been elected by the Shop Stewards Committees of about 25 factories. Among the plants represented were: Ford (3 plants), Rotax, Smith's MA.1 MA.2, C.A.V.'s, Standard Telephones (New Southgate), Associated Automation, and a number of other firms.

On arrival at the A.E.U. offices the marchers were met by a line of policemen and locked doors. They tried to get 'their' leaders to receive a deputation, without result... or even answer. They then decided to sit on the office steps until received. After about three-quarters of an hour of sitting, singing, listening to speakers and shouting abuse at the bureaucrats inside, some of the men became restless and started infiltrating around the sides of the building. A group of four men found their way into the offices through a luxurious £100,000 extension which was in the process of construction. They gave those barricaded inside the fright of their lives. At the same time, in response to a phone call from the police who expected trouble, the Assistant General Secretary Ernie Roberts was sent out to the 'rabble' to receive their resolutions. After hearing the usual non-committal waffle from him, a unanimous resolution of 'No Confidence in the Executive' was passed and the meeting broke up. Militants sensed that the demonstration had been allowed to develop along the line of political 'pressure manoeuvres' rather than as an effective protest. They felt it should have been conducted more aggressively.

Support for the strike among rank-and-file workers was widespread. A committee called 'The Acton, Park Royal, Willesden and Hendon Shop Stewards Campaign Committee' was formed to support the BLSP men. This Committee, which helped to raise funds, at first held weekly report back meetings on the course of the dispute. Its secretary was G. Mitchell, Chairman of the Shop Stewards Committee at E.N.V.'s. The Committee

unfortunately proved incapable of developing really effective support. It soon succumbed to a factional dispute between those who wanted to talk much and do nothing and others who correctly wanted to do something but without relating it to the real militancy - or lack of it - in their own factory.

The Shell tanker drivers 'blacked' all fuel oil for the Warp Way plant. The plant was also 'blacked' by the drivers of the British Oxygen Company who refused to deliver liquid oxygen. Attempts by the management to 'borrow' liquid oxygen from other factories were investigated by B.O.C. shop stewards.

Over £20,000 were donated towards the strike fund by factories and jobs. Large donations came from the Kilbride factory of Rolls Royce (which donated £154), from Park Royal Vehicles (£100 a week), from Strachan's (where the men donated 8s. a week each, in spite of being on short-time working, on a three day week) and from Mickleover (who donated £40 a week). Ford's of Dagenham gave donations totalling several hundred pounds.

The donations from the big car factories at Coventry were relatively small. This was due mainly to a faulty organisation by the Coventry stewards (who at the end of the strike still had many of the 30,000 appeal leaflets given to them at the beginning of the dispute locked over).

The Strike Committee preferred raising funds by means of levies, even of a few coppers, than by donations from central factories.



funds. They felt, quite correctly in our view, that levies kept the issues of the strike and its continuation constantly before the eyes of the rank and file.

After the strike ended a victimisation fund was set up which enabled payments totalling over £60 to be made to each of those victimised and out of work.

## 10. EMPLOYERS AND UNION OFFICIALS

The attitude of the Rootes management illustrates the tougher line employers are now adopting in preparation for British entry into the Common Market.

The tactics adopted at BLSP were particularly underhand and vicious. They asked the men to work overtime in order to complete production schedules, which schedules were in fact aimed at creating a stockpile. They planned to declare a redundancy of 300 men and yet to keep production going during the inevitable subsequent dispute. When this diabolical scheme was discovered, due to the vigilance of the Combine Committee, the management refused to discuss the question of redundancy with the stewards, though they themselves had set precedents by doing so in the past.

When the stoppage started the Company refused even to discuss compromise proposals, except with the 'leaders' of the unions, men who had already shown their complete hostility to 'their own' members in dispute. They had done this in a dis-

pute in defence of 'official' union policy! The employers know full well that the union officials have already proved their inability and disinclination to implement union policy. This had been shown by a long line of recent unopposed settlements in the motor industry.

This struggle was not against the management at Rootes. The colossal cost did not fall on them alone. It is worth recalling in this respect a little known aspect of the work of the Engineering and Allied Employers National Federation. Their pamphlet 'Looking at Industrial Relations' published a couple of years ago, put it quite clearly: 'Federated firms whose work people take strike action, or who adopt "go slow" tactics, are entitled to claim payment of indemnity in respect of loss sustained through the actions of their workers. The payments made out of an Indemnity Fund to which all federated firms contribute. The basis of contributions and the amount of indemnity payable are in accordance with the rules laid down for the regulation and administration of the Fund'. In fact Rootes lost over £3,000,000 during the course of the dispute.

The employers were obviously prepared to go to considerable lengths to get the BLSP thorn out of the flesh. It is only in this light that we can understand their determination to fight it out to a finish and to smash the shop stewards organisation in the factory.

In this they were ably assisted by most of the union officials whose activities supplemented those of the employers. Both they and management joined hands to 'discipline' workers, who were struggling

against them both. They both felt a need to establish full control over 'their' workers.

The increasing liaison between trade union leaders and management is typified by the joint agreement of May 1961 between the trade unions and the car manufacturers.

In a recent textbook for managers \* Roger Falk, Chairman of the British Export Trade Association, states quite rightly: 'Today the unions have a vested interest in both sustained property and good management. They might even be described as being on the side of management.'

At BLSP, they certainly were!

The vindictiveness of the Executive towards 'their own' members has set a new low for officers in the A.E.U. On several occasions members first heard of the actions of 'their' leaders through disclosures given to industrial reporters of leading national papers.

On October 11, for example, the A.E.U. 'leaders' sent a letter to all Branch secretaries of the Union, condemning the strike, slandering the strikers and threatening to 'review' their membership of the Union, if they did not immediately return to work. Parts of this letter were carefully leaked to the big business press. The Evening Standard carried a report that same evening. The very next day, the whole press rallied magnificently to the side of the trade union officials.

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\* 'The Business of Management', p.164, Penguin Books, 1961.

To put things in correct perspective we are reproducing the whole of this letter - as Appendix III - and also a later letter from the A.E.U. Executive (Appendix V) which is noteworthy for its mendacity. It in fact contains more lies per square inch than any politician's election address! We also publish the reply to these letters from the BLSP Strike Committee (Appendix IV).

The leaders of the other unions were not much better. Even the National Union of Sheet Metal Workers - for whom the strike was 'official' - only paid strike benefit after six weeks. According to Bro. Guy, their local official this was because 'they did not wish to embarrass the other unions involved'.

## II. AFTERMATH

About 125 workers were left on the stones after the final return to work. Of the 27 stewards 21 were sacked. The organisation within the factory, except amongst the Sheet Metal Workers, almost ceased to exist.\*

One of the first controls to go was the ceiling on piecework earnings. Differentials were introduced again. This of course meant that it was every man for himself. The rat-race started. Some men were earning up to 14s. or 15s. an hour on piecework. Some metal finishers were getting up to

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\* We understand that an N.U.V.B. shop steward has since been elected.

£33 a week, at a time when some of their fellows were still out of work.

The rat-race on piecework earnings rapidly led to a downwards pressure on piecework prices. One job for example (bottom sections for light cars) which had been worked at a temporary price of 7/6 each was repriced at 4/10. This decision by the management led to a re-awakening of resistance. An overtime ban was introduced by the department affected. Unfortunately, there was no response from other sections.

The firm also put men doing repair work - who had previously been on shop average piecework earnings - onto individual piecework on the individual job. This resulted in a much increased tempo of work.

Another loss was the revoking of E.P.I. (Exceptional Production Interference) payments to people on 'waiting time' due to the firm's negligence. This payment had been of 10d an hour.

## 12. LESSONS

'SOLIDARITY' does not like to devote a large proportion of its space to lengthy analyses and 'lesson drawing'. We prefer to dig up the real facts and present them.

The BLSP strike does however call for some comments as to the lessons to be drawn. Some of these are outlined in the final statement of the Joint Shop Stewards Committee (Appendix VI). But there are one or two additional points.

Faced with an absolute determined employing class, confronted with all the influences which they can wield, it is almost impossible to win a dispute of kind, unless there is the widest coordination, sympathetic action and 'blacking' of the affected. This must draw into action all workers connected with the sector in dispute.

This presupposes a very high level of mass consciousness and mass participation. There is no substitute for this mass consciousness. It cannot be replaced by any self-appointed and 'theoretically correct' leadership or the actions of any political section.

On the other hand, there is an important role for an organisation of militants and socialists attempting to develop such consciousness, to build links between workers, to combat misrepresentation, to disseminate accurate information and to provide facilities to help workers in struggle. Such an organisation must see as its main aim to help workers in dispute to win and not to use them for political ends.

There is an immense amount to be done. If you are interested in helping us in this work, please write to us. We need the help of every worker who is conscious of the needs of his class and is prepared himself to do something about them.

THE END

2032

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ALL FROM THE ABOVE ADDRESS.

- B) As the letter says, on October 18th the management informed the Unions that 150 men would not be re-employed. The talks ended in deadlock. Once again we were proved right. How could we back under these conditions?

With the breakdown in talks on October 18th we expected the Union to declare our action official and pay dispute benefit.

The letter infers that the District Committee did not approve action. This is not true. The minutes of the London North District Committee dated 13.9.61, No. N1872/61 states:

'That this District Committee demands that E.C. endorse this dispute, as we do, in line with National policy of this Union on redundancy'.

The 1959 resolution of the National Committee read:

'This National Committee instructs Executive Council that resolution No. 11 carried at the 1958 National Committee must be immediately operative. It is no comfort to our unemployed members to be told (1) wait till we get a Labour Government; (2) wait till we get agreement in the Confederation. We therefore instruct Executive Council that help and approval must be given to all who by their actions defend the right to work and such action is approved by the District Committee.'

If as the A.E.U. Executive Council letter says there is no redundancy then it must be victimisation which the management is attempting. For A.E.U. Executive Council to keep recommending us to go back on this basis has been absolutely impossible to accept.

The circular speaks of 84 stoppages. We want to make it quite clear that we have no knowledge of them and we should know. Arising from the nature of the production methods in the factory, it has been custom and practice over many years for the management to ask for changes in labour loading and for overtime which have resulted in very brief meetings of sections concerned in order to accommodate the flow of production. There have certainly not been strikes.

We wish to thank the hundreds of branches which have responded so generously to our previous appeals. We urge all branches to send further resolutions to the Executive Council demanding official recognition of our just stand.

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A P P E N D I X V.

(see text p.18)

FROM GENERAL SECRETARY, A.E.U., TO ALL BRANCH SECRETARIES.

3rd November , 1961.

Dear Sir and Brother,

B.L.S.P. LTD., ACTON.

We regret that, in complete violation of the rules of our Union and the Procedure Agreement, our members' irresponsible conduct still continues, creating unemployment to thousands of other members employed in other Motor Car Plants.

Gravely concerned about the hardships our members in these other plants are suffering, Executive Council sought a meeting with the Rootes' Directors. This meeting was held on the 18th October, 1961, at which the Unions' representatives strongly urged the Company to agree to re-employ all applicants on a phased basis; thereafter discuss the future employment position.

After a lengthy discussion the Directors stated that they had reached the end of their patience with the shop stewards, who had continuously brought the workers out on strike on the slightest pretext; 84 such stoppages had taken place during 1961 alone. Sharing the Unions' concern regarding the hardships imposed on other workers, they did state that they were prepared to re-employ all applicants on a phased basis over a seven to ten day period, with the exception of 150 workers whom they could not in the foreseeable future employ in view of the new position brought about by the unconstitutional strike.

On considering this the Executive Council again urged our members to apply for their jobs, but at the same time requested the Minister of Labour to preside over a joint meeting of both parties in an effort to improve on this position.

At a meeting with the Minister's Chief Conciliation Officer it was explained that the Minister could not intervene in either an official or unofficial strike which was in violation of the Procedure Agreement.

Since then some of the workers have applied for their jobs and have been re-employed and a limited resumption of work has taken place in other establishments.

Many branches have drawn Executive Council's attention to the anti-union efforts of some of our misguided members, and others who are

not members, to bolster up this regrettable rebellion against the Union Rules and Constitution.

Material consisting of unfactual and calculated misrepresentation is being circulated to our branches to discredit the Union, particularly Executive Council and the President, Bro. W.J.Carron.

We would again reaffirm that no redundancy whatsoever had been declared and, furthermore, as reported by our Divisional Organiser to District Committee on 13th September, 1961, 'The dispute arises out of fears of threatened redundancy based on the knowledge of our members that their productivity far exceeds the output required in other establishments within the Rootes Group'.

The shop stewards were told on both the 30th and 31st August by the 7th or 8th September the Works Manager would have by then the production schedules and be able to discuss with them the future prospects of employment; despite this our 500 members withdrew their labour on Monday 4th September; the 250 workers employed in the toolroom and maintenance continued to work.

Irrespective to the efforts now being made to differentiate between production and non-production workers, we had, and still have, a situation in which two-thirds of our members went out on unofficial strike without the prior approval of the District Committee, whilst one-third have constantly remained at work.

National level informal discussions with the Employers held on 18th and 21st September, resulted in the following assurances being given by Rootes:

'That there would be no discharges on the grounds of redundancy for one month and that whilst this did not imply that there shall necessarily be discharges at the end of one month, the question of appropriate labour loading and hours of work in relation to production requirements must be faced without delay and discussions with the shop stewards will take place immediately on a resumption of work, before any reduction of the working week or redundancy becomes operative.'

The strikers rejected this and continued to disobey Executive Council instructions and to violate the Procedure Agreement, oblivious to the employment and hardship they were causing to thousands of fellow workers elsewhere.

Events as outlined in circular B.11/61 followed.

Executive Council desire it to be known that from the commencement of the strike they have been fully aware of all the facts. They have used only the Divisional Organiser and District Committee to convey their decisions to our members. Press statements which Bro. Carron has made have been on the instructions of Executive Council who, in the interests of the good name of the Union, can and do decide on such statements on major issues of public concern, as indeed this dispute was. We frequently find this necessary to counteract inaccurate and misleading press statements.

Attempts have also been made by people, not even in our Union, to bully the Executive Council into taking decisions against their better judgment; one such effort was a demonstration and march to General Office. Only 100 people could be mustered for this, and a significant number of these did not work in the B.L.S.P.; many were not even members of our Union.

The members in dispute openly boast that they are pursuing the policy of a combine Shop Stewards' Committee - a body which is not provided for in our constitution, and evidently one which comprises people other than A.E.U. members; it is also claimed that they are pursuing our National Committee policy, but this is not so; reference to our National Committee policy decisions clearly indicates that in the event of threatened redundancy, District Committees, in conjunction with Executive Council, must insist on overtime terminating and thereafter work sharing on the basis of the Guaranteed Week. National Committee also instruct Executive Council to warn employers that measures would be taken by the Union to safeguard our members' right to work.

The precipitate action taken by our shop stewards and members employed in the B.L.S.P. was completely inconsistent with this policy and the Rules of our Union.

From the foregoing, it must be obvious to all that Executive Council have tried to guide and help our membership in the B.L.S.P. in conformity with our responsibilities within Rule, and we are confident that in this we shall receive the support of every loyal member of the Union.

Yours fraternally,

C.W.Hallett,  
General Secretary.

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B.L.S.P. JOINT SHOP STEWARDS COMMITTEE FINAL STATEMENT.

The Acton B.L.S.P. historic dispute ends. The Press has made capital of the end of our dispute. After 13 weeks of strike, recognised by the S.M.W. and the Boilermakers, and opposed by the others, the workers returned to work on terms agreed by the local officials.

The workers went back in good heart, although they did not win what they had struck for, namely the refusal to accept redundancy, and their call for short time working instead of mass sackings. They still feel this principle is worth fighting for, and are sure that other workers will take up the struggle.

Motor workers are not prepared to accept casual employment, which was the rule before the war, because profits are high enough to ensure a stable income for the men who produce the profits. At Acton the pressure of the employers, press, T.V. and certain union leaders who threatened their members with expulsion, did not break the strike. But the economic pressure on strikers with families became too great. Some found other work and some eventually applied to restart.

In this situation the local officials, who had fought so hard and through, and were warmly thanked for their efforts, negotiated terms for a resumption, which the strike committee recommended to the mass meeting. A large minority voted against returning to work on terms which meant the victimisation of certain stewards, but the majority accepted the resolution with a heavy heart.

The firm stated that 150 of the strikers would not be re-engaged and nor would a number of stewards. However the workers who go back will build T.U. organisation, and B.L.S.P. will take its place in future struggles.

We believe that our strike brought home to thousands the need to fight on this key issue of the right to work, and we hope it will stimulate the unions, whose official policy it is, to start fighting for it officially. It will also make firms think twice before they announce mass redundancies. Rootes did not think that an official strike could last so long or remain so solid for 12 weeks.

We are preparing a pamphlet which will bring out the lessons of the struggle, and we believe this will be of great assistance to all. We want to thank the thousands who helped us carry on the strike and a statement of accounts will be sent out as soon as it is ready. In the meantime, we intend to assist the workers who are victimised and a special fund has been set up. These workers must be helped until they find other jobs, and we therefore hope that you will continue your help for a further period.

This has been one round in a long battle. We are confident of eventual victory, and we are sure that our supporters are too.

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