

1970

STANDARD

TRIUMPH

STRIKE

THE FULL FACTS

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THE STANDARD-TRIUMPH STRIKE

— FOREWORD —

From time to time the trade unions employ - at a suitable salary - some historian or other to write 'official' history for them.

With dutiful regard for their employers these historians duly canonise the founding fathers and eulogize the present and former 'leaders'. Today's militants are tactfully ignored. The more presumptuous of these hacks are not even averse to making scathing comments about those who carry on the day to day struggle here and now.

This pamphlet records a piece of real labour history. It tells the story of a seven week 'unofficial' strike by 126 Standard-Triumph workers. This will of course ensure that the pamphlet receives no blessing from on high.

No doubt it will cause resentment in official precincts. Others will recognize what they will decry as 'tactless' truths. Some will whine at its candour, lamenting that it undermines 'unity'.

We consider that the need to tell the truth about the struggle of the Standard workers overrides all these petty and self-interested objections.

It is our conviction that the experiences of the Standard men can help other workers, who can learn from this strike the need always to rely on their own strength and their own beliefs.

Workers may also see that the full-time union officials cannot be entrusted to solve their problems. Unbridled authority in the hands of these people is not only wrong, but positively dangerous to the real interests of the working class.

If this pamphlet achieves any of these objectives, it will have served its purpose well.

B. P.

1972

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INTRODUCTION

By Brother GEORGE JACOBS,

Secretary of the Strike Committee.

May I assure every union member who reads this pamphlet that the dispute at Standard-Triumph Sales Ltd (London) was not in any way 'political'. There was not one Communist Party member in this shop. Ours was a straightforward case of union members, every day working men, not militants, who got well and truly fed up with the constant failure to get attempted negotiations settled. For every point the Committee won and put to rights, the management introduced two more.

These members had a just case. But the Executive Committee of the National Union of Vehicle Builders did not face up to their responsibilities. Instead, they got out the 741 axe (the Strike Breaker). A meeting was called according to Confed Minute 741 of the Bridlington Agreement. This meeting was so important that the Amalgamated Engineering Union's E.C. member was missing! When phoned, it was stated he had forgotten the meeting, which was held up 45 minutes!

When this E.C. member arrived he was elected Chairman. His first words were to recommend that the men should return to work. He was reminded by the N.U.V.B. NEC official that the N.U.V.B. had called this meeting under 741, with certain terms of reference, and therefore that the case had to be discussed. After little discussion the Assistant General Secretary of the N.U.V.B. was sent out to phone the National Employers' Federation for their terms for a return to work. While he was out the meeting broke up, and the N.E.F. terms were phoned through to the London District Office of the N.U.V.B. later that day.

The facts I have stated are true. As I don't like these facts, I ask: 'Why did a member of the A.E.U. Executive 'forget' such an important meeting? Why did he try to instruct a return to work without studying the case fully?'. This shows up the irresponsible attitude of the men we have put in a position of trust. Their actions amount to a betrayal of their members.

Nor must we forget that the N.U.V.B. Assistant General Secretary also allowed the employers to dictate terms that subjected his members to a worsening of conditions. He accepted the resumption of a Works Conference without knowledge of its terms of reference - again a disgusting betrayal of the position entrusted to him.

By this time I am sure all trade union members will feel there must be a full inquiry into this case. WE DO NOT PAY UNION DUES OR BECOME UNION MEMBERS FOR THE OFFICIALS TO TELL US WHEN TO GO TO WORK.

WE WORK AS A NECESSITY, OUR ONLY SELLING COMMODITY IS OUR LABOUR. WE HAVE TO SELL IT TO OUR BEST ADVANTAGE, JUST AS THE EMPLOYERS SELL THEIR COMMODITIES, RESERVING THE RIGHT TO CHANGE ITS PRICE WITHOUT RESTRICTION.

We do not employ trade union officials so that the employers may send them instructions to send us back to work. Let these officials remember that WE employ THEM and that their job is to advise and negotiate the best possible terms for us. There must be an immediate end to these mock meetings which are placing all union members in jeopardy. These meetings remove from members their right to fight back at a time when managements and the Employers Federation are doing their best to take back the conditions that were won at great cost by trade union members in years gone by.

WE, THE MEMBERS, ARE THE UNION AND WE MUST START CLEANING THINGS UP, AND GO RIGHT THROUGH TO THE TOP. We must stop the selling out of our organizations by these irresponsible people, who are only seeking to get their names in the New Year's Honours List, and who, as soon as their members do not respond to this disgusting treatment, slight them and insult them by calling them 'wildcat strikers' or 'communists'; who do anything in fact to remove the dirt from themselves, where it really belongs.

Let us have 741 omitted or used properly. Just look at a few examples in the last two years where 741 has proved the strike breaker's axe: Renault, Thrupp & Maberly's, Standard-Triumph... One could give quite a few more.

Recently at Vickers-Armstrong 741 was not even used. Instead the A.E.U. instructed their members to return to work, and the N.U.V.B. have told their local official that if the A.E.U. go back, he must tell the N.U.V.B. members to go back too. Presumably no one has the guts to back these lads at Vickers and tell the National Employers Federation of the lake they should jump into!

At the Southern Area Council meeting of the N.U.V.B. many members expressed the same concern and feelings I have written about. I am not making any slight on the trade unions. I am stating facts that are absolutely true, and exposing an attitude of the Executive Committees that is frightening. Let us sort the chaff from the straw. Some E.C. members are good and true, otherwise I would not have been able to obtain the facts that I am giving you here.

WE, the union members, should try to stop this rot by attending the branches regularly and getting things sorted out. In future instead of asking your workmate who to vote for, we should know ourselves. Don't let us sit back and moan. Let us do something by ourselves and for ourselves, so that all the sacrifices made over the years by trade union members should not be wasted. The conditions we enjoy today have cost a great deal to obtain. WE MUST NOT HAND THEM BACK.

LESSONS OF THE STANDARD TRIUMPH STRIKE

One hundred and twenty six men at the recently organized Standard Triumph Service Depot (Western Avenue, London) were on strike from April 24 to June 14, 1961.

This seven and a half weeks long dispute only involved a small number of men. It was bitterly fought out. Moreover it contained within itself many of the features seen in recent strikes in the motor car industry. These parallels make the Standard Triumph strike a dispute to be studied by all serious militants. Its importance far outweighs the number of men actually involved.

Too many of these small strikes are fought out in isolation, the lessons smothered or only learned by a few demoralised militants. These lessons should be made available to as many workers as possible - both in the industry concerned and in other industries. In this way workers will learn from the strength and weaknesses of other workers and it will prove possible to strengthen shop and factory organization. This is why we are publishing this pamphlet.

Another reason for study of this dispute by militants is the extremely efficient way in which it was organized and run: the way supplies were blocked, demonstrations organized and funds raised. In this respect the dispute was a model.

I. BACKGROUND

Most of the work done at the Standard Triumph Service Depots: is repair work, carried out under the manufacturer's guarantee, and which is too difficult for the dealers to cope with. Each job is different and the work entails a high degree of responsibility and judgment. All the men employed are skilled. The depots also do refurbishing of cars which have been in storage.

The basic wages of the London men are the same as those received at Coventry. The wide differentials were arrived at by the different times allowed for the same work. For example the average bonus at Coventry is 138 per cent. In London it is about 78-80 per cent.

According to figures given by Brother Gough - the Chief Shop Steward at the Coventry Service Depot - to a meeting of the London Strike Committee on April 23: 'Wages this week at Allesly were: Coach Repairers, £23, and fitters £22. 5s.'. Yet Coach Repairers at London get only about £16. It should be noted that both figures are for a 40 $\frac{3}{4}$ hours week.

As well as paying the London men lower wages, the management in London has also cut out certain types

of workers such as Soda acid Washers, etc., whose work is done in London by the production men, who thereby in fact get reduced time for increased work.

It is worth recalling that the management of Standard Triumph is notorious for its record of speed-up and also for its offensive against the shop stewards organization in the Coventry factories.

2. NEGOTIATIONS DRAG ON ...

The men attempted to bring their views to the management and to get things straightened out. The official procedure was resorted to. The union leaders were given every chance to negotiate a settlement. Every 'constitutional' method was tried. Talks dragged on for over a year. The management finally even refused to discuss with the full-time officers, despite three attempts to obtain informal conferences.

We are reminded of a certain nursery rhyme:

There was a Duke of York
Who had ten thousand men
He marched them up to the top
of the hill...

And he marched them down again.
Brother Carron, that modern Duke of York, and other trade union leaders are constantly leading 'their' members up the hills of such negotiations. When the reference gets to Central Conference at York - and failure to agree is registered - it is then referred right back to the factory... and so we start all over again!

Militants are fed up to the teeth with being given the run-around in this way. There are plenty of instances on record of shops and factories taking action into their own hands.

At a mass meeting held early in April, the Standard-Triumph men overwhelmingly passed a resolution stating that unless the London depot had the same conditions as the Coventry depot by noon on April 24, They would withdraw their labour. This decision was duly carried out.

3. ISSUES CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD

The men struck against the very wide differentials in wages and piecework prices existing - for the same work - between Coventry and London. This difference, which amounts to about 30 per cent, means that there is from £5 to £7 less in the pay packets of the London men.

As one of the leaflets issued by the Strike Committee said: 'The wages at the London Depot are paid from Coventry. The National Insurance cards are at Coventry. The Income Tax is dealt with at Coventry. According to the management, only the piecework times and the bonus system are divorced from Coventry!'

The 'argument' used by the management was that the lower times given for jobs would make more work available at London, presumably at the expense of the Coventry men!

A leaflet, distributed in Coventry by the Strike Committee of the London Depot, warned the Coventry workers of what was at stake: 'If the management win this fight, Allesly (the Coventry factory) will be next. Already they have restricted the activity of your Allesly shop stewards. They stopped these stewards holding meetings and have tried to withhold pass-outs. This is only the start! Stop it now! Stop the cut-throat policies that put men out of work and speed up production at the expense of reduced bonus earnings.'

4. ORGANISATION OF THE STRIKE

The strike was organized as follows: the Factory Committee included the representatives of the 5 unions, with the addition of a Chairman, Brother E. Secular, and a Secretary, Brother G. Jacobs. Each shop, the coach repairers, the fitters and the painters, elected a shop committee, which was co-opted onto the strike committee. The Strike Committee set up sub-groups to deal with Publicity, Transport, Contacts, Demonstrations and Picketing.

Picketing was organized on a rota basis. All men involved in the dispute, who were not delegated to other work, were called upon. The picketing was carried out throughout normal working hours, and was on a 3-shift basis.

Financial support from other firms was good. Many shops and factories levied themselves (usually 2/6 per week per man) to help pay the running costs of the dispute.

Amongst well known firms giving financial support were Duples, Thrupp and Maberly, Bonallacks, Napiers, B.L.S.P., Fords, Standard-Triumph (Coventry), Strongs (Acton), Mullard Equipment (Crawley), de Havilland, Sperry's (Isleworth), A.P.V. (Crawley), Shell Mex and B.P. (Shell Haven), Aldenham Bus Garage, Harris Lebus (Tottenham), Weymanns (Weybridge), etc. Scores of trade union branches and smaller firms also did what they could to help.

The Demonstrations Committee organized a number of actions. A detachment of strikers participated with banners in the London May Day march. Deputations attended the 741 Conference at Swinton House, Grays Inn Road, and also went to the Shell Haven Oil Refinery. A loud-speaker van toured the Acton area, putting the strikers' viewpoint to other workers and gaining support for the strike.

Sympathetic action was taken in a number of cases. Coventry workers placed very effective embargoes on all spares for London. In order to get spares, London dealers had to go to Coventry and collect them themselves.

The Coventry Service Depot refused to handle London work. This embargo was made less effective by Standard-Triumph's tactic of using a Coventry dealer as a go-between. This made it almost impossible for the men at Coventry to tell what was London work and what was not. Concerning this embargo the TGWU official at Coventry ignored a call to stop car-transporter drivers from carrying 'black' cars to and from London. Unfortunately, no approach was made to the drivers themselves.

The Shell Mex and B.P. Fuel Oil tanker drivers 'blacked' all supplies used for the heating system. So did the drivers for the Wakefield Oil Company and Charringtons. Men at the latter firm also stopped supplies of coal and coke. The firm had to pay through the nose for supplies of solid fuel from local 'one-horse' coal dealers.

5. ATTITUDE OF THE UNION OFFICIALS

Five unions were involved, the National Union of Vehicle Builders, the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Transport & General Workers Union, the Electrical Trades Union and the Sheet Metal Workers. As the NUVB was the union with the most members involved in the dispute, its officials had negotiating rights.

The role of the trade union leaders was disgusting. As far as most of them were concerned their only interest was to get the men back as quickly as possible... on any terms. A further leaflet issued by the London Strike Committee makes this quite clear:

'At a meeting held under 741 in London on 25.5.61, the E.C.s of our combined unions recommended a return to work, the only concession favourable to us being the resumption of a meeting scheduled for resumption in February 1960, which until now was claimed as being closed. All other points subject us to conditions worse than those in operation before the dispute came about. We regret we cannot accept this.

'WE DO NOT NEED A UNION TO WORSEN CONDITIONS FOR US, THE EMPLOYERS DO THIS WELL ENOUGH. Since the union officials agreed to the peaceful-settlement-of-dispute policy with the employers, it seems apparent that all union members are wrong, no matter what their complaints!'

Bro. Jacobs, secretary of the Strike Committee, described this meeting and subsequent events in a special letter to SOLIDARITY:

'Despite twelve months' attempted negotiations with the management, the members of the Standard-Triumph Sales Ltd. were forced to withdraw their labour. The union officials have made three attempts to obtain informal Conference, but received rejection each time.

'The Executive of the NUVB met and referred this case to a meeting of 741. At this meeting, held on May 25, the Assistant General Secretary of the NUVB was instructed to phone the National Federation of Employers. At this stage the meeting broke up. The officials recommended a return to work, not knowing the terms offered by the employers and not having debated these terms. The employers' terms were only phoned to the London District Office of the NUVB later that day.

'At a meeting of the London District Committee of the Union, held on June 1, the N.E.C. officer was asked if it was true that the terms were not given to the E.C.s present at 741, and also whether it was true that there was no debate on these terms. He agreed that both statements were true.

'Two of the clauses in the employers' offer are not acceptable. One is that we return to work under a worsening of conditions, under conditions that were not in operation when the dispute came about. The other is for a resumption of a Works Conference that has nothing to do with this dispute. We also object to the fact that these conditions were accepted without any knowledge of the terms of reference to the resumed Works Conference.'

We understand that soon after the Standard-Triumph strike started the Employers Federation contacted the Executive Council of the AEU asking them to instruct 'their' members to return to work.

The Executive Council immediately transmitted these 'instructions' to the Divisional Organizer and to the District Secretary of the London (North) District Committee. The letter from the E.C. was discussed by the District Committee. In their reply to the E.C. the District Committee correctly pointed out that the E.C. had instructed them to order the men back to work without even waiting to receive the District Committee's own report of the dispute. At the same time, the District Committee did not, 'for tactical reasons', endorse the strike.

The Executive Council replied repeating its 'instructions' that the men return to work under minute 741 of the Confederation Executive. Incidentally, the Chairman of the 741 Conference was Brother Boyd, the extreme right-wing member of the Executive Council of the AEU, surely a peculiar occurrence since the NUVB was the union with negotiating rights!

With the horrible recent example of Swindon before it - where

6 members of the District Committee were suspended for refusing to instruct the men on strike at Pressed Steel to go back to work - the London (North) District Committee caved in, under protest. It recommended the men to return to work and 'go through the procedure'.

The only union to grant dispute benefit was the NSSMW & B, whose London branch has the power to grant such benefit. But even they used the face saving formula that as two members of their union couldn't work because of the strike, they would agree to pay them benefit. They did not declare the strike of these two men to be official.

6. THE SETTLEMENT ... AND AFTER

The men eventually went back to work as united as they had come out. They managed to get better terms than the ones upon which the trade union officials had instructed them to return. The main additional concessions gained by the men were that no short time was to be worked after their return and that the terms of reference of the resumed Conference were to be extended to cover all the questions that had given rise to the dispute.

The strike was 100 per cent solid as far as the production men were concerned. About 24 staff workers (supervisors, apprentices and outside men) continued to work. In effect, they blacklegged.

After their return the men felt that they had been very badly

let down and sold out by the union leaders. Several of them felt like tearing up their cards, not because they had no fight left in them, but because they didn't see the use of paying full-time officials whose main purpose appeared to be to 'discipline' them into producing on the employers' terms.

The men are discussing ways and means of continuing the struggle. If the resumed negotiations drag on too long they threaten further strike action or possibly some form of guerrilla action.

What sort of men were those who took part in this dispute? Were they 'wildcats'? Or 'werewolves'? Or any other figment of the zoological imagination of Brother Carron? No, they were perfectly normal working people, without horns or forked tails that we could detect. Not one of the men involved was a member of the Communist Party. Not that it would have mattered in the least if they had been!

7. PATTERN OF SELL-OUTS

This type of action by the trade union leaderships didn't happen in a vacuum. In April of this year the Executive Committee of the NUVB prepared the way by publishing a statement in the union's Quarterly Journal which stated amongst other things that 'Executive Committee alone have the power to authorise or endorse strike action. If the above procedure (York Memorandum) is not carried out, any action taken will

not be endorsed and benefit will, therefore, not be paid.'

The article went on to say that there were instances in which members were taking advice and instruction from bodies which have no authority under union rules. This position, the article declared, could not be tolerated. In the event of members accepting instructions from outside bodies (presumably Joint Shop Stewards Committees) benefit would not be paid. This statement - truly a surprising one from a so-called 'militant leadership' - was enthusiastically welcomed by the Economic League (Bulletin No. 87). *

We understand that the rank-and-file NUVB Policy Conference rejected this statement which had been issued by the eleven man National Executive Council. This reversal, however, did not seem to have much effect on the way the N.E.C. handled the Standard-Triumph dispute! They just ignored the decision of the Policy Conference! This is a sad commentary on democracy within the unions, but we doubt the capitalist press will shed their usual bucketfuls of crocodile tears on the issue!

We have also witnessed the recent agreement signed by Carron (AEU) and Matthews (NUGMW) on Industrial Relations. This was used to split the men during the Pressed Steel strike. Both the AEU and the NUGMW leaderships have been signing agreements with the car manufacturers

* The Economic League Bulletin is one of the Employers' industrial propaganda organs. Most of its space is devoted to witch-hunting militants.

in which they sanction the very thing which the Standard-Triumph men were in dispute over, namely different rates in different areas. Examples are the new Ford factory at Liverpool and the Vauxhall plant at Wirral.

The Pressed Steel strike at Swindon resembled the Standard-Triumph dispute in many ways. The Swindon men were striking for the same wages as men doing the same work, employed by the same company at Oxford. This would have meant 9d. an hour increase. Again, in this dispute, the trade union officers used all possible methods ranging from gentle persuasion to promises, manoeuvres and threats. They forced the men to their knees. This strike could have been won. The firm itself admitted (after the men went back to work) that they had lost nearly a million pounds in the dispute.

8. THEIR INTERESTS AND OURS

All over the country - and in other countries too - militants are asking themselves searching questions. Why do 'their' union officials act in this way? Why, whenever men struggle, do they find their leaders a hindrance rather than a help? Are the union bureaucrats in fact 'betraying' the men? Or is it something much deeper?

A few moments' reflection will show that these leaders have been systematically 'selling-out' year in, year out, in one industry after another, abroad and at home. Why do they do this?

We feel it is because they have different interests from those of working people. The union bureaucrats act quite logically - according to their interests. The only trouble is that these interests are not ours!

We want control over working conditions and full rights of shop stewards to negotiate on all issues. We want to break the stranglehold of negotiating procedures such as the York Memorandum (741) and other such agreements, which were imposed on us following the 1921 Engineering lock-out, and the defeat then suffered by engineering workers. *

They want to be the bosses of the labour force, the arbiters

* At the end of the War the National Committee of the AEU (the main union in the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions) passed a resolution calling for a revision of the 'provisions for avoiding disputes' (the York Memorandum) more in line with the strength of the movement. Other unions have done the same. This resolution has been piously repeated at many subsequent meetings of the National Committee of the AEU. The union officials have taken no effective action whatsoever to ensure a change. They are the main defenders of the 'established' negotiating procedure!

It is surely now up to the rank and file to see that nationally agreed policy is at last put into practice, at job level.

between employers and employed, the generals of the army of labour. They use the confidence which the working class has in them to harness workers to the increasing tempo and exploitation of production. They play a big part in the fact that our lives are ever more dominated by bureaucrats. They are incapable of fighting the trend towards a society where militants are straight-jacketed by legislation and men confronted with the choice: conform or starve! They are in fact part of this trend. Looked at from this angle their behaviour is quite logical.

The way forward will also appear clear: workers must rely on their factory and shop organizations to fight for their interests. No Saviour from on high will solve these problems for them.

In some instances it will be possible to further our interests through the trade unions, in other cases 'unofficial' methods of organization and action have to be used.

One of the questions raised by the Standard-Triumph and other recent disputes in the London area is the creation of a committee to which Shop Stewards Committees of whatever union or complexion can affiliate. Through such a committee they could give each other mutual aid in cases of need, irrespective of the attitudes of the trade union bureaucrats. This problem is already being discussed by militants in the London area, where the obvious inadequacy of existing organization is becoming increasingly obvious. We feel that the creation of such a body would be a much-needed step to ensure effective support for future struggles.

9 CONCLUSION

The object of the Standard-Triumph strike was not merely to secure more pay for the London men. It was also an attempt by rank-and-file workers to break down divisions between themselves and other workers employed by the same company, on similar work. Modern management repeatedly resorts to methods of this kind to keep the working class divided. They hope to make workers think that the real enemy is the worker in the next shop, in the next factory, in the next town... or overseas. Any struggle against such artificial divisions, any struggle which tends to unite workers, deserves the fullest support of all militants.

'SOLIDARITY' aims at sober, realistic and truthful reporting of all working class struggles. We are particularly interested, however, in those struggles in which basically socialist issues are involved. Such are the struggles concerning control at workshop level, struggles concerning managerial rights, actions in support of workers in other places and other countries, and struggles against wage differentials. If you are interested in helping us in this work, please write to us. There is an enormous amount to be done. 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.

TOM HILLIER, AEU.
JIM PETTER, AEU.
KEN WELLER, AEU.

'WHAT NEXT FOR ENGINEERS'

'SOLIDARITY' PAMPHLET No. 3.

By KEN WELLER, AEU Shop Steward.

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