

THEY KNEW WHY THEY FOUGHT

UNOFFICIAL STRUGGLES & LEADERSHIP
ON THE DOCKS 1945-1989

Bill Hunter

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Dedication

In memory of Rachel Ryan 1917 - 1992

*My companion and comrade for forty eight years
and a Trotskyist for fifty four.*

With the best of the unofficial leaders who appear in this book:

"She knew why she fought, and loved what she knew."

Illustrations in original book

Cover: Dockers Demonstration 1952

1: Blue Union Membership

2: Peter Kerrigan

3: Gerry Edwards

4: 1951 Conspiracy Trial

5: Socialist Outlook

6: Liverpool Portworkers Committee 1952

7: Portworkers Clarion

8: News of the Blues

9: What Next For Britain's Portworkers

10: Pay Dispute 1970

11: Jack Jones is questioned by dockers

12: Release of Vic Turner 1974

13: Liverpool Docks 1920

14: Liverpool Docks 1980

Back: The Author

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The Newsletter

Authors Collection

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Authors Collection

Authors Collection

Authors Collection

Marg Nichols

The Newsletter

Marg Nichols

Merseyside County Museums

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Contents

1: Struggling Out of the Abyss.

2: The Desire for Change. After the War

3: The Unofficial Movements

4: The T&GWU and the Break to the Blue Union

5: The Blue Union Recognition Strike

6: Rank and File Unity in defence of the "Blue"

7: The "Decasualisation" Deals

8: The Devlin Scheme

9: The 1967 Strike

10: Modernisation

11: Jack Jones and the Jones-Aldington Committee

12: The Betrayal of the Anti-Tory Struggles

13: Abolition of the Scheme - The Final Sell-Out

14: Balance Sheet of the Blue

15: Conclusions

Preface

This book does not have its origins in academic considerations of writing history. For most of my active political life I have been associated with dockers' struggles, with the unofficial leadership of the dockers and with attempts to give Trotskyist leadership to the working class. It was this lifetime's experience which convinced me that there was an imperative need to write about the key aspects of this dockers' history since the Second World War. There are lessons to be drawn from this history which will be extremely important for the whole working class in the years to come, lessons that show the great capacity of the working class for struggle and for the development of their own autonomous leadership and organisation.

In 1989 dockers went on official strike against the abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme introduced by a Labour Government in 1947. The defeat of that strike registered the end of relationships in the docks that had been dominant not just since the end of the Second World War but for a hundred years before. That the 1989 strike was the last chapter in a whole period of working class history became clear from interviews with reporters as the strike ended. Typical of the reaction was a Southampton docker who told Paul Routledge of the *Observer* (16 July 1989) that: "It's like the miners here ... it's a way of life; they want to knock it out of us".

The crumbling of the strike was the result of the feeling among a great number of dockers that big forces had piled up against them. Their trade union had capitulated and decisive changes were already taking place. Any serious student of the history of the dockers in Britain must conclude that the reason why this body of workers, a body with such inspiring traditions, could be brought to this debacle was solely on account of the policies of the official Trade Union leadership.

A hundred years of bitter experience and bitter struggle moulded relationships among dockers and among the communities in which they lived. It is necessary to understand that this is the major factor that formed the dockers and their communities. There was an intense loyalty to one another, a loyalty that came out of the constant battle to end the filthy and inhuman conditions in which they worked and lived. Out of this battle developed the dockers' militancy and their trade union Organisation; their concern to protect those men disabled at work, to protect old dockers and all those "ineffectives" as the employers called them. This history here recounted from first-hand experience is meant to pay a tribute to the class solidarity of these men and in particular to those unofficial leaders who fought on the principles that had been taught to them by older workers.

I hope that this account of dockers in the 44 years after the end of the Second World War will help the vanguard of the new mass movement that is starting to surge through Britain as the international crisis of capitalism develops.

Many people have helped me with this account. Some are actors in it. Here I mention only a very few. David Bruce who spent quite some time editing the first draft. Audrey Jones and Mike George who constantly helped. Finally, Dave Swindlehurst of Art in Action, Bootle, who voluntarily gave a great deal of time to the layout of the book and its final arrangements.

Liverpool, October 1993

Struggling Out of the Abyss

The road out of the degradation and poverty that characterised the life of the dock workers and their communities in the last century was rough, tough and brutal. Collective action and a hard hatred of strike-breakers became principles created out of a struggle for jobs and against inhuman working conditions. Employers and their agents were cruel and ruthless in exploiting the dockers' labour, conspiring with the strongest and most unprincipled men to set the pace of work and thus sift out older and weaker men. The dockers had to establish certain conditions in face of the most pitiless employers: agreements establishing continuity of work on a ship as a protection against the boss keeping his most malleable employees in continuous work at the expense of others; agreements on the number of men in a gang; on rights for the old and the injured and so on. It was the solidarity of the dock workers alone that curbed the greed and corruption of bosses and their rule by fear.

Until the 1890s both ship owners and stevedoring employers had exploited an unorganised, desperate pool of casual labourers at the lowest level of the British working class. From the expansion of transport in the eighteenth century that had helped lay the base for the Industrial Revolution, and during the industrial growth of Britain as the first capitalist nation, while ship owners, merchants and industrialists amassed great wealth, the mass of dock labourers lived with no prospect of long term employment and always in the company of starvation. Consider only one statistic: in 1802, the dockers' wage was five and a half pence an hour. There was a steady rise in the cost of living during the nineteenth century but the dock labourers' wage never went beyond that five and a half pence until the historic surge to organise the unskilled labourers of 1889 and the great London strike for the "Dockers' Tanner". James Sexton participated in organising Liverpool dockers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He writes in his book – James Sexton, Agitator – of the conditions in which dockers lived and worked. Master Stevedores or master quay porters were granted licenses by the Dock Boards on production of the signatures of two householders. They employed a mass of dockers as casual workers. The dockers worked with rotten plant and defective machinery and with no legislative protection. "The hospitals were full of maimed and suffering men", writes Sexton. Many of the bosses were moneylenders. Sexton tells how, from the "pitifully small loans" these employers gave:

"They extracted 3d per week on every shilling advanced, and the man who did not borrow from them on this ruinous basis – whether he needed the money or not – had very little chance of getting a job with them."

Injured men were treated callously, Sexton writes about a serious accident to himself that left the side of his face shattered and a fracture to his skull. A request of a fellow docker to take him to hospital was refused and he lay two hours in a shed before an ambulance came. He describes his unsuccessful attempt to obtain some compensation when he eventually recovered. The employer in the end gave him a light job but his first wages had the cost of the ambulance deducted.

Henry Mayhew, the investigator of social conditions in Victorian England, described masses of poorly dressed men in the East End of London congregating around the

principal entrances to the docks, winter and summer, at six am, and then fighting for work when the foremen appeared, Mayhew concluded:

“The scene is one to sadden the most callous with thousands of men struggling for one day's hire, the struggle being fiercer from the knowledge that hundreds must be left to idle the day out in want.”

Hard and cruel conditions continued into the period of union organisation. In 1902, Jack London, the famous US novelist and socialist, went into the East End of London and spent time among what A.C. Pigou the economist had called the “submerged tenth” of London's population.¹ Jack London's book, *The People of the Abyss*, describes the living conditions in the crowded slums and workhouses, and among the homeless and those who were working. Chapter XIII is entitled: “Dan Cullen, Docker”, “I stood, yesterday, in a room in one of the ‘Municipal Dwellings’ not far from Lemman Street”, is how London begins his story of this dock labourer who, despite the victory of the strike of 1889, lived and worked in terrible conditions which were made worse for him because he was a leader of the dockers he worked among.

“Courtesy to the language” did not allow London to say that Dan Cullen lived in a room:

“It was a den, a lair, whose dimensions were seven feet by eight with a rickety table, a chair and two boxes as furniture. The floor was bare, while the walls and ceiling were literally covered with blood marks and splotches. Each mark represented a violent death of an insect, for the place swarmed with vermin, a plague with which no person could cope single handed.”

Dan Cullen was dying in hospital. “Yet”, said London, “he had impressed his personality on his miserable surroundings sufficiently to give an inkling as to what sort of man he was”.

“On the walls were cheap pictures of Garibaldi, Engels, Dan Burns and other labour leaders, while on the table lay one of Walter Besant's novels. He knew his Shakespeare I was told, and had read history, sociology, and economics. He was self-educated. All his days he toiled hard with his body; and because he had opened the books, and been caught up by the fires of the spirit and could ‘write a letter like a lawyer’ he had been selected by his fellows to toil hard for them with his brain.

He became a leader of fruit-porters, represented the dockers on the London Trades Council and wrote trenchant articles for the labour journals ... he spoke his mind freely and fought the good fight. In the ‘Great Dock Strike’ he was guilty of taking a leading part. And that was the end of Dan Cullen. From that day he was a marked man, and every day, for ten years and more, he was paid off for what he had done.

A docker is a casual labourer. Work ebbs and flows, and he works or does not work according to the amount of goods on hand to be moved. Dan Cullen was discriminated against. While he was not absolutely turned away (which would have caused trouble, and which would certainly have been more merciful) he was called in by the

foreman to do not more than two or three days work per week. This is what is called being 'disciplined' or 'drilled'. It means being starved. There is no politer word. Ten years of it broke his heart, and a broken hearted man cannot live."

Colonel R.B. Oram was Superintendent of Surrey Commercial Docks and after that was a Port Consultant. In *The Dockers' Tragedy* he contrasts the hiring of casual dock labour in Victorian times with conditions in the 1930s.

"Mayhew", writes Oram, "left an imperishable picture of a call, typical of any that took place on the docks". He then adds:

"Conditions as late as the 1930s had not, to my recollection, substantially altered. In the winter of 1934 I remembered leaving the West India Docks, after working all night, at about 5.30 am. It was a cold and wet morning. By the main gate in a shelter which had only a roof, but with a latrine on which men balanced themselves on a pole, were some 50 men waiting patiently and with hardly a sound until the call, then some two hours distant. Uncertain of work, they felt that by stealing a march on later arrivals, they might be the lucky ones to get a morning's employment. From the many that were called few indeed were chosen; it was a pathetic sight that I have never forgotten."

Oram gives one of his memories of the 1930s when he would make an order for a few men at 1 pm and shortly find hundreds fighting for the jobs.

Peter Kerrigan started on Liverpool docks in 1935.²

"In Bootle, Merseyside, where I grew up, it seemed that you either became a docker, a seafarer or a ship repairer. My old man was a coal heaver filling the coal into the bunkers of ships going to sea. You had to have a pound and fourpence to get on the dock then. That was to pay for your tally which made you eligible for hiring. I didn't have a pound and fourpence and my father didn't have it. So I went on the fairground and boxed, taking men on, and getting a collection out of the crowd. I got about 30 shillings, gave my mother ten shillings and kept a pound and fourpence. I got my name down, as my father was a docker, and after a while I was started and joined the Transport and General Workers Union.

I became the youngest coal heaver on the dock at the age of 19. They were terribly hard conditions which made hard men. There weren't enough coal heavers to man three shifts, so they would work round the clock, particularly during the war. They would work till they finished the ship and then do the same with the next one. You'd work four or five days without going home to sleep. You'd catch a sleep down in the bunker while your mates worked."³

In a pamphlet *What Next for Portworkers?* he wrote:

"Older men on the docks remember the thirties very well. The humiliation of the stands. The 'muscle feeling'. The scramble for a job. They remember the 'blue eyes' system – the whisper of 'You're staying behind' into the ear of a favoured one. The militant was

isolated. The man who refused to overload a sling on the last ship was left standing.”⁴

Joe Cubbin's father and brother were seamen. He started work at 14 on casual work as a scaler on the Gladstone dock. It was hot, dirty and hard work, crawling round the boilers. He was paid three shillings a day for going into the ship's boilers and scaling off the rust with a wire brush. He says it was a lot of money compared to what his mate got – eight shillings a week, for pushing a baker's hand cart round and working till eight o'clock on a Saturday.

“You'd have four hours in the boiler, then crawl out for your break. You couldn't afford to go to a cafe; and then you'd go back in for another four hours. Most weeks you'd only have two or three days work and then I used to go looking for work as a rivet boy on ship repair.”

Joe Cubbin started on Liverpool docks in 1936 as a casual labourer. He had to stand for hiring twice a day.

“I was 18 when I started work on the docks in 1936, as a casual dock worker. I had to go on the stand for work in the morning and the afternoon. The ship might be in for a week or a fortnight but I still had to go to be hired twice a day and I'd get left if the boss wanted a job for one of his 'blue eyes' who'd just finished a ship. There was no continuity. A lot of young lads like me got treated like shit. I was in the union but didn't have a tally, and the tally men had priority,

I was in the army for seven years from 1939. I went into the Royal Engineers and ended training and leading men on loading and unloading cargo on ships, barges and landing craft. I ended a Sergeant major.

I came back on the dock in 1946. We had to work compulsory overtime and I was worse off than when I was in the army. Then we had a meeting at the Pier Head once and I got up at the front and said: 'Now get up there and make sure you're getting the right money'. I got put on to the unofficial committee then.”⁵

After the Second World War we find essentially the same harsh conflict between dock employer and dock worker. A little picture of conditions on the docks after the war was given by a Liverpool docker, who wrote:

“I started on the Liverpool docks in February 1951. My father was a docker and he got me a job through the union. With the rest of the 'new intake' I went to a control on the docks to pick up my registration book. I found myself in the middle of a strike. That morning, after we picked up our books, we went on the picket line. There was no question of us going to work. We were all the sons of dockers and had grown up in a time of one struggle after another on the docks.

Yes, conditions were terrible. Pay was low. You were not given industrial clothing. You would unload containers made of cardboard with notices on them saying masks must be worn – but masks on the docks were unheard of. Often, for ten days down a hatch we worked on rotten bags of asbestos, which would burst open.

You could go home soaked and/or stinking, especially if you had been working on hides, with other passengers in trams or overhead railway refusing to sit by you. In fact, it was not until the six weeks strike of 1967 that we got industrial clothing, rainwear and decent washing facilities.”⁶

Vic Turner, one of the five dockers jailed in 1972 known as the “Pentonville Five”, gave a picture in an interview of the way of life that was being “knocked out” of dockers in 1989:

“I knew that I would eventually be a docker but recruitment was spasmodic. In the meantime I got a job as an enameller and joined the Transport and General Workers Union (T&GWU). It was not until 1951, at the age of 24, that I started work on ‘The Royals’ [the Royal group of London docks], and then I transferred to the docks trade group within the T&GWU.

That was when I grew up. I was regarded as an immature person who needed a few chips knocked off my shoulder. Being a docker was a way of life. There was a community spirit in every sense of the word. It was a rough job — the atmosphere was rough and the humour was rough. Once you got through the dock gates you were cut off from the outside world. We had our own code – never written down, but always understood. Later I learned that the sense of humour in the working class is the same all over the world. Our code was built up over the years – it had shape but was not formal. It was clear, we all knew what was expected. As soon as something arose we knew instinctively what was expected of us. A hand in the pocket, help with a family.

Woe betide anyone who didn't recognise what he should do. The challenge didn't take the form of anger, but a kind of amazed hurt.

But mainly it was that each generation in those days had a trade, not like the young people of today who are unemployed with no trade and no union. We were lucky. The old chaps had been there since the middle of last century. It was them who built the docks and other industries, and they told us about their lives. They were part of a large labour force, and the ship owners would choose who would work. Fluctuations in trade meant that the dockers were condemned to weeks and months with only a pittance, for the benefit of the brokers and ship owners. Their experiences became our experiences.

I walked into the dock in the middle of a dispute about working arrangements and conditions. That was what it was like. Hardly any of the disputes were about money. We were either in a fight to prevent our agreements being broken or to stop new, even harsher conditions, being imposed. Then there were the solidarity strikes in

support of other workers – like the Canadian seafarers or Ford workers." ⁷

Larry Cavanagh, who was later chairman of a Merseyside Portworkers Unofficial Committee, went to work on Birkenhead docks later, but still under essentially the same conditions:

"When I started on Birkenhead docks in 1964 you had to work overtime till seven o'clock, except on Thursday, when you got paid. If the ship was due to finish, you worked past seven o'clock, until it was finished. It was pretty hard. You had to carry bags of ash which were about two hundredweight, and heavy cases, which would all have to be done manually. Sometimes there'd be barges of soda ash. You'd get in the barge, put them into slings and there would be dust everywhere. Your nose would start running, you'd be continually wiping it and it was like having the 'flu". There were other commodities that were worse than ash. There was one I recall, called mansa, I think it went into soap powder. Your nose would start to bleed when you were working this stuff. You could work on nearly every poison you can think of and at that time they never issued us with protective clothing. They never issued gloves or anything like that and you had your own overalls which you went home in. They expected you to work in the rain and there was no wet weather gear given out. All these were issues later on in the strike of 67. The members then were prepared to stay out on strike for ever to win things like not working in the rain and protective clothing if they were working dangerous cargo."⁸

1. London reported in 1902 a verdict at an inquest on an old woman of 77 years who died after being ill, in filthy surroundings with no one to help her. The verdict was that death was due to blood poisoning as a result of bed sores due to "self neglect". He then quotes Pigou on the "submerged tenth" (450,000 people in London according to London's calculations based on Pigou), to which the old lady belonged: "Either through lack of bodily strength or of intelligence or of fibre, or of all three, they are inefficient or unwilling workers and consequently unable to support themselves. They are often so degraded in intellect as to be incapable of distinguishing their right from their left hand, the numbers of their own houses; their bodies are feeble and without stamina; their affections are warped and they scarcely know what family life means." Instead of "submerged tenth", today we have the term "underclass" to encourage the same smug complacency that London describes in Pigou.
2. He played a leading part on the docks from the end of the war until the decline of the Blue Union in the north after 1967. With a number of other dockers he acted in the television play *The Big Flame* by Jim Allen (who had worked as a Manchester docker) about a dockers' strike where the dockers occupy the docks. Between bouts of unemployment he acted in other television plays.
3. Interviewed by the author.
4. Published by the Socialist Labour League.

5. Later, after the war, Joe worked in No. 5 Control with Peter Kerrigan and was a leader of the break to the Blue Union.
6. John Maginnis, in a "Worker's Look at History", in *Socialist voice*. July 1988.
7. Interviewed by Dot Gibson of Workers Press.
8. Interviewed by the author.

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 2

The Desire for Change after the War

The Second World War radicalised the dockers together with the whole British working class. In the last two years of the war there was growing restiveness against the industrial and political truce that the trade union and Labour Party leaders had made with the Tories. Working days lost by strikes rose to 1,530,000 in 1942, 1,810,000 in 1943, and 3,710,000 in 1944. By the beginning of 1944 the government was faced with the prospect of a general strike in the coal fields despite the condemnation of strikes by union leaders. A strike against a wage award spread rapidly at the end of January through Lancashire, Staffordshire, and South Wales. Sporadic strikes continued in the following weeks, flaring up to a strike of 100,000 Welsh miners in March, Press and politicians denounced the strikers.

The feeling among the men and women who were fighting and dying was shown by a decision taken at a meeting of troops in the Eighth Army Signals. *The Eighth Army News* reported the meeting under the headline: "Eighth Army men say to workers: The Right to Strike is Part of the Freedom We Fight For." The lead in to the article declared that: "The Welsh coal strike has raised in many minds the question: Should strikes be allowed in wartime? Here is the answer of Eighth Army men who had debated the subject". The paper went on to report that the meeting had overwhelmingly rejected a proposal that strikes should be illegal in wartime. Behind these feelings of workers in and out of the army was the determination that they were going to end the conditions of the 1930s. "I'm hanging on to this rifle if things are going to be the same as before the war", was a common phrase in the forces. Ernest Bevin, Transport and General Workers Union leader and Minister of Labour in the Coalition Government, who reviewed troops before D-Day and stood watching them embark, reported a shout from the ranks: "Ernie, when we have done this job for you, are we going back on the dole?"¹

In 1945, the Labour leaders were carried into government as a result of the great desire for change. Their greatest fear was that a mass explosion would come out of this desire. Attlee, Bevin and other leaders wanted to continue wartime curbs on industrial struggle. Churchill knew more about these leaders than many workers who elected them to carry out radical change. On hearing the election results in 1945 the old Tory leader said: "I do not feel down at all. I am not certain that the Conservative Party could deal with the labour troubles that are coming".²

The repeal of the Trades Disputes Act was largely hypocritical window dressing. This was shown clearly in the book *States of Emergency*, by Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy.

"... during what one historian has called 'the 1911-21 crisis of the state an underlying fear of revolution sharpened the official response to strikes. One modern legacy of this period is the government's strike breaking machine. Originally established as the Supply and Transport Organisation, after the Second World War it became known as the Emergencies Organisation and today it exists as the Civil Contingencies Unit."

It was this machinery that the Labour Government re-invigorated while secretly making its obeisances to the demands of its trade union supporters that the anti-strike legislation of the Trades Disputes Act be abolished. The civil service began planning before the Second World War was over for a confrontation with strikers. It did so on its own initiative.

Jeffery and Hennessy tell the story of how the permanent civil servants got to work after the 1945 dockers' strike.

The Under Secretary to the Home Office suggested to other Whitehall Heads of Departments the need to plan against strikes by setting up once more the Supply and Transport Organisation. The Home Secretary recommended on 22 August 1945, one month after the election, that the Cabinet should discuss this memorandum. Jeffery and Hennessy describe the memorandum as "political dynamite", and continue with the comment:

"Here was the first ever majority Labour Government, engaged upon the priority task of repealing the Trades Disputes and Trade Unions Act — the embodiment of Baldwin's victory over trade union power in the General Strike — being asked by its Home Secretary to consider the reactivation of the sharpest weapon Baldwin had possessed in 1926."

Attlee had a private discussion with three members of his Cabinet who agreed to push on with the plan. Eventually they waited until the repeal of the Trades Disputes Act went through Parliament, but on 8 March 1946 the Labour Cabinet decided to go ahead, with the greatest Secrecy. Contingency planning through a special top Civil Service Committee has continued ever since. This state contingency organisation, over the years from 1946, developed tactics and experience against working-class struggle which were used to such effect against the miners' strike, 39 years later.

Apart from secret state contingency planning, which was set in motion by the Labour Government, the Government also kept the wartime regulations for the purpose of suppressing strikes. Among them was Order 1305, which was later to be used to arrest and try seven unofficial dockers' leaders for leading a national docks strike.

During the war, a great number of trade union leaders and officials had found prestigious and well-paid niches in the bodies set up by the state to control war production and labour. They were not moved by the feelings against capitalist exploitation that had accumulated within the working class. The fervent desire for change among the mass of the British working population at the end of the war conflicted with an encrusted, complacent, bureaucracy in the T&GWU to which the majority of dockers belonged.³ The T&GWU leadership and its apparatus were the pillars of the right wing of the Labour Party and of the TUC.

There was widespread industrial unrest during the six years of the Labour Government. The action that workers took was largely unofficial. On 14 occasions

between July 1945 and October 1951 the Labour Government sent in troops to break strikes, with at least two interventions in each year. On seven occasions troops were used on the docks and a further three also involved the handling of essential supplies.

The dockers who went into the forces exchanged experiences of struggle and conditions of work with dockers from other ports. From among these, a number of rank and file leaders came to the fore after returning home.

“A year after the end of the war I returned to the docks and started on cargo where there were a lot of young dockers. The conditions didn't suit us on the dock, some of them were terrible, you worked on all kinds of dirty cargo and you had no overalls. Even in the army, you'd get a special denim suit or something. The lads who had been in the army were the foremost agitators. There was an old saying: “When all the boys get home, they won't stand for this'. Danny Brandon and the lads who formed the unofficial committee in Birkenhead had all been in the army. Danny Brandon's brother, Tommy, as well as other dockers who were in the army at the time, refused to scab it in the London dock strike at the end of the war. The ones who had been in the army would discuss together, particularly those who had been in the dockers' battalion.

We quickly found that you couldn't act officially. There were supposed to be 14 different sections of workers banded together in the Transport and General Workers Union and they were supposed to fight together if need be. That was the idea of the big union. But the T&G bureaucracy didn't operate that way.”

As Peter Kerrigan relates, the young dockers who formed the unofficial dockers' committee in Birkenhead with their paper, the *Portworkers Clarion*, had been in the forces. Danny Brandon, its being informed, imposed an earlier attendance at the “call”. Only their strike action removed the imposition.

A group of students who investigated conditions on Manchester Docks in 1950-1951 reported:

“There is no doubt that there is widespread dissatisfaction with their union among dock workers in Manchester. Relations with the union were criticised more than any other aspect of employment.”⁴

The students heard an oft repeated story which summed up the attitude of the full-time officials who were themselves not elected by union members but appointed by the union leadership. One official informed the dockers at a union branch meeting that he did not care what they thought about him. He had himself and his job to think of first and if he had to choose between being popular with them or standing in well with the high officials he would not hesitate to choose the latter.

In the early 1950s, Goldstein, an American student, spent a year studying the T&GWU and was given access to its branches, the meetings of its committees, and its records. The result was a book, *The Government of British Unions*, published in 1952. It roused the anger of the T&GWU bureaucracy, particularly its general secretary, Arthur Deakin. Goldstein's conclusion was that:

"It becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Transport and General Workers Union is an oligarchy at every level of its structure failing to elicit the active participation of its members."

A member of the Birkenhead Port Workers Defence Committee reviewed the book in their paper the *Portworkers Clarion*. The review was headed: "A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur" and began by asking: "Have you ever stood on a garden rake and had the handle hit you in the eye?" and continued: "That is how Arthur Deakin must feel on reading this book".

In his autobiography Jack Jones talks about the situation in the union when Cousins, the general secretary of the T&GWU, entered the Labour Government of 1964 and Jones soon after became acting editor, had been in the navy, and sailed to Nagasaki after the atom bomb was dropped. Harry Constable, who emerged in the leadership in London, was in the Royal Engineers and was reputed to be an expert with explosives.

One would need to go far at the time to find a body of workers who detested and despised their union officials for their corruption, arrogance, and class collaboration as much as did the dock workers, Perhaps only the seafarers could be found with the same bitter feelings about their union and its officials. We have already quoted the Liverpool docker John Magginnis on the conditions he found when he started on the docks in 1951. Here is what he says about the union's relationship with the men:

"All strikes, large or small, and there were some very large ones at the end of the war and after, were unofficial. They were led by port workers' committees, members elected at the dock gates. Trade union officials, from the highest to the lowest, were hated. We worked in dirty, unhealthy, dangerous conditions. But, if the men had a grievance and sent for the delegate (trade union official) he would walk round the sheds, straight into the office, come out, walk past the men without saying a word and you would find out later from the employer's representative that nothing had changed. The favourite phrase of delegates was: "My hands are tied, what can I do'."

Officials made agreements behind the back of the dockers. Men who, with the consent of union officials, were disciplined for militancy could only be saved by "unofficial" strike action. Dockers related a whole number of stories about the actions of officials. There was a story of dockers working in asbestos dust. Dockers stopped work and complained to the delegate that it caused cancer. The official went to see the employers, came back and said: "Don't worry, it takes 20 years".

There was the example of Birkenhead dockers who went on strike and were threatened with disciplinary action, after being accused of arriving late at the control one morning. An agreement for a small wage increase had been signed by officials who, without the men being informed, imposed an earlier attendance at the "call". Only their strike action removed the imposition.

A group of students who investigated conditions on Manchester Docks in 1950-1951 reported:

“There is no doubt that there is widespread dissatisfaction with their union among dock workers in Manchester. Relations with the union were criticised more than any other aspect of employment.”⁴

The students heard an oft repeated story which summed up the attitude of the full-time officials who were themselves not elected by union members but appointed by the union leadership. One official informed the dockers at a union branch meeting that he did not care what they thought about him. He had himself and his job to think of first and if he had to choose between being popular with them or standing in well with the high officials he would not hesitate to choose the latter.

In the early 1950s, Goldstein, an American student, spent a year studying the T&GWU and was given access to its branches, the meetings of its committees, and its records. The result was a book, *The Government of British Unions*, published in 1952. It roused the anger of the T&GWU bureaucracy, particularly its general secretary, Arthur Deakin. Goldstein's conclusion was that:

“It becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Transport and General Workers Union is an oligarchy at every level of its structure failing to elicit the active participation of its members.”

A member of the Birkenhead Port Workers Defence Committee reviewed the book in their paper the *Portworkers Clarion*. The review was headed: “A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur” and began by asking: “Have you ever stood on a garden rake and had the handle hit you in the eye?” and continued: “That is how Arthur Deakin must feel on reading this book”,

In his autobiography Jack Jones talks about the situation in the union when Cousins, the general secretary of the T&GWU, entered the Labour Government of 1964 and Jones soon after became acting general secretary. It was a decade after the union bureaucracy had been given a severe shaking up by the breakaway of 16,000 northern dockers. Jones went to Liverpool and found a “considerable number of dockers non-unionists.” He writes that, “The most amazing feature in the whole business was that few people in the higher echelons of the union seemed to know or care”. He recounts how “the idea that shop stewards were disruptive still prevailed in some circles ... Many issues had been dealt with behind the backs of the membership by the District Secretary who had followed an outmoded practice, Had he gone on that way we would have had no union left at all.”

The district secretary Jones was writing about was the well despised “Crusty” O'Hare whom we shall meet again later in this book, Jones says of this period in the union, “I seemed to be perpetually dashing around to staunch the loss of membership or helping to retrieve it.”

The hostility between the apparatus of the union and the rank and file was acutely sharpened by the position occupied by the T&GWU in the Dock Labour Scheme introduced by the Labour Government in 1947. It is time to say a few words about this.

During the war, in order to speed up the turn around of ships, the state was compelled to curtail the chaotic competition of innumerable stevedoring firms and force co-operation among them in the organising of dock work. After 1940 the National Dock Labour Corporation was set up. Employers, the state, and trade union officials were brought in to manage the docks. In a similar way to other workers, dockers were subjected to compulsory overtime and transfer. But, by the nature of

dock work, the latter meant much more on the docks with its emergency transfers of dock labour from one port to another as urgency dictated.

Soon after its election the Labour Government set up a committee under Sir John Foster KC to make recommendations on decasualisation, in preparation for a Dock Labour Scheme. This Committee reported in January 1947 and proposed that the ports should only register a certain number of men, with a pool of other men to meet fluctuations. The National Port Workers Defence Committee – the unofficial committee set up after a strike in 1945 (see below) – campaigned against the Foster report as being far from the regular employment promised by Ernest Bevin, ex-General Secretary of the T&GWU and wartime Minister of Labour. The Portworkers' Defence Committee put forward its own decasualisation scheme. At its meeting in Canning Town Hall in January 1947 Bert Aylward outlined a scheme that would place the hiring of dockers in the hands of the unions. His alternative scheme was based on the experience of union hiring halls in the USA. Aylward declared that the scheme would “place control in the hands of the unions and not in the hands of a small clique of ship owners, who are never seen on the docks.”

He called for workers' control of a nationalised port industry, as did the chairman Harry Constable, and answered Stafford Cripps, the former left-wing Labour Party leader, who was now a Labour Minister and who had declared that the workers had not the ability to control. Neither this Labour Government nor later Labour Governments made any move at all towards the nationalisation of the docks industry. Following the report of the Foster Committee, the Labour Government put through parliament the Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Scheme of 1947.

Under the National Dock Labour Scheme the dockers were employed by the National Dock Labour Board which, together with Area Boards, ran the scheme. The Boards consisted of employers' representatives and union officials who were responsible for administering the Scheme, disciplining the labour force and who issued port workers with their registration books twice a year. The employers continued to hire men at morning and afternoon calls but the Dock Labour Board paid out the fall-back pay which dockers received when they were not hired, as well as the wages owed by the employers. The employers paid a levy to the Scheme. Thus a docker sacked by an employer did not automatically lose his job. He was charged before his local Dock Labour Board and was sentenced there.

From the inception of the Scheme the employers continually sought to undermine those provisions that prevented their complete control of labour. The Dock Labour Scheme was in fact the embodiment of conflicting forces, with the strength of the workers pushing back the power of the employers but being controlled and checked by trade union and labour leaders. It was a framework in which the employers could maintain a base from which to regain their complete domination. Because post-war trade expanded immediately after the war, leading to almost negligible unemployment in the country as a whole, the dockers were in a much stronger position to press home their demands for an improvement in pay and conditions. After the war it would certainly not have been possible to return to the pre-war casual system. "Fall-back" pay and the indirect control of Labour under the Dock Labour Scheme was the price that the employers had to accept in order to forestall the full realisation of the dockers' aims

At times the Dock Labour Boards' disciplinary powers were used to compel workers to accept conditions of work that were formerly accepted only under the threat of

unemployment or under state compulsion in war time, Compulsory overtime after the war remained a burning issue for many years and caused a number of small strikes and one major one in 1954, but the question remained unsettled. Compulsory overtime was sustained by the threat of suspension and other penalties that the Boards could impose under the Scheme. When dock workers talked strongly of maintaining the Scheme what they were defending was the “fall-back” pay and the fact that the power of direct sacking was removed from the hands of individual employers. Many dockers also felt that the Dock Labour Scheme gave them a stronger national identity.

Though sometimes dockers' demands were phrased in terms of defending the Scheme, when the Scheme is examined in relation to the power which dockers enjoyed after the end of the war, its contradictory aspects become obvious. The Scheme actually helped the employers to maintain discipline and to tighten their grip on labour during a period when the relationship of forces had moved in the dockers' favour. It did not, then, come into being as part of a socialist programme. The Labour Government had no such guideline. The Scheme was an attempt to regulate conflicting relationships between workers and employers which could not be regulated. The Dock Labour Boards also could not fulfil to any extent the role of a buffer between docker and employer. Their relationships of strength were continually shifting.

The desire of complete decasualisation, which meant removal of the employers' power, continually surfaced among dockworkers. It is necessary to add that the employers could plot the end of the Scheme without any real opposition from the trade union leadership — indeed at times the trade union bureaucracy opened up the employers' path. They assisted the employers by attempting to suppress or distort the demands of the rank and file.

From the beginning, the Dock Labour Scheme did not cover all dockers and left casual hiring in small ports. The demand of the rank and file for the registration of all dockworkers was never fulfilled and in fact the number of non-registered dockers grew later with the mechanisation and containerisation of dock work, and the development of new ports. Thus the framework of the Dock Labour Scheme was continually being shaken. In the added power that it gave non-elected trade union officials, mainly from the bureaucracy of the T&GWU, which emerged after the war, it could not but acutely sharpen the antagonism between them and the rank and file of the unions.

From time to time there were strikes against disciplinary action and sackings by the Boards. Dockers were incensed at the way the trade union representatives on the Board sided with the employers. The gulf between the officialdom in the T&GWU and rank and file dockers widened still further when, after the Scheme was introduced, T&GWU officials actively assisted in, and sometimes led, the disciplining of men by the Dock Labour Boards.

“The Dock Labour Scheme was a two-edged thing. At the same time as it gave the benefits of a guaranteed minimum sum if you didn't get work, you had to pay for it with a certain loss of liberty. The people who ran it were the officials of the T&G and the employers. The people who punished you were also the people who were supposed to be your representatives.”⁵

Militant trade unionists who kicked against working conditions quickly found that they had to fight not only their employers, but also their own representatives. Union officials had acquired the power through the Scheme to deprive men of their livelihood. The bureaucracy of the T&GWU was further strengthened by the way in which the Scheme was used to guarantee contributions to the union. On Merseyside and in Manchester registration books (without which no docker could be accepted for work) were issued only on production of a clear T&GWU card. The union was thus guaranteed its members, no matter how little activity was carried on in their interests. The vast majority of dockers in these two areas had their union cards stamped only at six-monthly intervals when registration books were issued. Many dockers looked upon the union not as an organisation for the defence and betterment of the conditions of the dockers but as an "overhead charge" for the maintenance of their job. The officials could safely ignore the workers' dissatisfaction with the way the union was behaving, secure in the knowledge that union dues would still have to be paid each April and October. Thus a form of the "closed shop" for which militant workers had struggled in order to consolidate their strength was turned into its opposite by the union bureaucracy. This was not the decasualisation for which dockers had been looking.

1. *The People's War*. Angus Calder, London.
2. Lord Moran: Winston Churchill.
3. *Lord Moran. Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival, 1940-1963*
4. In the major ports of London, Southampton, Bristol, Merseyside, Manchester and Hull, and most of the smaller ports, dockers were members of the T&GWU. In Middlesbrough they were in the General and Municipal Workers Union and, in Glasgow and Campbeltown they were in the Scottish Transport and General Workers Union. This Scottish union had been formed in 1932 when docker members of the T&GWU broke from it over the right to elect their own officials.
5. *The Dock Worker* an analysis of conditions in the port of Manchester. University of Liverpool Department of Social Science. 1954.
6. Peter Kerrigan, interviewed by the author,

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 3

The Unofficial Movements

As the Labour Government carried through policies of wage freeze and austerity while prices rose, the unofficial strike and the unofficial committee rapidly became a feature of nearly all industries — engineering, mining, road transport, shipping — but, above all, flourished on the docks.

The traditions of struggle which mark docks history were found in unofficial leaders after the war. Like Jack London says of Dan Cullen, they "fought the good fight". They were men who had certain principles by which they worked and lived, principles of solidarity and a belief that it was workers' collective strength and not just the skill of the negotiator which won struggles. They had what they called their "docksology", which included the maxims of leading struggle through all the great ebbs and flows to which it was subject on the docks — ebbs and flows which meant that unofficial leaders addressed massive meetings at one time and tiny meetings

another. These leaders were viciously attacked and vilified by the press during strikes.¹ They would be descended on by Moral Rearmament professionals with money to spend who would seek to use any speck of demoralisation to corrupt them both ideologically and materially.

The MRA was formed out of the "Oxford Group" which began before the war. It was backed by a great deal of American finance. It's well turned out and obviously well-fed professionals took ex-strike leaders round the world, calling on militant workers, preaching conciliation with employers and repeating the slogan "it is not who is right but what is right". They talked of "absolute honesty" and "absolute truth" and sought to seduce the families of unofficial leaders by talking in the militant's home about great possibilities of holidays at their premises in southern England or Caux, Switzerland, where employers and trade unionists, who had embraced these absolutes, could be met. The Liverpool docker Crosby, one of the unofficial leaders who was arrested in 1951, later joined the MRA. After this, he was greeted with hostility at meetings of dockers for his opposition to all militant action.²

Hugh Cunningham who was a leading member of the National Stevedores and Dockers Union on Merseyside, described how MRA emissaries paid visits to his house during the 1967 strike:

"When we went on strike we went out because we believed in what we were fighting for. In the first week of the 1967 strike the MRA came round to my house. I had a wife and four children. They hadn't had a holiday. The MRA told the wife that if I went on a course at the MRA college in Switzerland, they could have a holiday while I was there. Naturally, the wife and kids really thought this would be great and it took some time until she realised the effect the publicity would have on our fight."

In July 1945, three weeks after the war in Europe had ended, employers on the Surrey Docks in London cancelled the war bonuses and offered revised rates that were set far below what they had been. Dockers refused to accept these new imposed conditions and went on day work – in effect a "go slow" – in protest. The employers suspended 1,500 dockers for going slow and as a result the dispute developed into the first post-war strike. The London dockers were condemned by their own union leadership and in their defence set up an unofficial committee. The striking dockers demanded 25 shillings a day guaranteed minimum – a demand which was soon taken up by the rank and file in every port.

On 24 July Churchill ordered 600 troops to stand by. On 31 July, five days after being elected, the Labour Government sent in troops to unload ships. Strikes followed in Glasgow, Grimsby, and the South West ports. Ships were moved to Liverpool. The union officials in Liverpool refused to hold a meeting and four unofficial leaders came up from London and addressed men at the dock gates. The Liverpool dockers came out on strike.

This strike saw the beginnings of a salient feature of trade union activity among dockers in the late 1940s and in the 1950s — the attempt to organise a national link up of ports. Unofficial leaders travelled between ports, held meetings of local militant leaders, agitated at dock gates, and fought the denunciations of trade union officials, employers, leaders of both the Tory and Labour parties, and the press alike. Their action built a unity between ports which was to become evident in later struggles,

though it was not built easily and not without a hard fight to overcome divisions between dockers in different ports.

At the height of the 1945 strike over 43,000 dockers came out and 21,000 troops were put into the docks. The struggle lasted ten weeks. Union officials were howled down at docks meetings. Unofficial committees were set up in all the major ports. Under the pressure of the feelings of the rank and file, a National Delegate Conference of the docks section of the Transport and General Workers Union declared their support for the demand for 25 shillings a day. A National Portworkers' Committee was set up and Bert Aylward was elected as its national organiser. The National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union members on the National Portworkers' Committee included Bert Aylward and Dick Barrett, the General Secretary of the NAS&D. Both of them were at that time members of the Communist Party. The Party had given reluctant support to the strike at the beginning, then began advocating a return to work. The Party members eventually succeeded in moving a resolution in the unofficial committee in London – known as the London Progressive Committee – that the dockers return to work and give 28 days' notice of strike action. Some of the members, including Dick Barrett, walked out of the national unofficial committee when they were told that they had no alternative but to call for a general return to work. Bert Aylward and several other Party members broke with the Communist Party over their policy during this strike. Barrett was to leave some time later. Ten days after the return the London Progressive Committee disbanded on a motion proposed by members of the Communist Party. At that time the Party had a policy of national unity behind the Labour Government. A number of members of the Progressive Committee, led by Harry Constable and Bert Aylward, began organising another unofficial committee.

Aylward, like Harry Constable, subsequently joined the Trotskyist group in the Labour Party. Of him, Peter Kerrigan says:

“There were many of the unofficial leaders who gave of their best. Here I must say a word about Bert Aylward, who was the ‘old man’ among us. Bert Aylward was the hardest working man I ever met, a hard disciplinarian, but nobody ever questioned Bert's honesty or that he was a man of principle. He played a big part in keeping me in struggle, and he was a Trotskyist member at the time. As a speaker he was very good; I always felt he had dotted the i's and crossed the t's. He was very analytical, and a good committee man, giving good guidance. Bert only drank lemonade.”

Among all the unofficial leaders Harry Constable had the greatest ability to bring politics into relationship with the dockers' life. Aylward and Constable played a leading part in developing a National Portworkers' Defence Committee built on links forged during the ten weeks struggle of 1945. The National Portworkers' Defence Committee began a campaign for a “Dockers' Charter”. The Charter consisted of five economic demands: a 40 hour week, a daily minimum of 25 shillings, a fortnight's paid holiday, a pension scheme for aged and infirm dockers, and a welfare services in all ports. It also demanded an end to casual labour. During a press conference to condemn a dock strike in 1951, Arthur Deakin, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, declared the Charter was “impracticable”.

The conditions and traditions that prevailed in the docks resulted in a stormy period of unofficial strikes, some of which were lengthy. In 1948 eleven London dockers

were working on zinc oxide. The men stopped work and asked for protective clothing. The employers refused. The men demanded "dirt money" to replace their ruined clothes. This was refused. Eventually they worked the cargo. Then they were charged by the Dock Labour Board on which sat union officials, suspended for a week and deprived of attendance money for 13 weeks. This callous action enraged their fellow dockers and a strike spread throughout the London docks, Deakin, the leader of the T&GWU, supported the sentences and declared the whole strike to be a "red plot".

Attlee broadcast to the country on the same theme. Zinc oxide can turn the flesh purple on contact with the skin and ruins the clothes of those working with it. Attlee, however, declared that the men refused to work because the cargo "happened to be a little dirty". The strike committee was denounced as being led by members of the Communist Party. The strike committee was in fact composed of 27 dockers who were members of no party, ten Labour Party members, and five Communist Party members.³

Twenty thousand London dockers were on strike for two and a half weeks, and there was sympathy action in Liverpool, A State of Emergency was declared by the government on 28 June. Aneurin Bevan stated in a Cabinet meeting that emergency action was inevitable if a socialist government was not to be undermined at a critical moment by indiscipline and subversion.⁴ The dockers returned to work demanding a public inquiry into the Dock Labour Scheme, with special reference to Clause 10 (the punishment clause). The Strike Committee recommended the return: "in view of the complete line-up of reactionary forces against us and the considerable complacency of the respective factions – employers, higher trade union officials, and the government."

In April 1949, after the "Dromore" or "Canadian Seamen's Strike", as it was generally known then, Constable, Saunders and Timothy – unofficial leaders – were expelled from the T&GWU for "acting against union policy". Their expulsion was carried through because they had played a prominent part in this strike against working on a Canadian ship which was manned by members of a strikebreaking Canadian union. The strike spread from Bristol to London and then to Liverpool and Glasgow, "The first big strike I was in" recounts Peter Kerrigan "was the 'Dromore' strike.

"I'd been in half-day stoppages here and there, but never in a big one. The Dromore' was an international strike. The whole of Bristol was out, Glasgow was out, London and Liverpool were out. The strike in Glasgow was an official strike called by the Scottish Transport and General Workers Union. Dromore' was the name of the ship which was blacked as a result of a Canadian Seafarers' strike. The Canadian Seaman's Union was led by Communist Party members and the strike was opposed by right-wing union leaders here and in Canada. There was a big witch-hunt in the press. The 'Dromore' was manned by members of another union and it sailed to Bristol, where dockers refused to unload it, bring it round or throw the ropes off. The ship sailed to Liverpool, Bristol dockers came here and Merseyside stopped work. Dockers had already stopped in London and Constable came up here and made a speech."

The first meeting of the state Official Committee on Emergencies, (see chapter two), was on 13 April 1950 to discuss the possibility of a dock strike following the

expulsion from the T&GWU of three of the leaders of the 1949 unofficial dispute – Constable, Saunders and Timothy.

The union's special committee that recommended the expulsions also declared that the unofficial Portworkers' Defence Committee and its newspaper, the *Portworkers' News*, were subversive bodies and any union member associating with them would be liable to severe disciplinary action. When the three men's appeal against expulsion from the union was rejected on 18 April the unofficial committee called an immediate meeting. The 3,000 dockers present resolved to strike from the next day, 19 April.

On Thursday 20 April a Cabinet meeting in the morning discussed the situation but decided against the immediate use of troops. The Ministerial Committee on Emergencies met for the first time in 1950 that evening in the Foreign Secretary's room in the House of Commons and, anticipating that the strike was going to spread rapidly, authorised the Home Secretary, Chuter Ede, to request service ministers to make preparations for troops to be available from Monday 24 April. At the next day's Cabinet meeting, Ede reported that 1,000 troops could be available from 24 April and that military officers in mufti' (plain clothes) would be visiting the docks on 23 April to plan the work of the troops.

Also on 21 April, with 8,000 dockers on strike along the Thames, the PWDC held another mass meeting. It offered to end the strike if a ballot of all port workers was organised so that every worker could express their opinion about the expulsions. The T&GWU leaders rejected this and 1,000 troops were sent into the docks. On 24 April, 12,000 dockers were out. The Committee on Emergencies decided to increase the number of troops by 1,000 each day until by the end of a fortnight 20,000 would be at work, "the maximum effort which they could make". On 26 April, with 14,400 dockers on strike, and over 3,000 troops at work, bus crews and tug operators considered sympathetic action.

The London Dock Labour Board, however, issued a threat to the strikers on 27 April that if they did not return to work by Monday 1 May they would be expelled from the industry. A major in the Royal Engineers was heard to say on 28 April: "I hope the bally strike doesn't finish before Monday. We want a chance to perfect our organisation this time, eh?"⁵

A mass meeting on 29 April agreed to resume work and fight the expulsions through the union. The dockers did not gain the reinstatement of the expelled militants in the union, but they had not been totally defeated for they prevented the removal of their unofficial leaders from employment on the docks.

The docks employers later tried to victimise Constable by a general policy of not hiring him at the "call". For a time after his expulsion from the union he was ignored by the employers' agents at the morning and afternoon call when men were hired. His fellow dockers decided on action. One morning when the hiring began in the control all the other dockers stepped back and left Constable standing alone. When the employers' agents called dockers, they replied one after another: "If he don't go; we don't go".⁶ For two or three calls Constable was not hired and none of the dockers went to work. Eventually the employers settled and hired Constable; the attempt to victimise him had been defeated.

After a campaign for membership in the T&GWU Saunders and Constable eventually joined the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers – the "Blue Union".⁷ At a

conference in 1958 Harry Constable spoke about the pressure put on militant unofficial leaders by the union officialdom:

"In the Transport and General Workers Union I was summoned by Deakin and told to turn it up. Many people, members of both the Communist Party and the Labour Party, have been told to turn it up or be thrown out. They offer you compromises – trade union jobs as officials, and reform from within. The T&GWU has brought in many militants and told them to toe the line. But we refused to compromise, knowing full well that we would be expelled – and not only expelled, but arrested."

He told how "together with a member of the Communist Party" (Saunders) he had wanted "to fight things out" and had worked for four years in the docks industry without a union card. "But we are recognised by the workers as trade unionists", he declared. "Wherever we go, we are respected. People recognise us. We are not fighting as individuals or for ourselves". Constable was not suggesting that trade unionists should go forward and ask for expulsion, but there could be no compromise on principles. He ended with what he would have called a piece of "docksology"; "You must make your base, and fight your case".⁸

In February 1951 the Birkenhead Portworkers' Committee called a mass meeting of Birkenhead dockers and the meeting decided to take strike action. Like the National Portworkers' Defence Committee, this Birkenhead committee had been fighting for the Dockers' Charter. It consisted of a group of young and active dockers who were in touch with Harry Constable. They had set up a committee which met regularly and published a paper which sold 1,500 copies an issue. They raised the money to purchase a small van and loudspeaker and used it for meetings at dock gates in Liverpool and Birkenhead. The strike was against a wage agreement that had been signed by the dockers' unions. The union leaders, led by Deakin and the T&GWU, had agreed to a wage increase of two shillings a week. The strike against the wage agreement spread to Liverpool and Manchester. London dockers came out on strike.

The Labour Cabinet decided on the prosecution of dockers unofficial leaders. On 9 Feb the police raided a public house in East London where the Portworkers' Defence Committee was meeting to discuss ways of spreading the strike. They arrested four unofficial leaders from London – Constable, Timothy, Cowley, and Dickens one from Liverpool – Crosby and two from Birkenhead — Harrison and Johnson. They were charged, under a war-time regulation against strikes, with conspiracy to "incite dockers to take part in strike in contravention of the Employment and National Arbitration Order 1305". Immediately 7,000 dockers stopped work in London and another 11,000 on Merseyside. Later they returned to work with a decision that they would take 24-hour protest actions each time the unofficial leaders appeared in court.

"In the court Timothy made the best speech. It was a class speech. Harrison I remember said how he had thought it was a land of Hope and Glory but he found out that it wasn't. The T&G officials were the main prosecution witnesses. A chief witness was Liverpool District secretary."⁹

The Attorney General Sir Hartley Shawcross prosecuted. Shawcross's address to the jury sought to appeal to all the prejudices against the unofficial movement.

Indeed, he repeated the accusations about violence that the state and the employers have resorted to ever since the time of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. He declared:

"Members of the jury, it was the technique of the unofficial strike, and it is important that this should be realised – the technique of lies and of threats and of fears to get men to come out on strike against the advice of the appointed leaders of their union as a whole."

Most of the prosecution's case rested on evidence from police officers. One plain clothes detective declared that he had not missed a portworkers' meeting since 1945. On the day of their first appearance in court 17,000 dockers stopped work throughout Britain. After that London dockers came out seven times on 24-hour protest strikes. In the end the jury could not agree on the first charge against the men and they were acquitted. In all 8,000 dockers went to the court on 17 April to hear the verdict. Dockers picked up the released leaders and carried them shoulder high. Mounted police charged the gathering and a number of dockers were arrested. The Liverpool leaders were met with a similar demonstration of support from dockers when they arrived at Lime Street station. The Attorney General was forced to drop the prosecution.

It was the end of Order 1305 which the Government immediately repealed. The dockers had won a victory for all workers. But it was a victory that had been won despite the opposition of the Transport and General Workers Union apparatus. Throughout the whole campaign, however, the NAS&D had given its support to the imprisoned dockers.

1. The Portworkers' Clarion, the paper of the Birkenhead dockers' unofficial committee, printed the following joke about the press and the dockers. A Birkenhead docker was on Strike and one day took his family to Chester Zoo. While he was there a lion escaped and came bounding along the path chasing two screaming children. The docker, who was an extremely big and powerful man, made even more tough by his labour on the docks, in one bound jumped on the lion's back and, putting an arm lock round its neck, strangled it. The dead body lay on the ground, the docker was surrounded by a crowd congratulating him. The press photographers and reporters surrounded him, expressing their amazement and astonishment and praising his courage and strength. They took long interviews from him and from his wife and children. They told him he would be a hero. Then just before he left one of the reporters asked him if he was on holiday. "No. I'm on strike" he said, There was certain coldness in the air then. He didn't take much notice of it but went home, waiting impatiently for the evening paper to be delivered. It came through the letter box and, with excitement, he opened it up. There he was, on the front page. Over his picture was a banner headline: "Wildcat striker kills children's pet."

2. See later in this chapter for the arrests and Old Bailey trial. Also see later chapters for more on Hugh Cunningham.

3. Strike Committee statement.

4. Minutes of Cabinet Emergency Committee, Quoted by Kenneth O. Morgan *The Peoples Peace*. Oxford,

5. *Troops in Strikes*. Steve Peke. Cobden

6. I was present at this call, having been smuggled in by unofficial leaders.

7. The NAS&D was known as the Blue Union because of the colour of its members' contribution cards. The T&GWU was known as the White Union because its cards were white.

8. Report of Rank and File Industrial Conference. *Newsletter*, 22 November 1958.

9. Peter Kerrigan.

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 4

The T&GWU and the Break to the Blue Union

Four years after the repeal of Order 1305, 16,000 dockers in the ports of Merseyside, Manchester, and Hull broke from the T&GWU and joined the NAS&D – the Blue Union.¹ Until this time the Blue Union had been a London union only, of 4,000 stevedores and 3,000 dockers. The stevedores' section of the Blue Union had originally been the Stevedores Protection Society, which was a powerful craft union formed in 1872. The stevedores then organised the cargo in the holds. Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *History of Trade Unionism*, published in 1919,² describes them as “better-paid, trained workmen who load ships for export” who “cast in their lot” with the lesser paid dock labourers in the great strike of 1889. With the development of cargoes in bulk the special nature of the Stevedores' employment was reduced, until, in the period we are discussing, the stevedores in London could be simply defined as members of the stevedores' section of the NAS&D who had agreements with employers that they worked certain ships.

Bert Aylward had been a member of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers since 1923. In June of that year, 40,000 dockers came out on strike against an agreement, signed by T&GWU leaders and port employers, accepting a reduction of wages. The strike was led by an unofficial committee called the “Unknown 39” of which Bert was a member. At the end of that strike, in disgust at the activities of the bureaucracy of the T&GWU, thousands of London dockers, including Bert Aylward, left the T&GWU and joined with the Stevedores Protection Society (a union of long standing on the docks that was not part of the amalgamation of dockers and other unions which formed the T&GWU in 1922). Out of this came the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers. Bert remained a member till he died.³

In contrast with the set-up in the T&GWU, the Blue Union embodied both militant and democratic traditions, traditions that were a great attraction for the northern men. All major decisions were referred back to the rank and file for final decision. This was a constant source of criticism by T&GWU officials, employers, and governments alike — a fact that did not go unnoticed by the dockers. The committees of inquiry which were set up under both Labour and Tory governments took note of it only in order to condemn it. The Leggett Report contrasted the NAS&D with the T&GWU.⁴ It called for “some modifications” of the tradition in the NAS&D of “constant reference back by the union official to his lay committee or to the union membership”.

The Leggett Report recalled another inquiry — the Ammon Report of 1945 — in which the democracy of the NAS&D was criticised, declaring:

“In our view the periodical necessity to face an election weakens the position of an official in many ways. There is a tendency for him

constantly to have regard to the views of extreme but vociferous minorities, and it becomes particularly difficult for him to take responsibility for a necessary decision which he feels will be unpalatable to his members." ⁴

The northern dockers saw that the leadership of the NAS&D was controlled by mass meetings of their members. It was such meetings that decided to recognise strikes that the T&GWU officials had attacked. The NAS&D gave official support to the strike which followed the boycott of ships during the 1949 Canadian seafarers union dispute. In 1949 the NAS&D called an official strike over the threat to sack "ineffective" dockers — a strike which was still talked of in 1954 as having prevented a mass sacking of old or infirm dockers. Militant dockers' felt that such a union could offer some protection to their leaders and provide them with a structure that offered more continuity than unofficial organisations, whose decline, when the struggle ebbed, left leaders open to victimisation. Dockers, such as Albert Timothy in London who were members of the Portworkers Committee together with T&GWU unofficial leaders, were also members of leading committees of the Blue Union, which gave them a protection greater than that of the unofficial leaders who were T&GWU members. Peter Kerrigan, discussing the reasons for northern dockers joining the Blue Union, said:

"We called the mass movement to the Blue Union a prison break. Leading up to it there was the overtime strike of 1954. According to the Dock Labour Scheme you were obliged, if required, to work two hours overtime of an evening. The strike was against compulsory overtime and the Blue Union made it official, while the T&G dockers leading it were unofficial. Constable and others came up to Liverpool for support and the whole of the North, Liverpool, Garston, Birkenhead, Manchester, and Hull, supported the strike. The conditions were better in London and the feeling of the 'scousers' who went down to meetings on London docks was to have an organisation like London all over, nationally, and we began to think the Blue Union could be that.

We felt we were second class citizens up here and in Hull. For decades, getting parity with London dockers' pay and conditions was a big question. In Liverpool you only began to make bonus after you had got an initial amount out. It never operated like that in London, they got paid from the very start, so much per case, or so much per hundred ... In Liverpool, if you were working on a fridge hatch and it rained, you'd have to close the hatch down and your piecework would go by the board. You'd get stoppage money but that was coppers. In London they got their piecework, In London, they at least had some reasonable toilets. Piecework prices were double in London to what they were here. If carcasses were sixpence in London they'd be threepence in Liverpool. When the bulk sugar unloading was introduced the trade union leaders agreed that we wouldn't get the rates they had in London, but we would get rates 'applicable' to the district. Instead of using changes to get better conditions they continued to keep us below London.

Some of these differences in conditions were discussed in the dockers' battalion. Also a lot of dockers came up here during the blitz, because some London docks were closed, and they compared conditions."

Thus it was that in Hull, Manchester, and Merseyside militant dockers wanted to push beyond the limits of rank and file committees. They wanted a democratic organisation that would have the stability, the permanency, and the strength to represent men all the time in dealings with the employers and that would be able to protect its own militant leadership.

When, on 16 August 1954, 4,000 dockers came out on strike in Hull, the strike spurred forward a break from the T&GWU. The strike was against an antiquated and dangerous method of unloading grain known as "handscuttling". Men had to stand up to their waists and deeper in loose grain in the hold of a ship and shovel grain into sacks with big metal scoops. Even the secretary of the National Dock Group of the T&GWU, who opposed the strike, described "handscuttling" as a "rotten, dirty, underpaid job that should have died with Queen Victoria". The T&GWU had tolerated it for years. It took the militant and unofficial action of dockers to abolish it.

As a result of this strike all the frustration and seething discontent felt by the dockers suddenly came to a head. A delegation of the Birkenhead unofficial committee visited Hull and discussed with the strike committee there and the latter decided to propose to the Hull dockers that they join the Blue Union. A mass meeting on 22 August 1954 decided, almost unanimously, to apply for membership of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers. A few days later, a leaflet was issued by the committee which led the strike. Copies were sent across to Merseyside. It summed up their feelings as follows:

"For many years the dockers of Hull have resented the way the Transport and General Workers Union has handled our disputes. Time after time we have reported our grievances to the T&GWU only to receive the reply: 'There is nothing we can do, our hands are tied'. We of Hull believe that the time has come to do some untying: that is, to untie ourselves from the T&GWU and enter the Blue Union. We also believe that the experiences of the Merseyside dockers are the same as ours in Hull. We, therefore, call upon you to defend your interests by joining with us and supporting us in our attempts to achieve the unity of dockers within the democratic structure of the Blue Union."

Four weeks after the Hull meeting 1,000 dockers packed into Birkenhead Town Hall and enthusiastically agreed to follow Hull's example. All but a tiny handful of Birkenhead's dockers subsequently applied to join the NAS&D. Manchester followed soon after and by the end of the year dockers were flocking to the Blue Union from every dock on Merseyside. This "walk-out" involved approximately 40 per cent of the dock workers in Liverpool, Birkenhead, Manchester, and Hull. The size of the break-away proved that here was no artificial and isolated adventure by a handful of men acting on impulse. London meetings of the NAS&D rank and file of both sections came out overwhelmingly in favour of accepting the membership of northern dockers.

Offices were set up in Hull, Birkenhead, Manchester, and Liverpool. In the early months of 1955 large mass meetings of dockers were held in these cities. Branches and Area Committees of the NAS&D were established. By March 1955 there were five branches of the union in Birkenhead, 12 in Liverpool, two in Manchester, and seven in Hull. Full-time officers were operating in all these towns. The popular nature of the movement was shown by the large attendance at branch meetings, Hundreds

of dockers were swept into union branch activity for the first time in their lives. That first great organising of dock labourers 60 years before must have resembled the thronging of these virile, raw, but energetic forces into the branch meeting rooms. What a startling contrast to the tiny branch meetings of the T&GWU. Enthusiasm replaced apathy. Dockers felt at last that they did not "belong" to the union but that the union belonged to them. -

Peter Kerrigan, looking back on that time, describes the feelings:

"We wanted to make the Blue Union what the T&GWU was meant to be. I was on a delegation to London dockers during the 1954 strike, and I remember we discussed then how best to move, whether it was better to continue unofficially in the T&G, working with the official committee of the Blue, or to make a complete break. The attack on the members by Deakin and the officials was so bad that if you did any fighting you were always in danger of losing your registration book and your job on the docks. Danny Brandon was soon to be a casualty and lost his book for attending a meeting in the afternoon.

After the 1954 overtime strike, we were more and more convinced of the course of joining the Blue. There was big support among the rank and file. When Dick Barrett came up to Liverpool to speak at the Liverpool stadium there was the biggest meeting of dockers ever seen there. The hall overflowed, there were 8,000 people there. They passed a resolution to join the NAS&D. Barrett was carried out of the hall. He was a little cockney sparrow of a man, proud of the stevedores' traditions of sticking together and fighting for old and infirm dockers. He got caught up in something that he didn't realise would have the effect it did, of bringing the whole trade union bureaucracy down on his head.

That stadium meeting was the culmination of dock gate meetings where we got a consensus of opinion from the dock by resolutions. After the stadium meeting we opened premises in unused shops, up and down the dock road. The central office was above the Mersey Cafe at the Pier Head, Liverpool. Constable, Harry Freeman, an official of the dockers' section (who came up to recruit us but was a witness against us in the subsequent court case), and Bert Aylward, were sent up by the Blue Union from London as recruiting officers. During this recruitment, men were leaving the ships where they were working, to sign up with the Blue and get their union cards. They signed forms declaring that they wished to transfer their membership from the T&GWU to the NAS&D and an official of the NAS&D would countersign the form. We had four or five thousand members sign up in three weeks. In Birkenhead by this time, there was only a handful left in the T&GWU.

We didn't know about the Bridlington Agreement, which was an agreement among the trade union bureaucracies that they wouldn't poach each other's members. We just thought it right that you should be able to be in the union that you thought would fight best for you. When Bill Johnson was asked by counsel in the court case what he

knew of the Bridlington Agreement at the time, he said he thought it was a 'sweet club'." ⁵

The TUC General Council immediately gave its support to the bureaucracy of the T&GWU. The NAS&D was suspended from the TUC for "poaching" forthwith. But the Blue Union continued to expand in the north. The T&GWU threatened dockers with loss of jobs if they joined the Blue Union. Officials posted notices outside the Birkenhead premises of the union, inviting 1,000 men to register at once to fill the "waiting list" for jobs on the dock and replace dockers who had joined the NAS&D, that is, they were declaring that those who joined the Blue Union had lost their employment! The action was met with anger and contempt from the mass of dockers in both unions. In April 1955, when the dockers in Merseyside and Manchester applied for their new registration books, an attempt to deprive Blue Union members of their livelihood was decisively defeated. Dockers of both unions immediately stopped work when Blue Union men were refused registration books because they could not produce a T&GWU union card. Hughie Cunningham describes what happened in Liverpool at the start of an action that paralysed Merseyside docks. Cunningham became secretary of the No 1 branch of the Blue Union in Liverpool, which was composed of dockers on the Gladstone dock in the north end of Liverpool. It is the area where the free port and container base are now, and where almost the entire labour force of less than 400 dockers on Merseyside is now concentrated. He joined the Blue a few years after he started on the docks. He said he was sick of the "corruption" and the way the bad conditions were ignored by union officials. He told me the story that was current in the Gladstone about the first attempt by the Transport and General Workers Union officials to defeat the Blue Union in 1955 by this agreement that employers would only hire men on the production of a T&GWU union card.

"When the hiring began and dockers were asked for the cards, some men pulled out of their pockets the ace of spades or the jack of diamonds. In the Gladstone, the superintendent – Charlie Swanney – went to hire a gang; there were six White men and two Blue. He tapped Pat Flynn, a T&G member on the shoulder. Pat turned round and immediately said to him: 'Sorry Charlie, we're snookered behind the blue'. Another docker started singing then, "Oh you can't have one without the other'. Soon, all the men in the control – it was a control of 2,000 — were singing in chorus: "Oh you can't have one, you can't have one, you can't have one without the o-o-ther'." ⁶

The three ports were completely paralysed. After two days the Manchester Dock Labour Board capitulated and the Merseyside Board followed.

1. The Blue Union claimed to have recruited 8,500 in Liverpool and Garston, 2,000 in Manchester, 3,500 in Hull and 2,200 in Birkenhead.
2. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*.
3. There was another break away in 1932 concerned with the democracy of the T&GWU. The Scottish Transport and General Workers Union was formed in 1932, embracing all the dockers in the ports of Glasgow and Campbeltown. They were defending the right to elect their eight full time officials when the T&GWU Executive insisted that the officials should be appointed by them. The branch had won a judgement in the courts confirming its right to elect officials. Ernest Bevin,

general secretary of the T&GWU, promptly changed the rules of the union and the dockers of Glasgow organised themselves separately.

4. *Unofficial stoppages on the London docks*. A report of a committee of inquiry under the chairmanship of Sir Frederick Leggett, 1950.
5. Bill Johnson, one of the Birkenhead dockers arrested under Order 1305, became full-time official for the Blue Union in Birkenhead in 1955. He was an official until the 1970s. He then worked in Cammel Lairds shipyard where he became a leading shop steward.
6. The song "*Love and Marriage*" was popular around that time.

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 5

The Blue Union Recognition Strike

The NAS&D demanded that it be recognised by the employers in the northern ports. This was refused, and further, the employers refused to negotiate on the demand. The official paper of the union *News of the Blues* on 14 May 1955 reported:

“Representatives from Birkenhead, Liverpool, Hull, Manchester and London attended the National Delegate Conference last weekend and having considered the reports from various ports, decided that efforts by the officers to obtain recognition were not likely to succeed.

For the last seven months, the officers have been in correspondence with the employers in Hull and Merseyside, in an endeavour to obtain authority to adjudicate on day to day problems and to secure full representation on the Local Group Committees. The employers' attitude is that we must first of all obtain the consent of the Transport and General Workers Union, and accordingly we have written letters to the Transport and General Workers Union but have not received a reply. The Minister of Labour has been fully informed by us of our efforts to obtain recognition.”

In the same issue of this broadsheet there is an article by Bert Aylward about the participation of the Blue Union contingent in the Liverpool May Day march.

“For the first time in Liverpool, the banners of the NAS&D were carried in the city's May Day demonstration on Sunday 1st May. Despite torrential rain just before the time for commencement, there was an excellent turn out, from both the local trades unions and Labour Parties.

The Liverpool Trades Council [at that time a Trades and Labour Council] had decided in all its wisdom that we should not be allowed to participate in the march; perhaps they felt we would march like outcasts or poor relations at the rear. Maybe they felt that as Jimmy O'Hare was the marshal it might be a little embarrassing for him.

However, we considered ourselves fully entitled to take our place in the normal procession, so we entered in the centre of the line-up.

Judging by the response we got from other unions and the Labour Party rank and file we were very welcome.

The response to our contingent from the onlookers on the route was very good. A group of T&G busmen were heard to shout 'Good old Blues'. Many of the onlookers bought the union's broadsheet.

Conspicuous by its absence was the T&G Docks Section banner. I wonder if they are getting short of people to carry it?

Without doubt, the presence of our union in the procession was a good thing, it helped to show to other trade unionists the determination of the Blue to remain here, and also showed that the NAS&D is a real part of the proper union movement."

The meeting of the Blue Union proposed strike action as from 23 May if the employers did not grant recognition by then. The recommendation went before mass meetings in London, Hull, Manchester, Liverpool, and Birkenhead. In Hull, only 22 men in a meeting of 1,500 voted against the strike ultimatum. It was the same in all the ports. Everywhere the strike recommendation was endorsed by decisive majorities.

A statement issued by the T&GWU on the eve of the strike called on its docker members to remain at work and declared that only "a reign of anarchy and terror" could result from the Blue Union's action. Such language testifies to a state of panic. The TUC General Council condemned the strike and demanded that the Blue Union should hand back the northern men to the T&GWU, The TUC obviously felt that it was unimportant what the dockers thought or what they wanted. For the TUC the matter was one of making "suitable" arrangements at the top. The ranks could simply be herded around to suit the needs of union bosses. Over 20,000 dockers stopped work on the Monday that the ultimatum expired. In addition 7,000 T&GWU men came out in sympathy. In February 1958 in the pamphlet *Hands off the Blue* I wrote: "Surveying the beginning of the strike now it is clearer than ever that there was every chance of victory". The strike had solid support in the ranks of the NAS&D. The employers placed the emphasis for non-recognition on an "inter-union" struggle, stating that recognition was a matter for the unions to settle among themselves. In this way, they left open a way to retreat. The T&GWU leadership was desperately afraid of the spread of the strike. Leaders of the union declared they were willing to spend £9 million to break the strike. Now that it was a question of defending the union bureaucracy there were no barriers to the amount of resources that the union and the energy of the officials could unleash — something which the dockers had not often seen in conflicts with their employers. The campaign of the T&GWU was a failure. When national officers of the union called their members to a meeting in Liverpool, 3,000 dockers gave them such a rough handling that they were obliged to call in a police escort before they could leave. As they left, the national officers were pelted with pieces of bread, which was the strikers reply to an earlier threat of one official – the Merseyside District Secretary, J. O'Hare – that the strikers would be "forced to eat crusts". Thereafter he was to be known as "Crusty" O'Hare. A.E. Tiffin, General Secretary of the T&GWU, was later to reveal how close the leadership felt that the NAS&D was to success. Speaking to a Docks National Committee in August 1955, he declared:

"That battle could have been lost. In my opinion it was one of the greatest crises we have had to face for a long period of time."

The strike lasted six weeks. The strikers received no strike pay and suffered very real hardship, but it was not a break in the militancy of the rank and file which prevented victory being achieved. Why then did it fail? The answer lies partly in the weakness which quickly began to show itself among a section of the London leadership of the NAS&D who backed the struggle in the beginning but found it something they were not prepared for. They had welcomed the northern men into the union and ended not only by letting them down, but by flouting the democratic traditions of their own Blue Union.

More importantly, assisting the offensive against the Strike were the leaders of the Communist Party. In the months before the recognition strike they had opposed the development of the Blue Union in the northern ports. When Hull dockers joined, Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party, attacked the action and called for "unity in the fight to democratise the Transport and General Workers Union". To say the least, that demand was but an abstract generalisation. The very choice made by these dockers posed the question of workers' democracy in a new way. They had a right to make their choice. Even for those who believed that the choice was wrong, their principled course was to support them in a battle for workers' democracy against an entrenched bureaucracy. Those dockers in the T&GWU who supported the Blue Union recognition strike were acting on the simple principle (which Harry Pollitt would have supported with all his undoubted oratory 30 years before) that they chose the side of their fellow workers in struggle even though they personally were not prepared to leave the T&GWU.

The policy of the Communist Party at the time was to obtain by any means the lifting of the ban on members of the Communist Party occupying official positions in the T&GWU. Their way of winning this concession was not by means of a principled struggle but rather the opportunist one of making moves at the top and winning the support of a section of the bureaucracy. Their whole trade union policy essentially involved building "pressure movements", not in fighting to build an alternative leadership.

Their line was not accepted without misgivings by many of their own dock members. In his autobiography, *There is no other way*, Frank Deegan, a Liverpool docker, who was a member of the Communist Party all his working life, reports how Merseyside docker members of his party – Alec McKechnie, Jack Leydon, Bill Donaghy, himself, and "many others" – sent deputations to the local and national officials of the T&GWU. He reports that they supported recognition, even though, "We were not too keen on the idea that the best way to help solve the problem would be to get recognition for the break-aways". However, he continued: "We were determined that only the Transport Union would be responsible for dockers in the northern ports."

A comment that shows a certain amount of confusion on the part of a loyal Communist Party member, caught between the feeling on the docks and the training of his party.

The strike began on 28 May 1955. Immediately, outside the Surrey dock, a member of the Executive of the Stevedores section of the Blue Union made an appeal for a return to work, Docker members of the Communist Party refused to scab. However, leading Communist Party industrial members put pressure on the NAS&D leaders to carry out the policy of the TUC General Council. However, the Communist Party undermined the strike more effectively than if its members had openly crossed the picket lines. The strike had only been on a few days when the National Trade Union

Liaison Committee, an organisation of trade unionists dominated by Communist Party policy, together with the executive of the Lightermen's Union, met the London Executive Committee of the NAS&D and demanded they call the strike off. This pressure, which they continued to apply up to the end of the strike, was supplemented by the *Daily Worker*, the Communist Party paper, whose reports played down the numbers on strike and the possibility of support in other ports.

On 31 December 1954 an article by Vic Marney, a well known docker member of the Communist Party, appeared in *Tribune*, the paper of the Bevanites in the Labour Party. Incidentally, *Tribune* gave sympathetic treatment to the Blue Union. Marney was at this time secretary of the "Liaison Committee". He declared in his article that the Liaison Committee had decided:

"Under no circumstances will they be involved in any struggle for the recognition of the NAS&D in the outer ports."

The pressure on the leaders of the Blue Union from the TUC and the Communist Party had its effect. A fortnight after the strike began the London Executive of the Blue Union pushed the Liaison Committee's recommendation through at a conference of the Executive held with delegates from the northern ports. It was carried only by the chairman using both his ordinary vote and a casting vote and against the united opposition of all the northern representatives. Members of the Executive were not so desperate, at this stage, as to break with the democratic procedures of the NAS&D. They put the recommendation to the rank and file at mass meetings in London and the North and it was decisively rejected. A fortnight later another recommendation for a return was given the same treatment,

The damage, however, was being done. No matter how near the employers came to giving way in face of the determination of the rank and file, they still held back in the hope that the opponents of the strike inside the trade union movement would succeed in breaking it. The national delegate conference of the NAS&D was forced to spend hour after hour and day after day discussing formulas for capitulation at a time when a vigorous campaign to win support for recognition would have had every chance of a quick and overwhelming victory. The closing stage was reached when the delegate conference, worn down by internal discussion and isolated from the rank and file, agreed to go before a "Disputes Committee" set up by the TUC, at which the union was represented by the chairman and two national officers, both of whom were against the strike and both due to leave their jobs at the end of the month. The Disputes Committee was clearly a "set up" on the part of the leaders of the General Council and intended to bludgeon the Blue Union into submission in the interests of preserving the bureaucracy of the T&GWU. It demanded the expulsion of the northern men from the Blue Union. In return the NAS&D was promised that its suspension from the TUC would be lifted. Excluding the northern men from voting, the London members of the Executive of the union met on Friday 1 July and carried a resolution moved by a Communist Party member to accept the demand of the TUC leadership and instruct the strikers to return to work on the following Monday. Breaking with the traditions of the Blue Union, the Executive arranged no mass meetings.

However, meetings of northern dockers were called by local leaders and rank and file leaders also called a meeting in London. Despite the betrayals, morale clearly remained high at these meetings. The members of the northern committee had, however, to take into consideration the length of the strike, the necessity to preserve

forces and the added strain on T&GWU members who had supported the strike. With this in mind, they therefore recommended a return to work — but declared they remained members of the Blue Union and announced that they would carry on the fight for recognition. In Birkenhead a large number voted against the return. A *Manchester Guardian* reporter wrote of the Manchester meeting:

“As in Merseyside, (and it seems, in accordance with the new general policy of the ‘Blue Union’ in the northern ports) the retreat was made in good order and the language was as firm and militant as it has been at any time in the last six weeks. No one, from the cheerfulness of the crowd, would have guessed that it was the end of a six-week strike.”

In Hull, the strikers marched back to work in the same way as they had marched through the city on several occasions during the strike. In the weeks following, the secretaries of Blue Union branches in the north received letters from the Acting General Secretary of their union coldly informing them that they were excluded from the union as from 6 July. This was how a majority of the members of the union were expelled by the London members of its Executive.

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 6

Rank and File Unity in Defence of the “Blue”

The NAS&D leaders who carried through the expulsion of their northern members and the TUC leaders who demanded it were to find that the account was not closed. As usual they underrated working class tenacity. “Oh yes, I’m certain the men will return to the Transport Workers Union”. With these patronising words, outside TUC headquarters, the General Secretary of the TUC dismissed a warning of Bill Johnson, a full time official of the Blue Union in Birkenhead and secretary of the Merseyside Area Committee of the union.

The men did not return to the T&GWU, however. The Blue Union organisation refused to be killed. The northern men continued to pay their subscriptions and maintained their full-time officials and offices. They decided to fight their expulsions in the courts. Legal proceedings dragged on for nine months.

The six weeks recognition strike demanded great sacrifices from these dockers. From its betrayal onwards they sought a war of attrition which imposed huge strains. Blue Union militants were victimised for the slightest offence. Recognition was denied except in Hull, where the Blue Union official and local bosses operated de facto “ship side” recognition and the union had some power of negotiation on rates of pay and on job disputes.

Despite its problems, the organisation retained its strength in the north and was capable, from time to time, of showing very sharp teeth. In March 1956, the “test case” – Spring versus National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers — came before the Liverpool court. The courtroom was crowded with dockers. A few days later, judgement was given. It established that the NAS&D had invited the northern

men to join and Spring had been wrongfully expelled!¹ The northern men were back in the NAS&D.

They had established their right to be members of the NAS&D, legally as well as morally through their stubborn determination. With a tenacity born of their own interests the leaders of the TUC and the T&GWU continued to work to overturn the effects of this legal victory. The same tenacity was noticeably absent in the 1980s in fighting against Tory anti-union laws. Transport Union officials made continuous attempts to drive men back into their union.

The break to the NAS&D – an eloquent testimony to the extreme discontent with the T&GWU – served as a warning to the T&GWU bureaucracy of the explosive potential that existed within all sections of the union. Soon after the recognition strike, Frank Cousins became General Secretary of the T&GWU. The Communist Party, in particular, marked his appointment as a great change, christening him the “shining light”. In *The Awkward Warrior*, his biography of Cousins, Geoffrey Goodman describes how Cousins saw his tasks when he became General Secretary, Cousins spoke to the union Executive in March 1956, and told them that:

“I think we have to face the fact that it is going to be a long and difficult task, but here again given full co-operation between the officers and a determined approach we should eventually succeed in recovering the lost membership.”

That the Blue Union had sunk deep foundations in the north was evident from the way in which it maintained its strength there despite the constant attacks from the T&GWU bureaucracy and the TUC General Council. With evident determination and a strong sense of class loyalty, dockers in the T&GWU opposed their own officials on several occasions during these two decades in resistance to the victimisation of Blue Union men. Peter Kerrigan said of this solidarity with the Blue Union on the docks:

“The Transport and General officials tried all kinds of methods: show of cards with the officials declaring that anyone who didn't show a T&GWU card would not be available for work; trying to refuse our registration as dockers. But they continually came up against the solidarity of dockers. The men who stayed in the T&G knew that those who joined the NAS&D were generally fighters. We'd been on the old unofficial committees and anything that had been won had not come from the T&GWU officially, but through the unofficial movement. And there was also the widespread detestation of Transport and General Workers officials. Some of those older dockers who had been a lifetime in the T&GWU found it difficult to leave even though all they could show for it was a small funeral benefit, but they had an allegiance because they had been in so long. There were men who had been in the old carters' union which went to form the T&GWU. They supported the Blue Union fight and they would say: 'If I was younger, I'd be with you'. Most of those people who stayed in the White Union recognised that if there was no Blue there would be no fight.”

We have already seen how, in April 1955, 13,000 Merseyside dockers stopped work when an attempt was made to prevent Blue Union members from working on the docks. In October of the same year 10,000 dockers responded to a call for a one day

stoppage and won the reinstatement of two NAS&D members sacked after an allegation that they called another docker a "scab" at a bus stop.

In a ballot held in December 1957 that was organised by the T&GWU to elect members of the Merseyside Dock Labour Board, the winning candidate polled only 201 votes. Another unofficial ballot was run on the docks by the Blue Union, scrutinised by rank and file members of the White Union. The Blue Union nominee received four times the votes cast in the T&GWU ballot.²

T&GWU officers campaigned to have representatives of the Dock Labour Board discriminate against Blue Union members in the allocation of jobs. Early in January 1958, over 1,500 men, almost the entire labour force in No.5 control on Liverpool docks, stopped work for half a day when NAS&D members were refused a job. Two members of the Blue Union had been hired in a gang to discharge bulk sugar. On the instructions of a T&GWU official the foreman had given them their books back, which meant he was not taking them on. Members of the T&GWU and of the NAS&D walked out of the hiring pen in protest,

On 24 January, J. O'Hare, Merseyside District Secretary of the T&GWU, told the Liverpool Echo.

"Anybody who is not in the Transport and General Workers Union is a non-unionist".

On 28 January the Merseyside Area Committee of the NAS&D called for a day's protest action to oppose the victimisation of its members by T&GWU officials. Over 9,000 Merseyside dockers answered the call.

Support for these and other actions to defend the NAS&D raised the essential question very starkly: Are men and women trade unionists when their organisation is recognised as a fighting trade union by the majority of their fellow workers?

Even with the mountain of evidence before it, in respect of the level of support among the dockers for the right of men to belong to the NAS&D, in March 1962, T&GWU officials on Merseyside once again attempted to strike a final blow against the Blue in defence of their own interests. Once again they totally misjudged the possibilities when they attempted to build a strike against Blue Union dockers. The officials organised a gang of men from among those few on the docks who still supported them and induced them to refuse to work with "non-unionists". In "support" of these men they then called an official strike against "non-unionism" on the docks, a strike directed specifically against Blue Union members. There followed an amazing and significant series of events. The Blue Union dockers decided to stop work with their fellow workers, members of the White Union, against non-unionism! Around 9,000 Liverpool dockers from both unions were on strike for eight days.

As a result, the officials found themselves more despised than ever. But this did not stop them blindly staggering even further into the mire in pursuit of their war against the NAS&D. The officials first called off the strike. Then they reached an agreement with the Employers' Association to advise its members only to hire T&GWU members as from 24 April. That meant that at the "call", dockers would only be given a job on production of a White Union card. Reality was to strike the officials and the employers a heavy blow. When the employers carried out their agreement and T&GWU members were asked to show their union cards in the hiring pens before being hired, they refused! In a few days, with employers' agents refusing to hire men who would not show their cards, the docks were almost at a standstill. The *Journal of*

Commerce declared that shippers were privately expressing the view in Liverpool that the port was in as bad a position as if there was a strike.

The Employers Association hastily withdrew the advice to their members and called upon them to engage labour in the customary manner. Then they issued a long and revealing statement to the press. They declared they had expressed "misgivings" to the T&GWU officials at the beginning. They had felt that members of T&GWU would not support the union's own official resolution. Their statement went on to say: "The union gave assurance, however, that their members would give 100 per cent support". Then they described the reality of what happened:

"As soon as the arrangements were put into operation on the morning of Tuesday, 24 April, many members of the T&GWU refused to display their cards, apparently because their mates in the Blue Union would be unable to work. Throughout the week the position has steadily deteriorated ...with serious consequences to the trade of the port."

The Merseyside T&GWU officials were forced to retreat in disorder. Once again it was shown that the break-away represented a genuine process inside the docks industry. It is true that a number of men in the northern ports became non-unionists. The state of mind of these dockers should be understood. Their attitude can be summed up as: The T&GWU won't serve us and the Blue Union can't. What puts the question in perspective is the consideration that, during this period of the 1960s, unity of all dockers was possible, as was shown most clearly in the strike of 1967, and could have ended non-unionism. The majority of the dockers who were in neither union were not antiunion, and readily came out during strikes. In his book³ already quoted, Frank Deegan says that the judge's ruling that the northern men were legally members of the NAS&D "kept Britain's registered dockers in the major ports in inter-union strife for many years. This suited the port employers and the ship owners." This conclusion is totally removed from reality! The Blue Union leaders in the north were in the vanguard of all the struggles from the 1950s as many of them had been before. The responsibility for non-unionism rested firmly on the shoulders of the bureaucracy of the T&GWU who put their own narrow interests before the interests of their docker membership, used the machinery of their union against the Blue Union, and employed it in a similar way against the unofficial movement.

A joint campaign between Blue and White unions for a genuine and complete trade union organisation on the docks, a demand which was made again and again by the Blue Union, would have forged both a stronger sense of solidarity and a 100 per cent union membership on the docks. The T&GWU officials continually refused to join such a campaign. Their interests lay in imposing, or rather constantly re-imposing, their complete control over the membership.

Very little has been written on this break-away to the Blue Union, which in itself is quite significant. The trade union leadership has wanted to forget it, and the "Broad Left" that later developed inside the T&GWU was linked in an alliance with the Communist Party and in consequence has been willing to accept the Communist Party's version of history. The small pamphlet I wrote on the matter remains, as far as I know, the only survey of its history,⁴

The relations between the northern members of the NAS&D and the leadership in London remained uneasy and fluctuating. The London leaders were under pressure from the TUC General Council and the T&GWU leaders on the one hand, and on the

other, during the 1960s, they had the pressure of their own London membership which was opposed to the “decasualisation” schemes that the employers, government, and the T&GWU bureaucracy were foisting on the dockers. From time to time, however, the leaders of the Blue Union were still pushed forward by their membership, as for example when Barrett came to Liverpool in 1962 and spoke against the “New Deal” sponsored by the T&GWU area secretary. And again in 1963 when Barrett broke the secrecy on the terms agreed between the trade union leaders and employers as a result of the Rochdale enquiry.⁵

1. There was a conflict in the court over the resolution that the Executive Committee of the Blue Union had carried that the union should recruit in the north. A page of the minutes was missing. However it was conclusively shown that the union had sent officials to the north and opened premises and invited men to join.

2. *Newsletter*. 21 Dec 1957.

3. *No Other Way*

4. Hands off the Blue. A Labour Review pamphlet published in 1958.

5. *Ibid.*

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 7

The “Decasualisation” Deals

After the court case, the Blue Union took back the members in the north, but with the union outside the TUC. The northern members were in continuous struggle to preserve their position on the docks. In the 1960s, they were in the lead in the continuous resistance from dockers to the plans which emerged in employers', state and government circles for the reorganisation of the docks in the interests of British capitalism. The plans had the ear of national trade union leaders like Cousins and Jones, (who was later to take over Cousins' former job at the head of the T&GWU), and area bureaucrats like Merseyside's notorious Mr. “Crusty” O'Hare.

With increasing world competition and the decline of the British economy more and more evident, there was a growing pressure from the British ruling class for the reorganisation of British industries and the curbing of the power of the organised working class. Like the rest of the British workers, the dockers fought back. With economic and technological developments, characteristics of dock work that had lasted for centuries began to change. There was an increase in the ratio of capital equipment to labour, the decline of skilled manual handling and the development of bulk handling, palletisation, containerisation and roll-on roll-off ships. While, continuously, the trade union leaders were found agreeing with propositions for “decasualisation” by the employers which meant an increase in their power over the dockers, just as continuously they ignored, resisted or opposed the demands of dockers for real decasualisation, under the control of workers themselves.

Occasionally, a “left” leader, like Jack Jones, would make a propaganda speech on nationalisation of the docks and the need for real security, but the words had no connection with action. Trade union leaders and employers' leaders were driven together by a joint interest in controlling dockers' militancy. “Decasualisation”, hope

of the old dock militants, now became the banner under which the state and government re-organisation of the docks, and the dockers, took place.

In 1961, there was the birth of what became known as the 'Crichton-Cousins Manifesto'. It suffered the fate of some later similar moves when it was smothered by the dockers' hostility. It was conceived after a strike in London in May 1961 over the use of nonregistered labour at Lower Oliver's Wharf. Cousins obtained a return to work after a week and, after the strike, he had talks with the Tory Minister of Labour who also had discussions with A.J. Crichton, spokesman for the National Association of Port Employers, Cousins and Crichton agreed with the Minister that they would meet to prepare a national campaign for "decasualisation". The two of them were co-chairmen of the National Joint Council (NJC) for the Port Industry, consisting of employers and trade union leaders. In October 1961, the NJC issued a directive which became known as the "Crichton-Cousins Manifesto". In his book, *Dockers: The impact of industrial change*¹, David. F. Wilson writes:

"The unions made much greater concessions than the employers in the directive. They admitted that casual work had bred attitudes which militated against the observance of agreements and the efficient use of manpower, and they conceded that the restrictive practices which had grown up over generations to give hiring and job protection should be scrapped before, or simultaneously with, the decasualisation of the industry. The real obstacle to more effective decasualisation has been the lack of flexibility in the deployment of labour in the most effective manner and the remedy was for both sides of the industry to agree to mechanisation, rationalising the employing structure and flexible manning scales."

Decasualisation, then, could be achieved if the dock labour force was brought completely under the employers' control, to be used "flexibly" by them and without any of the dockers' "restrictive" practices. Cousins, however, had agreed with Crichton that, even so, there could not be a complete end of casualisation, as a casual fringe might have to be kept in all ports to meet fluctuations. Wilson describes the Manifesto as a result of "selfless abandon" by the trade union leadership. However, as the trade union leaders themselves were not going to do the suffering which this manifesto suggested, the abandoning of their members could hardly be described as "selfless".

It was at this time that Crichton declared that the labour force in London could be reduced from 27,000 to 14,000. Despite these statements about the drastic reduction of the dock labour force which employers' representatives let fall from time to time, in the next two and a half decades, trade union and government spokespersons made every attempt to play down the dockers' fear of unemployment. We shall quote some of them later.

Now, back to Cousins and Crichton, who might propose ... but the dockers disposed. Everywhere the Cousins-Crichton Manifesto met scorn and rejection from the men. It truly never "got off the ground". The next attempt was made on Merseyside. In 1962, in line with national moves, the Merseyside dock employers and the T&GWU announced negotiations for a new deal for Merseyside's dockers. The Merseyside T&GWU docks district secretary, Mr. J. O'Hare, who declared he had negotiated the deal personally, described it as "a deal which would make every docker's street 'sunshine street'." The "New Deal" contained agreements on mobility and flexibility.

The employers had no difficulty in arriving at agreement with the trade union leaders, but they found it impossible to implement it. Dockers strenuously opposed the deal. Once more, the employers came up against the unity of Blue and White dockers. The trade union officials on Merseyside only increased the anger of dockers, by making it clear that their collusion with the plans of the employers was intimately linked with their own plans to break the NAS&D. Blue Union members were further incensed by the declaration of O'Hare that their union had only 150 members in Birkenhead and Liverpool.

The Merseyside Area Committee of the NAS&D led the campaign against the proposals of the "New Deal". The climax was an overflowing meeting of 4,500 dockers which unanimously rejected the deal, with Dick Barrett, the General Secretary of the NAS&D, as well as speakers from Hull, Manchester and Merseyside attacking it. Barrett was met with loud applause and laughter when he began his speech by declaring he was pleased to welcome this meeting of 150 Blue Union members. After little more than a year, the proposals of the "New Deal" met the fate of the Crichton-Cousins Manifesto when they were finally dropped.

Again, soon after, there was the debacle of the Rochdale Committee of Enquiry into the docks, which had been set up by the Tory Government. It produced new "decasualisation" proposals, declaring that discussions behind closed doors had reached agreement with all the unions except the NAS&D. The new "decasualisation" scheme planned to introduce permanent employment to a proportion of the labour force under a contract system between each company and each dock worker it employed. The other proportion of dockers would be casuals sharing out the scraps, Disciplinary proceedings for the permanent workers would be entirely in the hands of the employers, with strikers facing loss of contract. The dockers saw this as a plan to split the dockers' solidarity by "decasualising" one section. The employers also talked of a drastic reduction in the number of dockers and had presented a big list of the alterations to working rules that they wanted.

This new deal which was agreed in secret by the trade union leaders met the same fate as others. The conspiracy of the trade union leaders against their members was upset by the democratic traditions of the Blue Union, which its leaders could not break completely at that time. The T&GWU rank and file demanded that their leaders report on the negotiations and were incensed when the union printed a circular which Wilson declares was "thoroughly evasive". It declared they would not give the employers' current proposals to their members, because they were "complex". On 10 March 1963 Barrett, General Secretary of the NAS&D, broke the secrecy of the talks, addressed a meeting of 2,000 of the Blue Union in London, and told them these employers' proposals. The meeting unanimously voted down the "decasualisation" scheme. Unofficial mass meetings of the T&GWU followed and also rejected them.

The dockers again put forward their own decasualisation proposals. The unofficial committee in the Royal Docks in London at this time published a charter of 11 demands including nationalisation, the retention of the scheme and for the register to be kept at its present strength with the inclusion of every port in the Scheme. It included demands for better piece rates, sickness and accident pay; a pension of £4 a week and retiring age of 65; a 40-hour week and three weeks holiday a year.

In 1964 the Labour Government of Harold Wilson was elected and, with the support of the trade union bureaucracy brought about the years of "productivity deals" when workers' conditions were "sold". Productivity deals were a monument to opportunism

— the workers generally received immediate small results while the employers made long-term gains. The 1960s, it will be remembered, was a period of the expansion of trade union membership and organisation in the workplace. But Labour Party leaders, trade union leaders and the big employers' associations alike, were concerned that (as Barbara Castle, the former Labour left winger, who was Minister of Labour, expressed it) "Power lies on the shop floor". In the workplace, conditions and wages were being won beyond those agreed by the "responsible" trade union leaders. The Labour Government of 1964-1970, therefore, began the attack on legal rights of union struggle which the later Tory Governments carried on. The reorganisation of industry and concentration of capital went ahead under the Labour Government. Capital needed the reorganisation of labour in order to maintain its rate of profit. For that, it was necessary to undermine the power of trade unionism. That was why the Labour Government introduced its White Paper which it called *In Place of Strife* – a direct attack on workers' organisation. The powerful reaction of the rank and file of the unions to this attack eventually split the Labour cabinet and forced the defeat of the Government's plans. The dockers participated in the forefront of the general struggle against the anti-union legislation. At the same time, particular plans were put into operation by the state and the government to curb the dockers' strength. They had the aim which Cousins had agreed with Crichton – to remove the restrictions on the docks employers which dockers had fiercely fought for over a hundred years, protecting themselves and their families and protecting, not only their own jobs, but the jobs of their sons. While workers were making economic advances, the ground was being laid for employers to change the relationship of forces completely in their favour.

1. Fontana, 1972.

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 8

The Devlin Scheme

Immediately after its election, the Labour Government of 1964 set up a committee of inquiry into the docks and modernisation, under the chairmanship of Lord Devlin. The other members of the Devlin Committee were Hugh Clegg from Nuffield College Oxford, Jack Scamp from the board of General Electric, and Sidney Ford, former right-wing president of the National Union of Mineworkers.

The Wilson leadership had no intention of introducing nationalisation of the docks as dockers were demanding. The Devlin Inquiry and its report were set up to help re-organise the docks industry and its labour force in the interests of British capitalism. The Labour Government of 1964 began the long dance which ended in 1989. It can be described as the employers, the government and the State giving with the left hand in order to take away, in a more lasting and decisive form, with the right hand, twice what they had given.¹ The Committee was asked to begin by resolving the docks strike which had started at the time of the election in 1964. Evidently, the Government hoped the Devlin Committee could provide a sweetener in settling the strike, and thus help achieve an acceptance of another "decasualisation" scheme which the inquiry would recommend.

On the eve of the general election, Frank Cousins was shouted down in the Liverpool Stadium by angry dockers, when he attempted to defend both his leadership and a wages deal he had just made with the employers. The offer was less than the demands of the dockers for 25 shillings a day minimum, an increase in wages and better conditions including proper welfare facilities. Dockers in London, Liverpool and Hull came out on unofficial strike against the agreement.

The Devlin Committee rapidly settled the strike. Dockers were given 19 shillings and two pence minimum, over a third more than Cousins had accepted, and an increase in piecework rates. The strike ended and the Devlin Committee continued its inquiry into modernisation.

The process began toward a re-organisation of the docks industry. It was a process which over the following decades moved forward, despite explosions and delays, resulting from the strength and solidarity of the docks rank and file. A pattern now emerged: dockers won economic advances, better working conditions, and increased redundancy pay, but steadily lost on the political plane – their future and their rights of control were undermined; their jobs and communities were destroyed.

Let us not forget, also, that the economic advances were won by the dockers' own strength in struggle, and despite their trade union leadership. Even the amount of redundancy pay was a tribute to that strength. The problem for the employers became how to "buy the rule book" as well as how to concentrate their own forces so as to be better able to use modernisation and lower the competition between each other. The technological processes under capitalism were not widening and expanding the satisfaction of humanity's needs, but increasing the competition for markets and the ruthless drive for profit. In that drive the dockers were labour costs that had to be reduced. Their organisation and "restrictive practices"— continuity rules, manning scales, conditions of working etc.— which protected them, their families and their community, were obstacles to the expansion of capital. These obstacles had to be smashed. Capitalism needed a labour force that would be the servant of the new technology, with mobility and "flexible" working conditions. And an essential corollary was that trade union organisation would either be castrated or non-existent.

Lord Justice Devlin gave a report on the docks industry which declared that the tradition on the docks "leads a man to treating his time as his own". The docker, it continued "has no sense that his working hours belong in any way to a particular employer". "Decasualisation", therefore, had to do with the employer having a supine labour force completely at his beck and call.

Devlin praised the Crichton-Cousins Manifesto, but criticised the T&GWU, declaring, "There have been four years in which the T&G might have been putting new ideas across to its members, and by so doing, re-establish themselves as a force." The Devlin report also criticised the employers. Their mistake, the report indicated, was that they tried to press ahead too fast. Devlin thought they should have listened to the unions. The union leaders had told the employers that what the employers wanted was just not attainable by the stroke of the pen and they should be content to take it in stages.

The Devlin Committee concluded that the employers must prepare a scheme to reduce the number of companies in the ports and then offer 100 per cent permanency, with the dockers entering into weekly contracts with one employer. It was clear that this permanency was to mean a much smaller labour force. Devlin

proposed that the Blue Union should have a representative on the National Negotiating Committee. However, it stipulated that the "confidence of the negotiating table" was to be respected. In other words, there should be no continuous reporting back to the rank and file. There must be "no repetition of the methods which killed negotiation over the tally clerks scheme", said the report. This was a reference to events which had taken place on London docks a little earlier, when the rank and file T&GWU tally clerks in London would not accept a decasualisation scheme because their brothers in the NAS&D were opposed to it. Devlin proposed that the Government should force through this tally clerks scheme at an appropriate time. There was a sharp warning to members of the Blue Union. The Devlin report criticised Dick Barrett as he was, it said, only a "voice" of the union and it complained that the union's officials had to report back to their members in the course of negotiations. The leadership of the NAS&D accepted these conditions and thus made a decisive break with the past traditions of the union.

The Devlin Committee called for an end to the "continuity rule" and the existing "manning scales". On the day the report was published, the *Daily Express* gleefully commented in its editorial:

"Not a tear will be shed for the troublemakers among the men who will have to be dismissed."

The proceedings of the Devlin committee and its report aroused widespread opposition among rank and file dockers. Peter Kerrigan said of the Devlin Scheme:

"The employers and the government were aiming to get containerisation and palletisation and everything they called modernisation at the expense of the dockers. We said the union should be opposing Devlin and fighting, as a start, for sick pay, pensions and bringing conditions in the north up to those of London so that we would not become a scab alley. Put simply, the aim of the Devlin Scheme was to modernise the ports for the benefit of the employers and profit. Certainly it wasn't to benefit the docker. Any so-called betterment of their conditions was in order to get the plan through for the reorganisation of the docks which would cut the number of employers, give them tight control over labour, do away with the Dock Labour Scheme and drastically reduce the number of dockers. We wanted the benefit of modernisation to go to the workers and not to the ship owners and harbour companies."

However, Jones, the Acting General Secretary of the T&GWU, issued a circular that declared:

"At long last the dreams of our fathers on dockland are likely to be achieved and the status of dock workers properly recognised."

In July 1967, at his union's conference, Cousins rejected as "wildly exaggerated" a report that 90 per cent of the dock labour force would eventually go. Jones expressed concern at the threat to dockers' jobs but all he proposed was the need for "proper redundancy arrangements."

In a statement welcoming aspects of the Devlin report the London Liaison Committee, led by Jack Dash, a leading Communist Party member, declared in language less sharp than that used by dockers' leaders in Hull and Liverpool that the

report "could be the basis for a major attack on manning scales, protective practices, working hours and conditions."

The unofficial committee which was set up on Merseyside later drew up demands on the Labour Government as an alternative to Devlin. They demanded the Dock Labour Board maintain full control of labour, discipline and welfare and that all unregistered port workers should be brought into the Dock Labour Scheme. There should be no reduction in the number of registered dock workers. They demanded an increase in fall-back pay and one call a day with no shift work. They also wanted 50 per cent pay for absence due to sickness or accident, retirement pay at 50 per cent of the national wage and three weeks paid holiday. They demanded the Labour Government nationalise the industry,

The unofficial committee which drew up the programme came into being on the initiative of the Blue Union. This Merseyside unofficial committee known as the Merseyside Portworkers Committee was elected from dockers in both the Blue Union and the White. Peter Kerrigan describes how unofficial committees were formed on Merseyside after the Blue Union was established there:

"After the Blue Union came to Merseyside, at the beginning of a dispute, to be democratic, we'd go to the controls and call for committee members to be elected to determine policy and suggest one man from the T&GWU and one from the Blue Union. Usually the T&GWU members who would be moved on to the committee would be in the Communist Party. The Blue Union members would be there officially with the blessing of the union committee on Merseyside, while the T&GWU members would be totally unofficial."

The Minister of Labour in the Labour Cabinet issued an Order setting 18 September 1967 as a deadline for the implementation of the Devlin proposals. Faced with the opposition of the dockers, the Minister of Labour – Ray Gunter, together with the National Modernisation Committee which had been set up, gave a solemn undertaking on 16 September that there would be no redundancy arising from decasualisation or from the removal of restrictive practices to increase efficiency. The undertaking was worthless, and the majority of dockers knew it.

Larry Cavanagh gives a picture of the period when the Devlin Scheme was being laid out, the opposition among the dockers to the initiation of the Devlin Scheme, and the events leading up to the strike of 1967.

"The people on the Devlin Committee from the T&GWU were officials. The Blue Union was only represented from London, because it wasn't recognised in the north anyway. One of the agreements for being on the committee was not to divulge its discussions until the final report. The union leaders were not to report back to their members and could only issue agreed statements from time to time. The reason for this was that the docks had a strong political leadership (not just members of the Blue Union); there were Trotskyists, Communist Party members, and even one or two members of the Labour Party who had a history of fighting. People had their differences with the Communist Party but they were recognised by the dockers, like the others, as the leaders, and the employers were not pleased about this. One of the arguments that

Devlin used for accepting shop stewards in 1967 was it would bring the rank and file leaders under more control.

While the Devlin Committee was sitting, there were rumours spread around of how much we were going to get out of the modernisation. Dockers were kept quiet for a period with the idea that the employers would have to pay out a lot of cash in order to get the conditions they required.

Eventually in September 1967 when the report came out, all hell broke loose, because we found that we'd really given everything away and we hadn't even got a basic pay rise. There was an enormous reaction to the Devlin report and big feeling for a strike."

Gerry Edwards came on to the docks after the war: "I worked in No.5 control, where Peter Kerrigan worked. I was number eight in the Blue Union. I became treasurer of No.5 branch.

The Liverpool dockers were completely opposed to Devlin. That was the difference between us and Dash in London. Liverpool never accepted Devlin. They could not apply Devlin to us.

If we had gone to work on 18 September, the date when Devlin was applied, we would have accepted Devlin."

Because of the opposition to Devlin on Merseyside Peter Kerrigan claims to be the shortest serving paid union official:

"I was made a paid official of the Blue in 1967 and I must have been the shortest serving paid official a union ever had. This was the time of the Devlin modernisation scheme which was supposed to come into operation on 18 September 1967. I called a meeting on Devlin in the Liverpool St George's Hall. The following day I got a telegram from the Executive Committee of the NAS&D instructing me not to attend such a meeting and not to address the membership and to keep in line with the official union policy on Devlin. That policy was no different to that of the T&G – so far had the London Blue Union leadership retreated under the squeeze of the TUC.

I held the meeting in the St George's Hall and put it to the men: 'Did they want me to address the meeting?' They unanimously instructed me to do so, which I did. A few days later I was sent my cards by the national leaders of the Blue Union. If I'd accepted that I didn't report to the men as their official, then they might as well have been back in the T&GWU. I put that point to the men, that the reason I joined the Blue was that I felt that the ranks had democracy over policy and control over officials."

1. This is paraphrasing the Transitional programme of the Fourth International which declares: "in an epoch of decaying capitalism ... the capitalist always takes away with the right hand twice what he grants with the left (taxes, tariffs, inflation, deflation', high prices, unemployment, police supervision of strikes". "Transitional Programme" adopted by the Founding Conference of the Fourth International. 1938. *Documents of the Fourth International*. Pathfinder Press, New York.

The 1967 Strike

How the 1967 strike began and its progress is reported by Larry Cavanagh as follows:

“Most of the meetings, agitation and explanation about the Devlin report came from the Merseyside Area Committee of the Blue Union, which acted as an ‘official/unofficial committee’. I was a member of the Area Committee. The Area Committee decided to call a mass meeting. In order to take in the whole of the docks we knew we must take in other elements who were in the T&GWU, were opposed to Devlin, but were afraid of being expelled from their union for opposing it. We got agreement with branch three of the T&GWU in Liverpool, in which most of the militants in the T&GWU were centred, including Dennis Kelly, a member of the Communist Party, who was later to be a leading figure in the strike.

The Area Committee had called a meeting at the Liverpool boxing stadium. When it was clear that there was going to be a massive turnout, these T&GWU militants had a meeting and decided they would join us, and make a joint committee. At this mass meeting Peter Kerrigan, who was an official of the Blue Union at the time, and the main person responsible for filling the stadium and getting most people to the meeting, was going to speak for the Blue Union area committee. When he stood up he was shouted at by one of the District Committee members of the T&G, a Communist Party member, Jack Leyden, yelling: ‘He’s not a docker’. This caused a division and a diversion in the meeting and rather than give way to this diversion, in my opinion, we should have fought it out and let Peter carry on, but Jim Benbow, the chairman of the Blue Union committee and chairman of the meeting — I suppose with the best of reasons in mind – decided Peter should sit down and someone else speak.

This meeting was a big success. We called another one, either the following day or the day after, which we had to have in the open at the Pier Head in Liverpool because there was such a response. We put a resolution for a strike to the vote which was carried by a majority. At a second meeting a week later there was a minority against the strike, but after that, for six weeks, the meetings were solid with not one vote against resolutions to continue the strike.

A few ships worked at the beginning with some of the weaker men using the excuse that the strike was not official. The strike was so powerful that we never asked for pickets to go down, but said it was so strong they would have to come out, which they did after a week when they saw the strength of feeling, and they were out to the end.

The Blue Union, on Merseyside, had got an agreement with London, Hull and other ports that we would all come out, which meant that half a dozen of the main ports would be out against the Devlin

Scheme. However, when it came to the actual strike, they either came out for a day or didn't come out at all. It was at that point that the unofficial committee on Merseyside recommended a return. On the committee, every member of the T&GWU including the CP'ers, voted to go back, with the exception of one.

The Blue Union members, with the exception of the chairman, voted against. The feeling of the rank and file was such that the mass meeting voted this recommendation down by a big majority. It was an amazing meeting. Benbow, chairman of the NAS&D Merseyside committee and also chairman of the strike committee, put the resolution, there was silence, then a small minority voted for it followed by a forest of hands against. There was no discussion, the recommendation was put and the men voted it down. Then, as all the other ports had gone back to work but Merseyside, and we realised we were out on our own, we drew up a programme of local demands and opposition to the Devlin Scheme.”

Hugh Cunningham, talking about the vote to stay out against the recommendation of the committee, reports:

“On the strike committee, the recommendation to return was carried by one vote. It was my job to ring Manchester and Hull to tell them the result of the mass meeting. At the mass meeting there was only a handful of votes for going back. Then I had problems getting through to Manchester and Hull on the phone. By the time I made it, both their meetings were over and they had decided to go back. We held an emergency meeting of our committee. I went to Manchester to tell them what transpired; someone else went to Hull. We had decided to accept that they remained at work and sent assistance. Anything we got we would see that they got and if we needed action because of attacks on us, we would call on them. We had to threaten to use this agreement when we got information that the Labour Government had plans to use troops against the strike.”

Cavanagh says:

“After two weeks, although the strike was very solid, we decided that the only way we would have a chance of winning would be if we extended it. So Dennis Kelly and myself went down to London to address a mass meeting. At this mass meeting we spoke, and then Jack Dash, who was chairing the meeting, spoke.¹ He was closing the meeting without putting any vote for support for us. So I grabbed the microphone out of his hand and put it that the London dockers should come out on the following Monday. This got a big cheer and Dash put it to the vote which was carried. This was on the Wednesday and I had made my mistake in my resolution in proposing a few days before the decision had to be carried out. Dash called a meeting for the Friday and changed the resolution, so that London came out, not in support of the Liverpool men against Devlin, but on one single issue, defence of continuity. That meant that instead of there being one strike there were two separate strikes. Continuity was a big issue in Liverpool and London and was contained in our demands. The continuity clause meant that once

you got allocated to a job you stayed on that job until the ship finished and you weren't moved from ship to ship or hatch to hatch at the employer's whim. That reduced the power of the employer. Dash obviously thought they could reach a compromise on this rather than the whole question of the Devlin Scheme."

From the time the strike began it was met by vicious attacks from the press and from Labour leaders. *The Liverpool Daily Post* called the men "selfish", "sheep-like", "short sighted" and said they were "holding the country to ransom". Ray Gunter, Minister of Labour, declared that "the wild cat strikes were indicative of a state of indiscipline in industry ... which we will finally have to tackle." Later he said it was all a "red plot, an unholy alliance of Communists and Trotskyists to ruin the social-democratic movement." Union officials appeared at press conferences, side by side with employers' representatives, to tell the men to return to work. However, as Cavanagh relates:

"With the two ports on strike, I think we had 200 ships tied up, which was an enormous amount of shipping. The Government became very worried about the strike as the weeks went by and Liverpool stayed solid, that eventually Wilson came down here to negotiate with the unofficial committee at the Adelphi Hotel, Prior to this, Jack Jones of the T&GWU had come to Merseyside to get us to return. He was unsuccessful and *The Times* reported that crowds of dockers shook their fists at him as he returned to London for urgent talks with Ray Gunter, the Minister of Labour.

But now there was suddenly a whole number of T&GWU officials who said they were prepared to take up our fight but we had to go back to work! They were the same people who didn't want to know before about the filthy conditions. Each time, they were voted down by the men. Jones thought he had a big reputation but the men unanimously voted against his recommendation to go back."

Cunningham remembers Jones' visit and the mass meeting he spoke at:

"He met the committee first in a room in the Liverpool Stadium. The men were waiting and I went down to the platform first, to speak to 5,000 men who were getting uneasy. I sat at the table on the platform and I can see the scene now, as the committee came through the doors at the back of the stadium, with Jones following. The doors open and the committee walks down. Every man cheers and claps. The clapping fades away as Jones came down. Then when he got up to speak there was uproar, Benbow, who was chairman of the strike committee, appealed for order. He told the meeting that Jones had been promised by the committee that he would be allowed to speak and the men should carry out the promise. There was then silence while he spoke and silence when he finished – not one clap.

Harold Wilson then set up the Inquiry under Jack Scamp.² We still refused to return to work. Just before Scamp was sent to Liverpool we knew that the Government was moving troops up here. We had information that they were quietly arriving at barracks around Merseyside. We told Scamp that immediately the first troops came in,

we would ring Manchester and Hull and they would stand by the promise they made when they went back to work. The troops never came in.

We never accepted Devlin. Jack Dash did. However, when we went back with conditions a little better than the London men, we said the London men should have the same."

Cavanagh describes the end of the strike:

"Wilson then came to Liverpool to discuss with Scamp, with Jones and with representatives of the strike committee and to try to get a settlement. He met the sub-committee of the unofficial committee and all kinds of conditions were negotiated – protective clothing, no working in the rain, better toilets, washing facilities, big increase in wages and so on. The wage increase was two shillings an hour, which was twice as much as what the officials had recommended in the first place. Now, it was a guaranteed minimum wage and eventually was incorporated into the basic wages. It was a big step forward. Instead of 13 pounds, we actually got 17 pounds odd and this later on became known as the 'Liverpool wage', because busmen, tug boatmen and everybody went on strike and all demanded 17 pounds. Most of them actually got it.

Wilson went back by train, thinking he had it sewn up, and at least he would get Liverpool back to work and he could then deal with the London dockers. The unofficial committee met and decided to recommend a return to work. Dennis Kelly and Jimmy Benbow, the chairman, spoke for a return at the mass meeting. On behalf of the minority on the strike committee, I spoke against, and I won. Wilson must have got the shock of his life to find the strike was still on. We opposed going back, because London was still out and we thought that, although there were enormous concessions to us, the employers had gained a lot by getting the Devlin Scheme in and there was a chance of beating the whole thing if we stayed out with London.

However, a week later, there was a vote to go back and London remained out for three or four weeks fighting that the continuity clause be retained.

We went back to work after six weeks. It was a powerful strike and at the end even the press was giving some publicity to the bad conditions. Wilson devalued the pound soon after that strike. However, the strike did not defeat the proposals which came from the Devlin report for the reorganisation in docks industry.

When we went back to work, the District Committee of the T&GWU, which had opposed the strike, almost to the end - they only gave up when it began to look that it was going to be a success - was almost entirely replaced. The men flooded into the branches and changed the branch committees because all these committees as well as the District Committee were associated with the lousy deal on Devlin in the first place."

As Larry Cavanagh says, the strike stimulated a wave of wage demands throughout Merseyside and the fight of the dockers had its effect on the later unofficial strike of Pilkington workers in nearby St. Helens. There the workers struck against the wages agreement signed by the General and Municipal Workers Union and won a higher increase.³ “For a period following this strike of 1967” recalls Cavanagh, “on Merseyside, although the employers had got Devlin through, and that was a foundation for destroying the dockers' strength, nevertheless for a period following this strike the employers were on the retreat.

“Once the shop stewards came on the scene, and with the men's feelings that they had won an enormous victory, there was a whole series of strikes on individual ships and berths, sometimes full-scale strikes for a few days. The men now had an ‘award system', where there was an on-spot assessment by the shop steward and the superintendent of the ship who could immediately grant money for bad or hazardous conditions and so on. The men were getting half a crown, five shillings or even as much as ten shillings an hour extra payment. The men had never known the employers to concede so much and this went on for a number of years.”

All this was to ease in the Devlin phase two, which meant a wholesale change of conditions. Like the amount of the Severance pay, which was a tribute to the militancy of the dockers, it was to help forward a decimation of dock labour. The agreement reached at the end of the strike declared that there would be “no redundancy arising from the decasualisation scheme”. That was a hollow promise, What gave the strike its stubbornness was dockers' concern at the prospect that the Devlin Scheme meant a shattering of jobs and security. However, the demands of the strike became purely economic. On this plane the strike won big concessions and its solidarity completely silenced the witch-hunt against it. The Labour Government and the state made a retreat – which did have elements of panic — in order to carry out the strategic aims of undermining the strength of dockers, Truly, the condemned men were given a hearty breakfast. The promises of “no redundancy” were once again worthless. The quite extensive advances won went hand in hand with a reorganisation of the docks and the use of new technology in a way that benefited the employers. In two decades the docks labour force was to be sorely cut down. Three months after the 1967 dockers' strike, in the 3 February 1968 issue of the *Newsletter*, I wrote as the “Merseyside correspondent”:

“It is necessary to issue a warning to Merseyside dockers. Their wages have gone up since the strike last October and they are feeling very confident. However, they still face the same basic urgent problem as before the strike. The ultimate purpose of the Devlin Scheme is to change them into a small, flexible, mobile labour force doing what the employers want, without the protection of agreements on manning scales etc. The showdown with Government and employers over Devlin has still to be fought out.”

1. Jack Dash was the leader of the Royal Docks unofficial committee and a member of the Communist Party. He was interviewed by Ludovic Kennedy on Tyne Tees Television on 5 March 1968 and declared “I never opposed the Devlin Scheme”, saying that there had been fewer strikes on the docks under his leadership. He went on: “I've never stopped the job yet. The last strike was brought to me.”

2. He had been a member of the Devlin Committee. See Chapter 8.

3. Several years later, a higher management source revealed to me that Pilkington's were prepared to give a higher wage increase at the beginning but the General and Municipal Workers Union bureaucracy was afraid that it would stimulate demands from other workers.

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 10

Modernisation

The Wilson Government of 1964 began with a declaration of a "technological revolution" in the interests of "socialism". Wilson talked of "the conscious, planned purposive use of scientific progress to provide undreamed of living standards and the possibility of leisure ultimately on an unbelievable scale". The strength of organisation of the British working class became more and more a central economic and political question for British capitalism, its state and the Labour Government. The Labour leadership which began proclaiming the socialist "technological revolution" ended with proposals for the legal shackling of workers' organisations to prevent them continuing the struggle for those "undreamed of living standards and leisure".

In 1968 the Labour Government attempted to introduce legislation against trade union rights with a White Paper entitled *In Place of Strife*. It proposed legal restrictions on the unions, including their registration, compulsory secret ballots on strike action and compulsory "cooling off" periods before strike action.

As the attack against trade unionism grew stronger, all sections of the working class, like the dockers, resisted it. The trade union bureaucracy in general reacted to these attacks on trade unionism in a way similar to how the T&GWU bureaucracy reacted to militant Struggle on the docks. They sought to collaborate with this capitalist policy. Barbara Castle, the Minister who introduced the proposed legislation, in her diaries reports on the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy including her close consultation with George Woodcock, general secretary of the TUC. Both in these diaries and in the press reports and experiences of trade unionists at the time there is abundant proof of the fact that if it had not been for unofficial industrial action there would have been no opposition to *In Place of Strife* at all. It was the widespread movement among the rank and file which forced a division in the Labour Cabinet. Mechanisation and container development gathered pace in the port transport industry as well as concentration of capital in big container firms linked with the ship owners and road transport.

"The merit of controlling dock operations directly is obvious. It gives the lines power to mould them to their diminishing requirements and greater strength to demand higher productivity on the docks. The container industry has developed as a maze of interlocking interests who vary from the giants like OCL to the back street operator who stuffs and strips two or so containers at a time." ¹

It was not only that containerisation did away with dockers but it further substituted workers at container depots, or workers filling containers in factories, for dockers. It meant goods being handled at container bases away from militant dockland. Transport, warehousing and shipping industries were grouped together while the

dockers' organisation was weakened by the trade union leadership. The T&GWU recruited in the container bases and the unregistered ports. They knew then that the work involved originated in the docks. But they made agreements for conditions for their members which were inferior to that of their docker members and made no real campaign to make them registered dockers. There was a rapid growth of unregistered ports and wharves. Johns reported on the growth of "docking cowboys" which were unorganised. He took the Humber as an example. He wrote:

"There are about a dozen private ports served by the Humber. Some consist of a jetty that can take one small 1,000 ton vessel a week. The cargo is often handled by part-time farm labour for wages and conditions far below those won by registered dockers. The growth of these 'docking cowboys' has been alarming. In 1968, 677 ships passed Goole Bridge on the Humber, Last year the total rocketed to 1,748. The cargo they carry has been estimated at anything between 500,000 to 1.5 million tons and the National Ports Council has predicted that the rate of increase could go on at the rate of 750,000 a year. The small wharves cannot match Hull's roll-on roll-off service, but they can offer low rates, fast turn round and no strikes, mainly because they employ casual labour, often on a part-time basis."

The dockers stubbornly resisted capitalist modernisation in the three decades before 1990. To be sure, it has to be recorded that some dockers and stewards saw their very strength and solidarity as, in themselves, the complete answer to problems. Stubborn militancy itself, they felt, would overcome everything, even the treachery of leadership. But more than an essentially defensive protection was needed.

In April 1969, members of the unofficial National Portworkers' Liaison Committee secured its winding up, with the argument that it became unnecessary with the establishment of shop stewards on the docks. In a short while, however, the shop stewards found it necessary to organise the unofficial National Shop Stewards Committee. By 27 June 1970, nearly half of the country's dockers were on unofficial strike over a wages offer. The underlying cause was the use of unregistered labour in and around the ports. The Government set up an inquiry — the Pearson Inquiry — which recommended a slightly improved wages increase and Jack Jones succeeded in having the strike called off. He had already made one attempt to get a lower offer accepted and met a great deal of opposition to his second attempt,

In January 1972 the press reported a serious situation in Britain's docks over pay claims and containerisation. On 26 January 30,000 dockers came out on a one-day strike organised by the unofficial Ports Shop Stewards Committee. One-day strikes followed in London on 11 February and 6 March Dockers picketed container depots and boycotted transport firms moving containers which had not been worked by registered dock labour. A number of cases were heard by the Industrial Tribunals which had been set up on the docks under Devlin's recommendations. Dockers under the leadership of unofficial committees continued boycotting containers from inland ports and continued picketing companies. Vic Turner, one of the "Pentonville Five" who were later jailed, describes the picketing:

"We had to explain that it was not our desire or intention to steal anybody else's job. The workers at the Inland Container Ports were our own class. We would defend their jobs. There were some significant successes. For instance, at Chobham Farm, the east

London container terminal. After we had been picketing there for some weeks, the employers formed an anti-picket organisation. It was based on the manual staff, but it was employer-based. The workers were encouraged to put up their anti-picket in working time with full pay. The workers leaders were Churchman and Cartwright.

We gave them the assurance that not one would lose their job, and, if they did, then we would organise another picket to support them. The next day we won the right to work there. Later, we were thanked by the so-called anti-pickets because their working conditions had improved overnight, they got a rise in wages and a cut in hours."²

Mike Carden, who came on Liverpool docks in 1970 and became a shop steward, is of the opinion:

"The struggle of the stewards on containerisation was 100 per cent correct in arguing for a 25-mile radius and the right to strip and stuff containers. They were also arguing for a substantial reduction in the working week. It was essential to fight these issues. What containerisation meant was that road haulage firms, or any other Tom, Dick or Harry who wanted to get involved with exporting or importing cargo in steel boxes, was given the right to do it. And they could set up within a mile or literally within a hundred yards of dockers who could see their work being carried out by non-union labour and workers being paid half the dockers' rates of pay. When the container ships first came to Britain they had to use the Scheme ports because they were the only ports with the facilities available. So Felixstowe was established primarily because of this. The employers didn't hide it, they made it very clear that they wanted a port that was an alternative to the Dock Labour Scheme ports where according to them they were held by the jugular vein by registered dockers. It was a Labour Government but we could not get nationalisation. We demanded a planned development for the distribution of shipping."

The weakness of the whole campaign over containerisation, however, was that it was a sectional campaign and at times brought one section of workers into collision with another. The blame for this, however, lies entirely at the door of the trade union leadership who refused to campaign to unite their members in policies which would advance them all and serve all their interests. This inevitably meant that the struggle of dockers to defend their own jobs resulted in a clash with other sections of workers, even though the pickets declared that it was not their intention to steal anybody else's job. There could only have been one real solution – planned nationalised transport and docks industry with the union beginning by demanding dockers' conditions for all. However, a leadership of the T&GWU which, at a time when new non-registered ports were expanding, could not conduct a campaign to bring their members there on to the conditions and wages of registered dockers, was actually undermining the strength of these same registered dockers.

Merseyside dockers boycotted Heaton's, a St Helens transport firm. The firm took an action against the T&GWU in an Industrial Relations Court but, in accordance with its policy at that time, the union refused to attend the court which had been set up under the anti-union legislation introduced by the Tory Government of Edward Heath. The

union was fined £5,000 for contempt of court. A writ was issued for seizure of the union's assets. The dockers continued to block Heaton's container traffic.

On 29 April 1972, the union was fined fifty thousand pounds, On 27 April, London dockers declared they would not work cargoes of UK Cold Storage Co. Similar action against other firms was taken by Hull and Manchester dockers. Contrary to the policy of the rank and file, the T&GWU leadership called for the lifting of all boycotts. The dockers, however, in all the ports continued their actions. The Midland Cold Storage – owned by the Vestey family – brought a successful action against five pickets in the Industrial Relations Court, Picketing continued. On Friday, 21 July, the five dockers were sentenced to be jailed for contempt of court.

Vic Turner described their arrest and jailing in his interview with the *Workers Press*:

“Whilst we were picketing the word went out that there would be arrests – the names mentioned were Vic Turner, Alan Williams and Bernie Steer. We decided that we would put up no resistance. We kept getting reports from the media men. At one point we suddenly heard that the Tipstaff from the Industrial Relations Court had set out to issued arrest orders, but had been turned out again. That was the early part of 1972. The picketing continued and was achieving successes. There was growing confidence in the other ports that at last justice was being achieved. Suddenly, it seemed that people were realising that our case was right and then some of the employers started talking. We were offered one part of the operation at Dagenham Cold Store, but, unfortunately, a block was put on the negotiations because some of the stewards said "no compromise". In the end we didn't get any jobs there. I felt that this was wrong because we could have established organisation and working relations with the workers already in the store, and built unity for future struggles.

One morning in the summer of 1972, I did the rounds of the picket lines – Midland and Dagenham Cold Store and Chobham Farm — to see if everything was OK. Then I went to a London shop stewards' meeting. We had just opened the meeting when a senior member of the union appeared at the French windows and said that the police were out to make arrests. We cancelled the meeting. Everybody went home and arranged to keep in touch. The next thing I knew, Bernie Steer was on his way to Pentonville jail. I went out on Friday evening as usual. On the Saturday morning I was standing at the Abbey Arms, sheltering from the rain, when a motor bike pulled up with Colin Coughlin (one of the younger dockers) on the back. I went to his house for a cup of tea. Then we went to The Swan' for a drink. The early editions of the papers had headlines saying: 'Docks chief in hiding' and they were referring to me! The local nick' was only up the road and I was standing there as large as life.

I said: 'I'm not having that'. So I went to Pentonville jail and they arrested me. I went in with a picket armband on and came out with it. There were five of us and we were in prison for five days, but we always knew that the working class would get us out. We were there because we were fighting about the things the old ones had told us

when we first started on the docks. We set out to defend what was our right.”

The spontaneous response from trade unionists throughout the country at the attacks on the rights of trade unionists shook the government and the trade union leaders. A large number of workers were on holiday, the end of July and beginning of August being one of the most popular holiday periods. In Coventry, for example, 80,000 engineering workers were on holiday. But the long list of workers who stopped work, taken from *Labour Research* (September 1972) is an impressive roll of honour.

Twenty six thousand dockers in Liverpool, Hull and London immediately stopped, in reaction to the judgement. By Tuesday all ports of any significance in Britain were at a standstill. On 22 July there was a token stoppage of printers on Sunday newspapers. In the next three days, thousands of print workers were involved in token stoppages. From 24 July until Friday 28 there were no daily newspapers. No evening papers were printed in Liverpool, Manchester or London. A meeting of South Wales TUC called on the General Council of the TUC to organise a one-day general strike. Engineers came out in many parts of the country. Ten pits stopped work in South Wales. In Scotland, where most pits were closed on holiday, 1,800 miners at Monkton Hall Colliery stopped work. A delegate meeting of Yorkshire National Union of Miners (60,000 miners) voted for a total stoppage but decided to wait for the National Executive to call it. Three Yorkshire pits decided not to wait for the

National Executive and stopped work. River Don and Grimethorpe steelworkers came out. Maintenance workers at Shotton, North Wales, steelworks stopped work and by the afternoon, half of the 13,000 production workers had walked out. Most Ford factories were on holiday – as were British Leyland factories — but 760 workers at the Daventry spares plant walked out. Twenty thousand London busworkers came out. Thirty factories closed in Sheffield and there was a demonstration through the town of 4,000. Members of NATKE and electricians, employed at Scottish and Yorkshire television stopped work.

On Merseyside 10,000 lorry drivers – including those employed by Heaton's, who had been stopped by dockers' pickets – came out on strike. Eric Riechnitz, leader of the commercial vehicle section of the T&GWU, told docks pickets: “We now stand with our fellow trade unionists on this matter”. Buses in Salford and St. Helens did not run. Dustmen in Lambeth, and workers at Stourton container depot (Leeds) took action. On this Tuesday, the Government said that 171,000 workers were on strike but trade union sources said the figure was too low. In the afternoon, the TUC General Council voted to call a one day general strike by 18 votes to seven. It was the first time in history that the British trade union leadership had called a general strike. In 1926 not all sections were called out. The state hurriedly found a solution; a law officer of the state, whose existence was not generally known – the “Official Solicitor” – set aside the committal. “We were scrubbing floors on the fifth day,” said Vic Turner, “when it was announced that I must get changed and get ready to see the Official Solicitor.

“I said: ‘No. All five of us will see him, and we won't change out of our prison clothes to see him either’. He told us he was there to give us the right to purge our contempt’. We refused. Later that day, Jack Lucas, a T&GWU official, and Brian Nicholson, a docker, lay member

of the union Executive, visited us. At six pm we were released. We were told to leave immediately. But we insisted on having a shower and changing our clothes. Then we left and were met outside the prison by crowds of workers."

The National Industrial Relations Court declared that it had decided to release the dockers on the application of the Official Solicitor. They gave as their reason that the Jones-Aldington Committee, which had been set up to inquire into the container conflict, was about to publish an interim report. Once again government, state, employers and trade union leaders had together stopped a conflict on the edge of a national conflagration.

On Thursday most of the strikes ended. However some strikes continued against the Industrial Relations Act, including 600 workers at Southwark Brewery and 8,000 workers at Pilkington's glass works, St. Helens. The dockers had been imprisoned in Pentonville jail and became known as the "Pentonville Five". Throughout their time in jail, the prison was picketed night and day and the picket was regularly swollen by contingents of printers, builders, miners and many other workers.

1. Containerisation; the case for the nationalisation of the dock transport industry - a pamphlet published by *Workers Press*, daily paper of the Socialist Labour League and consisting of articles by Stephen Johns and Ian Yeats,
2. Interviewed by Dot Gibson, *Workers Press*.

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 11

Jack Jones and the Jones-Aldington Committee

Jack Jones was the epitome of a left reformist trade union leader; a left bureaucrat who, despite all rhetoric, always ended by defending the apparatus. He followed the great British opportunist traditions of fervently supporting principles in speeches but carrying out the opportunist policies that are described by industrial editors as pragmatic realism. He records in his autobiography that in 1972, at the height of the container base picketing, he met John Peyton, Tory Ministry of Transport, and Maurice MacMillan, Tory Secretary of State for Employment. He declared:

"As I looked at them I thought, this is an opportunity for a breakthrough.¹ They were both obviously concerned about the crisis in the ports."

So, of course, were thousands of his members. Jones was hardly telling these Tory Ministers something new when he spoke to them about the crisis. Thousands of dockers over several years had been clearly expressing it. The real test for Jack Jones was not whether he was capable of saying these things that the Tory Ministers already knew. It was whether he could give leadership to men who wanted to do something about it. That he did not do. Instead his practice was to assist the changes for the benefit of capitalism. His role was to sugar the pill. Jones describes as his big achievement that he succeeded in persuading the Tory Ministers to set up the Jones-Aldington Committee. "Invariably in the past", he told them, "when there had been major difficulties in dockland the government of the day had appointed Lord Devlin or some other legal or academic luminary to conduct an inquiry". He said

that would not do now, while the Devlin Committee "had made a number of good recommendations, the failure to keep its promise of permanent employment for all registered dockers was the kernel of the present problem."

Many Trotskyists and militant dockers had been pointing that out for years! He goes on to reveal how he persuaded the Tories to adopt the idea of, "a joint committee from the industry but not the run of the mill port employers." I urged:

"Why not include the chairman from each of the major port authorities. This was agreed, while at the same time they left the selection of the dockers' representatives to me."

A victory of world shattering proportions! With the threat of a General Strike, the Tory Ministers would certainly be concerned about the crisis in the ports and greatly encourage Jack Jones' sterling efforts to help them out. The efforts were crowned by the agreement that there should be two joint chairmen of the committee to find a way out of this docks crisis. Jack Jones was one of the chairmen and the other was Lord Aldington, chairman of the Port of London Authority.

"Of course I was aware that Lord Aldington had been a prominent Conservative politician and minister and I wondered how I would get on with him. I felt if I could influence him it would have considerable impact on the committee and became more and more convinced of this as got to know him." He goes on: "Good progress was in fact being made and I was able to get the strike threat deferred while we proceeded with our work. Our efforts were nearly destroyed, however, by the unofficial picketing and blacking campaign which had now switched to the London area and the inept over-reaction of the N.I.R.C. [National Industrial Relations Court]."

Jones and Aldington rushed out an interim report as the strike movement grew against the imprisonment of the "Pentonville Five". The Interim Report was a measure to help get the Government "off the hook". But not only did it aid the government, it also helped trade union leaders who certainly did not want to implement their call for a general strike. The interim report met great opposition among dockers, but its publication achieved its purpose. It was successful in avoiding a confrontation which would have involved the whole class. The struggle over fundamental questions which in one way or another involved all sections of workers could now be confined to one section, and shunted into a siding.

Jack Jones in the 1970s became a supporter and speaker for the "Institute of Workers' Control". This activity went hand in hand with an opposition to the concrete living struggle which expressed the real movement for workers' control - that was in the rank-and-file dockers' struggle and the decasualisation proposals of the unofficial movements.

In his autobiography, Jones relates how he came out of a meeting after he had made the Jones-Aldington agreement.

"As I left Transport House that day one of the stewards from London docks came up to me. He was holding his little son by the hand. 'What about my future?' he asked. 'You have got a permanent job as a result of this agreement' I replied. 'Ah' he said "but what about the boy'."

Jones ends a chapter with these sentences and passes on without comment. In that docker's words, however, was expressed the great uneasiness about the future among dockers who had seen the fight for real decasualisation as security for the future. They were living through something else; there were 80,000 dockers in 1947 when the Dock Labour Scheme was legislated and Deakin declared that decasualisation had been achieved. In 1967 there were 60,000. In 1972 there were 31,834. For a large proportion of dockers who were registered when Devlin first made his proposals the result was that there were no jobs for them and jobs for their sons and grandsons disappeared.

The resistance to the reorganisation plans of the employers and to the government laws brought the threat of a general strike. Trade union leaders, like Jones, played a large part in taking the heat out of this situation. Now they had to deal with the heat in the dockers' section of the T&GWU. On 27 July a docks conference of the Transport Union rejected the interim Jones-Aldington report by 38 votes to 28. A resolution to call a national docks strike was carried with 18 abstentions. Hundreds of dockers outside Transport House, the headquarters of the T&GWU, greeted the news with cheers. Later, at a National Ports Shop Stewards' Committee meeting, the Liverpool and Hull delegates pressed for nationalisation and workers control to be included in the demands of the strike. London stewards opposed, on the grounds that this could not be achieved under a Tory Government. That there was a Tory Government certainly did not make the demand invalid, but raised the burning question of removing the Tories. The widespread feelings in the working class of opposition to this government had helped fuel the response to the arrest of the Pentonville Five. Two years later, the action of workers was to play the biggest part in compelling the Heath Government to call a General Election. The London stewards were narrowing the dispute in a way that assisted Jones.

Jones writes of the feeling in the union's national docks delegate conference which called a national strike and rejected the Jones-Aldington interim report. The conference felt, he says:

"If action can spring five of our mates from prison we can get all we want by having a national strike."

This was the real impulse to workers' control which Jones opposed and of which he was afraid. The arrests had united different sectors of the British working class in common action coming from common feelings on loss of jobs and legal attacks on the unions. The failure of leaders to take that united movement forward in the 1970s decided the future of dockers, and other British workers, in the 1980s and gave the Tories successes in their offensive against the unions.

The demands of the national dock strike which began on 27 July were: All stuffing and stripping of containers to be the work of registered dockworkers. Retention and extension of the Dock Labour Scheme to include all unregistered ports. No misuse of the temporary unattached register and no more redundancies. No reduction in the current overall dock workers' register.

The additional recommendations of Jones-Aldington were published on 16 August. They increased the payment for losing jobs. Jones declares that out of these recommendations dockers gained "the best voluntary redundancy scheme in any industry at any time". The severance scheme offered £4,000 to older dockers. The temporary attached register was ended and dockers on it were given permanent employment and attached to permanent employers.

After these Jones-Aldington recommendations were published, a majority of London docks stewards, influenced by the Communist Party, abandoned the four points of the strike. On 18 August by 53 votes to 30 docks delegates called off the strike in the light of the "progress of Jones-Aldington". Dockers in Liverpool initially refused to return. In meetings in London and Hull there were calls to continue the stoppage. Merseyside dockers only decided to return after the other ports went back.

The struggle around container depots continued. Some small agreements were made in London, Liverpool and Hull in regard to registered dockers working in container depots. However, this struggle was, at best, a rearguard action. It was, in essence, a collection of isolated events and a substitute for a real struggle to preserve employment. There was never a genuine co-ordinated, national campaign for the demands of the July 1972 strike by the union bureaucracy. Neither was there an unofficial campaign. The first elementary step in defending dockers' jobs was to secure a unity of a ports and all dockers, registered and non-registered. The demands of 1972 were proposing that; and that was what militant dockers wanted. But, having retreated in this strike, the movement retreated further during the next few years.

Trade union leaders, during the early years of the Labour Government which came into office in 1974, altered course to a prospect of the "registered" ports competing successfully with the "non-registered". This also became a policy of leaders among the stewards in London and Liverpool. The T&GWU leadership, which could not organise a campaign for the nationalisation of the docks under workers control, could not either perform the elementary trade union function of a campaign to bring a unity of all dockers.

The debacle of 1989 was thus set in 1972, and at the centre was Jack Jones and his collaboration with Aldington and the Tory Government. Cavanagh comments on what happened next:

"After that, the amount of severance money was increased. From then onwards, it went from two thousand to four thousand to six thousand to eight thousand; sixteen thousand to twenty two and a half thousand pounds, and eventually it reached thirty five thousand. Every time there was a crisis or problem with the so called surplus amount of dockers, they remembered the Pentonville Five and remembered the 1967 strike. So the way was always to increase the severance pay in a conscious attempt to avoid any fight over redundancies."

Mike Carden joined the clerical section of the T&GWU soon after he started work on Liverpool docks in 1970. There were then around 1,000 members on Merseyside.

"Prior to 1967, organisation for the clerical workers was non-existent. In 1972, we were the only group in the port of Liverpool and I think nationally who reached a clear agreement with the dockers that we would stop recruiting after the strike of 1972. We stayed out for a week after the dockers in that strike because we had not got a settlement that we felt was acceptable. So, that in 1972 we were the only group which as a result of that strike over Jones-Aldington, refused to have any further recruitment and any recruitment that did take place would be directly from dock workers who would be employed in the offices as registered dock workers.

There was some animosity between clerical group and dockers themselves because the clerical group represented time-keepers, quay foremen, ship's foremen, and the timekeeper could do a lot of damage to a docker and there was an element of the 'bowler hat brigade'. By the late 1960s there was a massive change.

The industry was being shaken up, there was an influx of younger people who had a different attitude. There were sons of dockers and I think it would be correct to say that a good 70 per cent were in some way related to dockers. There was an improvement in our relationship.

In late 1973 I became a shop steward, I think that whenever the dockers won anything - things like the Dock Labour Scheme, better rates of pay and improved conditions - there was always a cynical manipulation which took the benefits away in the long term. They were sold out left, right and centre. Some substantial achievements were made, but there were a lot of paper achievements, they looked good on paper. They were really not that much. They were not substantial enough to resist a long term challenge and the employers and the state were capable of whittling away at the foundation. Whenever the dockers challenged the state at this period they were bought off.

The way I recollect it is that since 1967 and to the late 1970s, the 'halcyon days were still there on the surface, the unofficial movement, warts and all, still maintained an element of control and generally speaking, the shop stewards were linked to the unofficial committees. These were relatively young men, don't forget, and I think there was still an element of militancy that existed, right up to the mid 1970s.

Devlin was talking in terms of reducing the number of employers. In 1967, I think there were a hundred and odd employers on Merseyside. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Board gradually became more important. In 1967 it only had one berth, by 1974 the other employers had been cut down.

With this went what the academics call a process of corporatization, where the employer tries to win over the stewards. I don't think that started till 1974 on Merseyside.

In 1970 the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board went bust, because it had been like the customers running the shop. The employers were running the port and charging themselves nothing for using it. The old board room in the Dock Board office was like a shrine to the shipping companies - Holt, Ellerman etc., with all the wonderful paintings and so on. Then, when the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board went bust, it was reconstituted as the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company. From then on, it never had a poor day, inasmuch as the government took a 24 per cent shareholding in the Mersey Dock and Harbour Company. Its fortunes then just went from good to better and improved right up to 1989. They were the port authorities. A number of other companies went bankrupt and in 1974 the

Company, as a result of Jones-Aldington, took on most of the dock labour. It was then that in my view the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company became more and more conscious of the need for having sophisticated communications with the labour force and shop stewards. There was erected a labyrinth of industrial relations. You can imagine there were a number of different work people involved in the port of Liverpool; you had engineering workers, clerical workers, shore gangs, gig boatmen, tug boatmen, a whole host of workers.

They had local joint consultative committees for each group. For example, the clerical section had their own joint consultative committee, the dockers had the same and other groups had the same. Then they had a central consultative committee which was elected. When I say elected, I use it loosely, because people suddenly appeared from nowhere. They created the idea of senior stewards and deputy stewards and convenors and it was linked to the "ncw age of industrial relations where the idea was to encourage shop stewards and not to discourage them. Many shop stewards moved from being dockers working on the dock to become permanent shop stewards. They spent their time at meetings permanently either at the dock or at Transport House, the union headquarters, which developed an industrial labyrinth of its own. More and more docks shop stewards became involved in local committees, district committees and modernisation committees. So the docks shop stewards' life would be on Monday morning to book on and that was it for the rest of the week. Meetings would last all day. If they were attached to a berth where a ship was working they would be paid the highest tonnage for that ship, even if they might never see the ship. The shop stewards I worked with were generally all working stewards. In the meantime there was a massive decline of dockers.

There would be beer and sandwiches at the meetings. At the central consultative committees, when the senior stewards met the managers or directors, at least once a month and sometimes weekly, they had meals in a restaurant. I don't think it was a good situation. I myself never got involved as I believed we weren't elected to eat with bosses. Some docks shop stewards would leave the meeting and have a pint over the road during the breaks. The problem is that situations like this lead to a softening up towards the employers' point of view. Actually it is not a question of identifying one fact which you might say could 'soften up' the leaders; there were a whole number of facts. If you are holed up with employers for hours and perhaps days on end, well I think there's no question as the old saying goes: "If you lie down with dogs you get fleas'.

You start believing some of the material you hear - they can't afford this, they can't afford that. But really, the Dock Labour Company never had a problem in the world, because the Government was there to ensure - Labour and Tory Governments - to ensure that their 'goal was shared', as they referred to it. They had two government

appointees - at least two, possibly three - appointed with state support. It was a copper-bottomed situation for them.

There were eight or nine thousand dockers in the 1970s and it would be wrong to assume that 9,000 dockers were all champing at the bit to support steel workers, miners, themselves or whatever. It is a saying on the docks that you have a nucleus of good men, people who are politically motivated or socially motivated who will fight for what they think is right. You also have on the other hand a fair element of people who just follow the wind. Some issues get more support than other issues. You had mass meetings where 6,000 people would attend; those days are well passed now.

Containerisation had a massive impact. After 1972, the fundamental part of the Devlin Scheme was containerisation, Together with this asserted social, even moral, aim which was said to be the eradication of the evil of casualisation which had existed for 200 years, there went the destruction of the dockers as such. No docker wanted this sort of decasualisation. Devlin was working the carrot and the stick. He was offering the high ideal, supposed decasualisation, but meanwhile, laying a foundation for the massive destruction of the labour force. I think there was a lot of cynicism, in a short while, when after repeated promises of maintaining labour in the industry and protecting jobs for life, there was a massive haemorrhage of the labour force.

From 1972, right up to the mid 1980s, severance became an 'art form' for the employer. In the 1980s it was the case that, at times, the employers never had enough men to man the ships up. So that dockers were working with short-handed gangs and receiving the pay of absentees from the gang. This was an agreement made in the early '70s. The situation arose infrequently then, but in the early 1980s it arose frequently. In the end the shop stewards and the employers negotiated an annual sum to substitute for the 'short-handed pay'.

It was an art form because they were short of labour but getting 800 men a year to leave the industry. While containerisation reduced the need for vast numbers of dock workers, initially it never reduced them overnight because the dockers still had the industrial strength to maintain, throughout the 1970s, some of the bans on container ships.

My view is that the limits of militancy are placed in the spurious victories that we achieved. Dockers knew in 1967 that the so called decasualisation of Devlin would not solve their problems. For the docker, decasualisation meant control of the industry. The dockers run the industry anyway. It always was a highly skilled, highly motivated job. In the container base where I work, if the bosses all dropped dead tomorrow, it would still continue.

The employers' decasualisation meant that they gave you something with one hand and in the other hand had a great big hammer to beat you over the head with."

1. *Jack Jones: Union Man. An autobiography.*

The Betrayal of the Anti-Tory Struggles

It becomes clear that, after 1972, every struggle on the docks was a rearguard action, because without a thought-out economic and political strategy among official and unofficial leaders, plans of capitalist modernisation and capitalist "decasualisation" by the big employers and the capitalist state were advancing.

From the time it assumed power, in 1979, the Thatcher Government began to consciously drive forward to what it hoped would be the final destruction of working-class strength. There was an economic recession at the beginning of the 1980s. Unemployment grew rapidly; closures took place on an unheard of scale. The interests of steelworkers, car workers, miners, railway workers, dockers and other workers who were losing jobs were clearly linked. All were threatened by the Tory legislation which took away trade union rights won in struggles over many years. The burning task of leadership was to ensure a united struggle. Trade union leaders found themselves compelled to talk of joint alliances to defeat Government attacks. However, the "triple alliance" of coal, steel and rail unions which was set up never organised anything, and in the miners' strike of 1984-1985 it ignominiously collapsed. There was no lack of opposition to the Government's plans among trade union activists. In the first years of the Tory Government, hundreds of thousands marched against it. The 1980s are a sorry tale of destruction by Labour Leaders of what could have been a mighty movement that could have shattered the Government. No trade unionist who seriously studies the political and industrial scene at the beginning of the 1980s and compares it with today can fail to draw the conclusion that strength of the Thatcher Government and its capitalist policies has been solely due to the abysmal capitulations of the leadership of the trade unions and Labour Party.

In January 1980 a national steel strike began which lasted solidly for 13 weeks. It was the longest national strike, up till then, since the end of the Second World War. The steelworkers were demanding a 20 per cent wage increase. They were further incensed by the estimate at the beginning of 1980 that a quarter of a million jobs would be lost in the first three months of that year. The British Steel Corporation was planning for an initial loss of 52,000 jobs, with more to follow as productivity was increased. The Tory Government was beginning to push forward its main aim which was to destroy the strength of workers' organisations. It was prepared to see the destruction of British manufacturing industry, the foundation of the British economy, in order to destroy the organisations of the working class with militant traditions and strength. The ranks of the trade union movement knew this and it was their feelings which were reflected in their leaders statements that they would be prepared to go to jail, rather than see their unions undermined and destroyed by anti-trade union laws. The next few years were to show how empty were those boasts. And yet we shall see in this brief chapter how the united struggle of dockers and miners alone, even after the TUC held back a unity of struggle in all sections, put the Government into desperate positions.

When the working class began to develop a unity in struggle, trade union leaders were to show that their opposition to any united class movement equalled that of the Tories. In 1980 they prevented a general strike when there was a powerful solidarity movement developing from South Wales against the sackings in the mines and in steel. In face of the reaction of workers facing closures, the Welsh TUC declared support for an alliance in strike action of miners, dockers, railway workers and other transport workers unless steel and pit closures were halted. There was a united

action of Welsh workers in a one-day strike at the end of the month that shook politicians and press by the depth of feeling it showed. As the following editorials show there was the breath of revolution in the air as politicians, businessmen and press faced the stark possibility of a general strike. The Industrial Editor of the *Daily Mirror* commented on 29 January

"The unions fear, not without cause, that the explosion of fury which occurred in South Wales yesterday could spread throughout the country ... That is why a powerful team of TUC leaders will see Chancellor Sir Geoffrey Howe later this week. Suddenly the scene has become more explosive and dangerous than anyone thought likely a few weeks ago."

The central desire of the TUC was to avoid sharp class confrontation. *The Times* of 30 January commented on the anxieties of the trade union leaders as a general strike became a realistic possibility.

"A general strike said its main leader) is essentially a revolutionary gesture and the leaders of the trade unions today are for the most part as far from being revolutionary as any group in Britain. The target of such an action would not be any ordinary employer, but the government, which holds the purse strings of the three industries most immediately involved. It would be direct political challenge to the government's ability to give effect to its policies in a major area of Britain. It is no wonder that the leaders of the TUC are frightened of losing control."

The trade union leaders succeeded at that time once again in blocking the movement towards a general Strike and then worked assiduously during the steel strike to undermine any unity in action. Leaders of the T&GWU, whatever their left reputations, practiced the same policy. In March, dockers on Merseyside stopped work in support of 100 men laid off for refusing to unload imported steel. Dennis Kelly, chairman of Merseyside docks shop stewards, declared that the dockers were following an instruction of the T&GWU sent out the previous week, stating that its members should not move exports or imports of steel. By the next day, the Liverpool and Birkenhead docks were at a standstill. A mass meeting passed a resolution by an overwhelming majority calling for a national docks strike. Ancillary workers joined the strike and 9,000 workers were eventually out. A delegation of dockers went to meet T&GWU officials in London to demand a national stoppage. They were met by Alex Kitson, Deputy General Secretary, who told them there would be no immediate national strike.

In line with this, while the Merseyside strikers were given official backing, however, no further steps were taken by the union leadership to call other dockers out. The leaders of the union concentrated on settling the Merseyside strike as quickly as possible, Alex Kitson told the press that the postponement of the decision to call a national strike was because the union hoped fervently that talks in Liverpool might get dockers back to work. Merseyside was out for a fortnight. The steelworkers' strike ended on 2 April. On the very day that the steelworkers took a decision to end the strike, the T&GWU withdrew support from the dockers.

During the miners' strike of 1984-1985, other powerful sections of workers were in conflict with the Tory Government, railway workers, busworkers and dockers. The Labour Council of Liverpool was also in sharp struggle with the government. The

Thatcher Government defeated the miners because, with the aid of Labour and trade union leaders, it isolated these sections from the miners, making small concessions on all these other fronts to forestall united action.

Soon after the miners' strike began, the TUC, the Labour leaders and the leaders of the steelworkers' union were working to ensure that the Ravenscraig steel works in Scotland received a quota of coal. Eventually on 11 May agreement was reached to allow 18,000 tonnes a week into Ravenscraig by train. Meanwhile the railway unions had called a work to rule. Jimmy Knapp of the National Union of Railway workers and Ray Buckton, General Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, whose unions were members of the alliance of steel and transport unions, made a defensive statement to the press denying that the action had been sanctioned as a result of requests from Mr A. Scargill.¹ But the alliance of their unions with the miners had no purpose if it was not to answer each other's requests for support. This was a denial that the alliance with the miners meant anything and a retreat before the concentrated offensive of the Tory Government against any unity of workers. We have to remember that these railway leaders were among those who made declarations of support for the NUM. Another member of the alliance - the steel union, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC), under the leadership of Bill Sirs, actively opposed it.

Knapp went on to say that the railway workers had their own dispute but added that there appeared to be growing unrest in the public sector against the Government. Surely a reason for jointly organising action? Militant rank and file railwayworkers were already refusing to move imported coal. Clyde tugboat crews had voted to boycott oil and coal ships carrying supplies to Ravenscraig steel works. But at Ravenscraig, at this time and later in the year, there was another telling example of the trade union leaders diverting and damping down the class feelings of workers. In May 1984 a Norwegian vessel docked at Hunterston with coal for Ravenscraig. The coal was unloaded by members of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, on the instructions of the union. The 25 dockers at Hunterston called for immediate strike action and a meeting of 40 delegates of the T&GWU Scottish Docks Trade group decided on a strike of 30 Scottish ports the following Monday.

One hundred and thirty lorries came into Ravenscraig the following day in convoy and two busloads of miners' pickets were arrested. The strike of dockers was delayed and there were talks between officials of the T&GWU, the ISTC and the Clyde Port Authority. On 16 May the talks came to an end with an agreed formula. A deal was made allowing coal into Ravenscraig - a quota of 18,000 tonnes a week. Even this was soon to be exceeded. The miners were not present at the talks or consulted by the unions present. The deal could only be defined as a deal against them.

With no lack of cynicism, the leaders of the four transport unions - railway, road transport, seafarers' unions - met immediately, and made free with their words of support for the miners. They pledged renewed backing. However, although the miners had asked for sympathy stoppages, this was not agreed. Following the refusal of these leaders to pledge sympathy stoppages, and obviously not unconnected with their decision, Len Murray, the TUC General Secretary, increased the pressure against regional and unofficial stoppages in support of the miners. He issued a statement on 20 May disowning sympathy strikes, declaring that the actions of regional councils of the TUC in calling for stoppages of one day in support of the miners did not have proper authority. Nevertheless, on 21 May, thousands stopped

work in South Yorkshire in a day of action, including bus crews, railway workers, local government employees and workers in engineering firms.

Large scale lorry convoys continued into the Ravenscraig plant. On 4 July, a *Times* industrial reporter, discussing the threat to remove union cards from lorry drivers in the T&GWU who delivered coal, declared it was "unlikely to happen because of divisions within the union over support for miners".

At this time, when dockers and train drivers refused to handle the ore because of the miners' strike, the employers in the port of Immingham used contract labour to remove iron ore for Scunthorpe steel works. In face of the feelings among dockers at what they saw as an attack on the Dock Labour Scheme, a National Docks Committee of the T&GWU was convened. It decided to call a national strike of harbour workers from midnight on 9 July.

All 13,000 registered workers came out. Non registered dock workers joined the strike. Poole, Shoreham, Harwich and Felixtowe voted to come out. The leadership of the General and Municipal and Workers Union called on its 1,500 members working on the docks in Middlesbrough to support the strike. On 12 July, a *Times* report declared that:

"Whitehall is clearly worried about the strike ... Around three quarters of the country's exports and imports are now stranded."

It went on to give prospects that were causing the worries of Whitehall. Supplies of coal and iron ore could be hit if the strike went on for any time. Support had been promised by members of the T&GWU in oil distribution and this could affect power stations. And, most threatening of all, miners' and dockers' pickets could join forces. Once again, we note the threat of widespread reaction in the working class and once again the spirit in the ranks was betrayed by trade union leaders.

While it was obvious that the Government was trying to isolate the miners, it was obvious also that there was at times, a desperation in their actions and that they were on the edge of the abyss. For example: when the dockers first took action, employers and backbench Tory MPs increased their demands for the end of the Dock Labour Scheme. In March 1984, the press reported Government plans to sweep away "restrictive practices" and "jobs-for-life guarantees" which they said that the Scheme upheld.

However, Stock Market prices and the pound fell in July. The National Dock Labour Board ruled in favour of the union on 13 July. The Government declared it was considering a State of Emergency on the 15th. On the same day, however, Nicholas Ridley, Secretary of State for Transport, felt it necessary to announce that the Government had no plans to abolish the Dock Labour Scheme. This was the Nicholas Ridley, it will be remembered, who was the author of a long term plan to break the strength of the unions. The union leaders went to the conciliation service, ACAS. On 17 July, as ACAS talks failed to reach a settlement, Government securities slumped and share prices fell again. Thatcher herself now declared the Government had no intention of doing away with the Scheme. The devil was sick, The devil a priest would be; The devil got well, Nary a priest was he. And those who restored him (or her) to health were the trade union leaders.

Those leaders whose deeds contradicted their words were abettors of the Tory strategy. A victory for the miners was entirely possible with united action. However, Todd and other leaders of the dockers now began to retreat in their search for a

formula to end the strike. They first retreated to the declaration that the purpose of the strike was to ensure the employers operate Clause Ten of the Dock Labour Scheme and give a pledge that non-Scheme labour would not be used without prior consent of the Dock Labour Board. On 21 July, an agreement was reached in the National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry, which consisted of employers and trades union representatives. Union leaders declared "we have got all we wanted" and said there would be no more breaches of Clause Ten. The employers, however, said they had made very few concessions. It was soon to be clear that it was the employers who told the truth.

The strike ended and the movement of dockers and miners to wider united action was blocked. The Tory Government and union leaders heaved a sigh of relief. How much union leaders had gained was shown less than a month later when the story of this betrayal of the fighting potentiality of dockers and miners moves back to Hunterston. The cargo vessel "Ostia" came into Hunterston docks, despite the boycott of imported coal there by registered dockers. It tied up without the help of tug boatmen or quayside workers. When the Ostia docked, dockers at Hunterston immediately walked out. In a few days, imports were stopped throughout Britain. The Prime Minister who was setting off for the Far East, postponed her trip because of the "present industrial situation"

The National Dock Labour Board ruled on 20 August that there was no provision to allow ISTC members to unload the "Ostia". However, the Ostia docked and was unloaded on 23 August by nonregistered labour. So much for the union leaders' "victory" in July which they said was a pledge that non-registered labour would not be used in this way. Other facts show also in which direction the victory lay. For the British Steel Corporation had continued exceeding its quota of 18,000 tonnes of coal weekly at Ravenscraig. The continuous stream of imported coal spelled frustration for the miners' pickets and was not only due to the right-wing ISTC and TUC leadership breaking all the principles of workers' solidarity. It was also due to the activity, or non-activity, of left leaders', avowed supporters of the miners. The miners appealed for a total blockade. These union leaders wanted only the restoration of the agreement allowing a quota of 18,000 tonnes a week.

On 24 August, there was a 78 to 11 vote for strike action at a T&GWU National Docks Delegate Conference. The National Docks Secretary of the T&GWU, John Connolly, uttered the following militant words to the press:

"The strike decision is in support of the T&G executive council's policy to support the miners, and that means stopping coal and oil berthing at Hunterston and other ports."

They were merely empty words. First, however, when the strike began, Connolly continued on his militant line,

"I want to make it clear it could be that other sectors of the union could be asked to help in this dispute."

But the thoughts of the leadership were far from spreading the strike. On 1 September, Ron Todd, the general secretary of the T&GWU proposed talks to the British Steel Corporation to try to agree quotas of coal. The British Steel Corporation management, having measured the mettle of the trade union leadership, declared dismissively that it was not interested in a deal to ration imported coal which had proved ineffective in the past.

The vacillation of the leadership meant that the strike, while still supported, was not getting the same widespread support as the stoppage a month before. The docks employers in London, like the BSC, turned the screw. The Port of London Authority in Tilbury set up a ballot on the strike which was run by the Electoral Reform Society. Forty nine per cent of dockers refused to vote and of the dockers who voted, just under 50 per cent, 1,398 dockers were against the strike. However, only 350 crossed the picket line.

Bus and railway workers were in dispute over wages. We have heard Jimmy Knapp on the growth of opposition to the Tory Government in the public sector. The real linking of these movements of workers demanded a joint struggle. This, the leaders both of the Labour Party and the trade unions did not want. Quite the contrary, they consciously set out to destroy it. The Labour leader Neil Kinnock chose this time to make his sharpest attacks on Arthur Scargill to undermine support for the miners strike. On 16 September, he declared on television that Scargill was "destroying the coal industry single handed" and that he was the nearest equivalent in the labour movement of a "First World War general."

On 17 September the T&GWU and the ISTC struck a deal. The formula reaffirmed the status quo at Hunterston and increased the quota of coal for Ravenscraig. John Preston, on behalf of the Labour Shadow Cabinet and the TUC General Council, had been busy arriving at the formula which was accepted by the BSC. Over a period of eight weeks the quota at Hunterston would be increased from 18,000 tonnes to the 22,500 demanded by the BSC. The NUM rejected the peace deal. Scargill expressed the anger of striking miners: "We do not expect anyone to make a deal which results in people crossing our picket line" he said.

The formula was accepted by a T&GWU docks delegate conference on 18 September by 76 votes to eight with six abstentions, and the dockers' strike ended. Three days after his union had made this deal, Ron Todd issued a directive to his members to refuse to transport coal across picket lines, refuse to handle imported coal or coal produced by dissident miners! Once again he was waving a revolver loaded with wind. Inevitably, strike-breaking lorry drivers took less and less notice of a union which could not carry out its threats to discipline them and of leaders who made agreements endorsing the transport of coal which they told their members to refuse.

What a sorry tale of the destruction of movements of struggle and a wearing down of workers' spirit by a conservative bureaucratic machine! In the middle of all these events, in the nineteenth week of the miners' strike at a miners demonstration, when Arthur Scargill said about the dockers' strike that: "Both our fights are intertwined and linked, fighting the same kind of government policy" Ron Todd followed and endorsed his words. He declared that the two disputes, though from different origins:

"...were inextricably linked. The dock strike started from our support of the NUM, when the port employers abrogated the National Dock Labour Scheme at Immingham."

Later, he was to do his best to destroy that "inextricable linking". Twice in the miners' strike he colluded with the Tory tactics of isolating the miners. It was unprincipled activities like this by trade union leaders which set the stage for the abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme in 1989.

1. This alliance of three unions was sometimes called the "Triple Alliance". It repeated the miserable history of the original "Triple Alliance" of 1921, an alliance of

the railway union, the transport union and the miners. The railway union and the transport union leaders refused the call of the miners for assistance on 15 April 1921. That day thereafter was known as "Black Friday".

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 13

Abolition of the Scheme - The Final Sell-Out

"We had two golden opportunities. We could have fought during the course of the miners' strike. We knew if it hadn't been the miners it would have been us and the Tories were waiting to get over the miners' strike to settle with us. We were actually out on strike twice with the miners and the union leaders couldn't give the correct leadership and bring out the dangers of what was going to come to us afterwards, if the miners were defeated. We could have made the miners strike a decisive blow the Government. That short period when dockers and miners were together in struggle showed that the Government had in enormous job dealing with both at the same time.¹

Eventually, all the employers' plans were realised in the big betrayal of 1989. That was the final break; the T&GWU leadership had no intention of really fighting the abolition of that National Dock Labour Scheme. They allowed three readings of the Bill to go through Parliament, instead of coming on strike at the first reading and calling all the dockers out while they still had the protection of the national Dock Labour Scheme. They allowed the Bill to become law, so by the time all the main ports struck work the employers could use non-dockers to do our work. The leaders undermined the confidence of the dockers so seriously that, even though Merseyside decided again to stick it out, it was too much for other ports and eventually we had to go back."

On 7 April 1989, the Tory Government published a Bill to abolish the Dock Labour Scheme and dockers at Liverpool and Tilbury walked out. On 8 April the *Independent* reported that:

"The Government and port employers have been planning the abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme and their strategy for defeating a national ports strike for the past 18 months confidential documents passed to the *Independent* show ... the plans, which are known to ministers, reveal the port authorities have a detailed strategy to tackle a total stoppage of up to eight weeks. The documents compiled in November 1987 detail how public opinion would be mobilised against striking dockers and how to safeguard supplies of 'politically sensitive' goods. Employers had first approached the Government in this round of their attempts to scrap the Scheme, in 1985, but they were told there was no chance until the Tories had

won the next election. In March 1987, the employers formed a strategy group to prepare the ground for abolition."

A group of Tory MPs began raising demands for a Bill for abolition and were preparing a private measure. Newspaper leader columns helped prepare the ground. The *Independent* reported that the employers document discussed a propaganda campaign and part of it would be

"a judicious mix of rubbishing the Scheme and stressing that individual dockers will not lose out ... The documents shed light on why abolition of the jobs for life' scheme was announced when it was. They stress that any industrial action would need to end before the end of the wheat harvest."

When Tilbury and Liverpool dockers went on strike, Ron Todd, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, declared their action was "a spontaneous reaction to a provocative act". But the action was spontaneous precisely because the union made no preparations in face of the plans of the employers. Its leaders made preparations only to prevent action by their docker **members. They immediately** appealed to dockers who had involved themselves in unofficial stoppages to return to work.

The employers, for their part, decided to increase the pressure and let it be known that they had taken legal advice and believed a strike in defence of the Scheme would be illegal. This was not 1972, or even 1982, when trade union leaders were, at least in words, threatening to face the might of the law to defend their members' rights. The leaders of the T&GWU, while announcing a docks delegate conference on the following Monday which could begin movements towards a strike ballot, began a series of events which wore away the militancy of the rank and file and succeeded, in delaying the official strike until after the Dock Labour Scheme had been abolished. The *Observer* labour correspondent wrote:

"Senior figures in the T&GWU privately concede that nothing can prevent the 42 year old Scheme from being steam-rolled into extinction by the Government's huge Parliamentary majority. There is, though, a lack of enthusiasm among the opposition to reinstating the dockers' deal should Labour win the next election."

So that while dockers' rank and file leaders were expecting a fight to defend the Scheme, the union leadership prepared for a retreat which meant the acceptance of the abolition of the Scheme. The National Docks Committee of the T&GWU, consisting of docks delegates, met on 10 April and took a unanimous decision to strike in defence of the National Dock Labour Scheme, the policy adopted by their union for ten years. The meeting was adjourned for a day so that Ron Todd, General Secretary of the union, could come to the meeting. When he came it was to warn the committee that the press would say that the strike was political. The majority of members of the committee had never thought the struggle was anything else. How could it be as it was a result of the Tory Government abolishing the Dock Labour Scheme? Todd declared he would oppose their policy on the executive of the union.

Having continually prevaricated in face of the employers' strategy, put in operation in 1987, to defeat the dockers and abolish the Scheme, Todd now told the National Committee that the Dock Labour Scheme could not be saved. There should be

industrial negotiations for a new national agreement within Thatcher's anti-union laws.

At the National Executive meeting of the union, Todd opposed the dockers' decision to strike in defence of the Scheme. His proposition was carried at the National Executive - which had a "broad left" majority - with three votes in favour of the Docks National Committee policy. The Executive decided to postpone a ballot on a national strike which they had agreed was to be a strike for a national docks agreement.

Following the meeting, the union leaders asked for a meeting with the employers, who refused it. Having measured the capitulatory tendencies of the union's leaders, they could be confident they would soon finish with restraints of the Dock Labour Scheme on them. Three times the union wrote to the employers for negotiations on a national agreement. The employers ignored their requests.

The union leaders decided to seek legal advice as to whether a strike would be legal. Meanwhile, Associated British Ports, a big employer of registered dockers, were threatening court proceedings, declaring the strike would be "secondary action" aimed against the Government and not individual employers.

Having picked the time for a confrontation, the employers and the state set the pace. Faced with the threat of sequestration, Mr. Todd made statements that he had to think of the interests of the whole union and not just his 9,000 docker members. On Todd's premise, and seeking to find a legal loophole, decisive action was delayed. This was despite warnings from militant dockers that when the Scheme was abolished on 3 July the employers then could set about employing non-registered labour and sack formerly registered dockers.

When the employers refused the demand for a national agreement, that surely involved all the T&GWU dockers, whether registered or otherwise. However, the trade union leadership, even if they were forced into a strike, had no intention of widening it beyond registered dockers. With no real positive principles but with their method of leadership based only on getting out of sticky situations, they certainly had no intention of launching a real campaign. They called a ballot for strike action among the 9,000 registered dockers, with no planning or real perspective for a struggle and knowing that the strike had no prospect for success, without at least involving the whole dock force.

At the end of April, there was still no ballot for strike action. Docks shop stewards from all over the country were telephoning union headquarters. They were told that the ballot paper was with the lawyers, and that there was a query as to whether the wording was within the Tory legislation. Eventually, a week into May, the ballot papers went out. The result was 74.3 per cent for strike action. The dockers expected then, at last, to be called out. But no! While shop stewards warned that the employers would drag out the dispute to lose valuable time and demoralise the ranks, the union leadership took the strike decision to the High Court, because the employers continued to claim the strike was political and illegal.

Ten days later there was a ruling from the High Court that it was a lawful trade dispute. Again, dockers expected to be called out. Again, false hopes! The employers appealed and the union leadership awaited the appeal. The Appeal Lords granted an injunction to the employers. Norman Willis, general secretary of the TUC, was moved to call it an "astonishing judgement" raising issues of the "gravest magnitude". Labour's Shadow Employment spokesman, Michael Meacher, said that the Government and the employers were colluding to hamper industrial action! For

its part the National Association of Port Employers increased the pressure and appealed to the union leadership to drop its demand for national negotiations and enter into local negotiations.

The National Port Shop Stewards Committee called for an immediate strike in line with the outcome of the ballot. The disgraceful capitulation of the union leadership continued. When over 2,000 dockers in Liverpool, Bristol, Tilbury, Lowestoft and Newport came out on unofficial strike, Ron Todd made an appeal to dockers not to take strike action until the union's appeal had been heard in the House of Lords.

From now on, it was clear that the united attack of the port employers and the Government aided by the trade union leadership was succeeding in breaking up the confidence of the dockers that they could win a victory. After a week, Liverpool and Tilbury remained on strike but the others had gone back to work. The National Association of Port Employers announced that it would be pulling out of the docks National Joint Council with the unions.

Mass meetings at Tilbury and Liverpool decided by small majorities to return to work. On the same day John Connolly, national docks secretary of the T&GWU, declared that the employers' actions were "provocative and bound to make the situation worse. The employers are taking succour from legal restraints imposed on the union."

The Law Lords now judged that strike action for a national agreement was within the law. Merseyside shop stewards issued a leaflet to the Biennial Conference of the T&GWU calling for "unequivocal support" and "not empty phrases". Alas! That is what the dockers continued to get.

On 27 June the T&GWU conference pledged the full might of 1,300,000 members of the union behind the dockers. This pledge was an empty gesture. In reply to the debate at the conference, Ron Todd declared that the union would remain within the law and stressed that the union as a whole must not be put in danger of sequestration of funds under the Tory laws against secondary action. So that the pledge was invalidated at the very moment it was given, because the use of the might of the full membership of the union would be "secondary" action under the law.

The T&GWU then began another strike ballot. The result on 7th July was three to one in favour of strike, but it came after the Government had abolished the Dock Labour Scheme. The criminal retreats of the leadership had succeeded in postponing the strike action until the Dock Labour Scheme had been removed. It was three months after the announcement of the abolition of the Scheme on 6 April that the official strike began, on 10 July.

When the result of the ballot was announced the employers had immediately issued a statement declaring:

"Dockers must understand that if they walk out not all of them will be coming back".

They said that any sort of national agreement implied the recreation of the National Dock Labour Scheme which they had "long fought to abolish".

There was a campaign of intimidation against striking dockers, Letters were sent out in every port informing dockers that they must be available for work otherwise they would be sacked. Dockers were made redundant and offered work on a casual basis.

Then, when the employers continued to carry out their prepared plan and sacked dockers in Tilbury, Mr. Todd declared that now the big issue was the reinstatement of port workers. He denounced the Tilbury sackings as an "outrageous provocation". But all the talk of "provocation" could not cover the responsibility of the union's leadership for what had happened. Having undermined resistance to the plans of Government and employers and brought the docks organisation to the brink of disaster, Todd now added:

"This is not a normal dispute. From the very beginning, the port employers, supported by their cronies in the Government, have set out to demoralise the workforce in Britain's docks and to destroy their trade unions."

The original aim of the stoppage, as declared by the union leadership - to win a national agreement to replace the Scheme - was now put on one side. "You don't worry about a cut finger when your jugular vein has been severed," declared Ron Todd, who had surely played a major role in bringing the dockers' throats close to the knife. Mr. Todd now puffed out a few fierce sounding words as a substitute for real battle. With this he got the cheers of union delegates from the ports at a national meeting, but refused to say whether the union would now sanction secondary picketing of non-Scheme ports. The issue of sackings of union representatives, de-recognition of the union, and all the provocations of the employers, however, by all reckoning, involved the whole union, not just 9,000 registered dockers. Mr. Todd was ducking and weaving in face of the pressures on the trade union officialdom, with no intention of campaigning to mobilise the strength of the ranks.

The vacillation and wholesale retreats of the T&GWU leadership had the effect of creating a shambles. By the third week, only Bristol and Liverpool were left on strike. Hull stewards recommended a return, arguing that an orderly return to work was better than allowing the strike to crumble. The dockers at Tilbury returned to work when they were warned that they would lose their jobs without redundancy pay. Already 16 shop stewards had been sent pay-off checks. On 1 August the executive of the T&GWU called off the strike. Mr. Todd now declared that the union would seek local agreements - in "a national framework", whatever that formula meant.

In looking at this terrible tale of the union's leadership of this struggle, we have to remind ourselves that the T&GWU had a "left" executive. The "Broad Left" of the union, however, made no campaign for an alternative policy to that of Todd, nor did it call any meetings during the whole of this critical period.

Meanwhile, the Port of London Authority had established a new firm at the huge grain terminal at Tilbury dock. It was to be a non-union company. Finney, the director of the National Association of Port Employers, boasted on 16 July that for the first time in 42 years, many of the 20,000 other workers in the industry had been able to retrain to do work hitherto the preserve of registered dockers. As the dockers returned, Mr. McNab, chief executive of the port of Tilbury announced:

"All those offered contracts of employment have accepted them and returned to work ... We could not stand idly by and watch our hard earned business disappear to our competitors. We had to make some tough decisions. We have completely restructured cargo handling within the port and introduced new working arrangements together with new employment contracts."

The 16 shop stewards never got their jobs back. On 4 November 1993, four and a half years after their sacking, an appeals court of three judges finally ruled it was "impractical" for them to be reinstated!

The T&GWU regional secretary K. Reid said that these dockers had: "won the moral and legal argument over their dismissal but most of them are still out of a job."

He declared that the Port of Tilbury, now privatised, was recruiting casual labour despite assurances given at the time of the abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme. Then 450 workers at Southampton decided on a majority vote to end their strike, after 150 dockers had been warned that they would be sacked unless they returned to work on Monday 31 July. The port manager sent a letter to dockers declaring that the employers have:

"... a right in law to dismiss you without any form of compensation or severance payment. Dismissal for breaking your contract of employment would mean that you would not receive any payment under the Government's compensation scheme."

The Forth Ports Authority said that of 100 dockers who voted to return to work, 30 would be selected for employment under the new terms. As Glasgow returned, it was announced that 18 of the 60 dockers who had been on strike would be made redundant. Trade union leaders tried to blame workers. One T&GWU official was reported as saying that their redundancy money was "fool's gold". But the responsibility for the acceptance of redundancy payments must be put squarely on the shoulders of the union's officialdom itself. An official whose whole activities are determined by maintaining the security of a job with the union and who participates every day in opportunism is a hypocrite when he attacks workers who take the money - a much less secure guarantee than the official's job.

John Connolly on 30 June declared that the union would continue to fight for a national agreement in the wake of the abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme, but the priority would be to insist on the reinstatement of those who had been dismissed. We have already recorded the fate of the Tilbury shop stewards.

During that same July, employers talked about a rosy future for the docks. For example, Mr. Andrew Kent, Associated British Ports Southampton Port Manager, said that the Scheme "put the fear of God into investors" but saw a bright future for Southampton as "the principal deep water port of the UK in 20 years time". Norman Fowler, Tory Secretary of State for Employment, declared:

"I have no doubt there is a very good future for British ports. With the abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme, the most important obstacle to the modernisation of our ports has been removed."

A Tilbury docker said;

"I basically agree that we should remain on strike but I have no confidence that the union will support us. Why should we expect any different treatment than that meted out to the miners, printers and seafarers? They were all sold down the river."

Cavanagh described the return on Merseyside:

"When we had to go back in 1989 we marched back. That was something we had never done before and something we picked up

from the miners. We found that there was a lock on the shop stewards' cabin. The number of stewards was drastically reduced.

Since then, only two full time stewards have been allowed on the dock and in 1992 there was a two-day strike. The officials instructed the men to go back to work and when they returned the employers informed them that they will no longer recognise shop stewards and they would only deal with the officials. This takes us back to prior to 1967, or even 1954, when the Blue Union fought for democratic union rights."

There were, in 1993, 405 former 'old-type' dockers from the old registered force on Merseyside: 240 on the container base, 35 on the Dublin ferry, 60 at the timber berths, 30 at the grain terminal and 40 on cargo handling. Together with them there were 80 former clerical workers. Less than 500 men then, are now the only organised force with limited recognition. There are private stevedoring companies who employ 60 permanent and about 100 part-time or casual men and who do not recognise the union. Some employ six or seven men, like a scrap firm which loads and unloads its scrap. These firms also operate on the wharves on the old Manchester Ship Canal. "The industry now has gone back a hundred years and it is a tragedy," comments Mike Carden.

"The irony and cynicism of it is that the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company now are handling more tons of cargo - and this is their own advertising - than they ever did in the height of the docks in the fifties and sixties. The future is very limited for the 400 men who are left here. The union has now reached a deal directly with an employer to employ what the employer calls part-time labour and what we call casual workers, All the 14 stewards are de-recognised, although the union officials can still negotiate. The employers are introducing casual labour and they have the arrogance to accuse us of being madmen wanting to drag the industry into the past."

In September 1993, an independent report was published by the Research Management Branch, Employment department, Sheffield, entitled *The Abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme*. The report says that the abolition of the Scheme led to a reduction in the national labour force from 17,404 to 12,083, with a saving of 41 per cent in the annual salary bill. The employers have shed permanent labour and now go back to the use of casual labour for periods of peak demand. The savings have gone solely to port employers to increase profits. Those workers left in the industry saw their average pay fall by 13.8 per cent between 1988 and 1991. Unskilled workers on the east coast are being paid £2.50 an hour, less than half the hourly rate in the major ports. Very significantly the accident rate per employee has increased from 3.84 per 100 workers to 5.92. The report says:

"The use of temporary dock workers is increasingly common in the ex-Scheme ports. Training for temporary dock workers, however, is rare. This failure may have contributed to the increase in the incidence of accidents in ex-Scheme ports following abolition."

John Connolly, national docks officer of the T&GWU, huffed and puffed at the report. He told the Independent of 24 September 1993 that the results of abolition had confirmed the union's worst fears. He was concerned that it had not produced the benefits in new business from the Continent. "Eighty five per cent of ports in the UK

are employing casual labour in some form or another" he said. At least now he doesn't have a large force of militant dockers to handle. And his "hands are tied". The report says industrial relations have been transformed, and while the majority of changes have been imposed there have been fewer disputes.

1. *Larry Cavanagh*

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 14

Balance Sheet of the Blue

The militant dockers who participated in that northern break-away, and the dockers in the T&GWU who protected them, played an honourable and worthy part in the struggle in the docks. It is significant that among those who were in the leadership of the Blue Union in the north during those years there are none who have ever expressed any regret at the role they played, or who still fail to stress its positive and abiding achievements.

The interviews with Hugh Cunningham and Gerry Edwards in this book were taken at the Edinburgh Park Dockers' Club, which is set back from the road in Townsend Lane in the north of Liverpool. I met them in a very large room where, at the time I arrived - two o'clock - there were around 500 men sitting around tables, drinking. Some of them kept coming over to our table to speak to Gerry or Hugh or were asked to give confirmation to some points the two were making or give a name they couldn't remember. When Peter Kerrigan came there were many dockers who came to greet him, glad to see him, some after many years. Clearly they held him in some regard.

I was among a slowly dwindling band. When they began work at the docks there would be at least 17,000 men working in the Merseyside ports. There were then seven miles of docks from Dingle in South Liverpool to Gladstone in the north, with an overhead railway running the whole length and known as the "dockers' umbrella". Now, there is only the container base at Gladstone left, with a few quays used on the river and 405 registered dockers. In the previous decade and a half, as old dockers in the club died, hardly any joined.

The opinions of those we talked to were firm and definite, as steadfast in their opinions on their struggles as they were at the time they took place. It would be wrong to say their heads were "bloody but unbowed". Certainly their heads are unbowed, but one had the impression they had given as good as they got. And what a difference to the shabby and sorry tale of official leaders that appears in this book. For them, the issues were sharp and clear. They were proud men, proud of their history and with the humorous stories and nicknames for which Merseyside dockers were famous when it used to be said that every third person on Merseyside was a comedian, Gerry had not even the smallest regret for the break to the Blue Union.

"All these older men realise what we achieved. The T&G was a vast organisation and we felt we counted for nothing. Some members of the London executive of the Blue Union were afraid we wanted to take London over because the northern men were the overwhelming

majority in the union. We never had that idea. We wanted a national democratic union with unity between London and the north."

Hughie Cunningham had become chairman of the Blue Union area committee after Benbow died, very shortly following the 1967 strike "You can see how our fight was respected by the tribute paid to Benbow when he died." he said.

"The cortege went all along the dock road early in the morning and men were standing out very early, waiting, in the dark. The employers had to give two hours off - from eight am to ten, but the men were off all morning. Groups had booked coaches to go to the cemetery at Anfield. Immediately after the cortege arrived it was impossible to get into or near Anfield cemetery. I was pleased to meet and fight with people like Kerrigan, Wally Butler, Frank O'Brien, Cubby (Joe Cubbin), Benbow, Spud Murphy and hundreds more. They fought for the dockers and they were people of integrity."

Peter Kerrigan had given his opinion in the interview from which I have already quoted.

"We failed to get recognition through the Recognition Strike, although the Hull dockers won dockside recognition which meant the Blue Union official negotiated on arbitrations, dirty cargo, piece-work etc. In Hull also a Blue Union docker could get his son on the dock. The T&GWU prevented that on Merseyside. Any recruitment to the register had to be Transport Union members. That was one of the biggest pressures they operated. The Blue Union continued through the 60s and was able to show its teeth in 1967 in the strike then. It went through some hard fighting in the north but the fact that men continued in it is really a big proof that the reasons for the big break from the T&G were overwhelming and it was a viable undertaking and showed the big pull of the idea of a national, democratic, fighting union. While the Blue did not recruit any large number of men after the Recognition Strike, it did recruit men after every strike in the 1960s. We were part of a decade and a half of struggle on Merseyside up to 1970 which raised the whole level. There was the Reform movement of the Seafarers, fighting in the early sixties for shop stewards, proper branch meetings and democracy in the union. I have no doubt that the struggle of the Blue helped them in eventually shaking the bureaucracy of their union. There was a strike of builders over the rain money; there was the struggle for parity of wages and conditions with the south when the car industry came here. The trade union leaders had agreed that the wages in the new car factories here should not equal Dagenham but would be in accordance with those general on Merseyside. So the rates of pay would be lower than London or even Oxford. When I think of the achievements of the Blue Union in the north I think of how it built the consciousness of dockers, both industrially and politically. And it did have a big effect on the Transport and General Workers Union; it shook the bureaucracy and forced them to retreat and give shop stewards in 1967. I have no doubts at all that the struggle for the Blue was right. There may have been wrong tactics at times, but they happen in every struggle. I very often think about the men in Number

5 Control, (which was my control, with 1500 men and 1,000 of them in the Blue Union, but there were similar men in other controls) who were ready to give time and effort for a cause, the way they did. For example, if there was a strike coming off, you'd print a 1,000 leaflets and say: 'Let's get these out in Birkenhead, we'll leave at six in the morning'. They would be there at six. The commitment was terrific to the Blue. These men had no idea of getting a job out of it like those who became officials then for the T&GWU. The thought of doing something for the T&GWU wouldn't get anybody out of bed. That was a phenomenon of this time. I can't completely explain it. It was the result of the nature of the fight which brought up that spirit, and which brought the resolve and the capacities of leadership that didn't sell out."

The Blue Union was able to maintain itself throughout the 1960s in the north, and the strength of its leadership on Merseyside was indicated by the economic victory it won in 1967 as a result of the steadfastness, determination, and firmness of its members and the rank and file of the T&GWU. However, there was a failure of unofficial leaders in the T&GWU to carry forward a struggle for the right of Blue Union members to have stewards from their own union. Cunningham told what happened:

"During the 1967 strike, the committee had agreed that when we got stewards, the qualification would not be union membership but only that they should be nominated and seconded and agreed at a meeting and represent 200 men, The Blue had played a leading part in bringing the victory about. We had led the campaign against Devlin.

After the strike was over, most of the T&GWU members on the committee forgot this and some wanted to annihilate us, so they insisted that stewards could only be T&GWU members. I was nominated as steward but the official ruled me out."

Larry Cavanagh confirms this:

"Unfortunately, this unity which we had with the lads of the Number 3 branch of the T&GWU during the strike was not carried through by the CP'ers and other militants there in a fight for us to have shop stewards. At that time the 'black circular still existed in the T&G, which debarred Communist Party members from holding office in the union, including shop stewards' positions. After the strike, Communist party members were elected as stewards and the union closed its eyes. The black circular was withdrawn at a Rules Revision conference in either the following year or 1969."

Thus, after the strike, despite the unity that had existed and the contribution of the Blue Union militants to the struggle, the T&GWU stewards, under the influence of the Communist Party, pursued an opportunist policy in refusing to carry out what had been agreed. It was the product of the same Stalinist training of narrow, sometimes vicious sectarianism, that led Leyden and his fellow Communist Party members to attack Peter Kerrigan at the meeting before the strike, when he was nominated from the Blue Union Area Committee to speak on Devlin. However, the Blue Union did continue to operate after 1967. Cunningham declares:

"We still had a number of fights after 1967. I was charged once with inciting men to go on strike. I went before the Dock Labour Board - the same superintendent who charged me was one of those judging me. I won the case. I got the right to visit the quays as a member of the Blue Union, There had been a legal case by the Blue Union in 1970 or 1971 and the Ellerman Line had been fined £5,000 for stopping a Blue Union delegate from doing his job as the Blue Union was recognised in the Devlin report,

The rule continued that a docker's son whose father was in the Blue could not get a job on the dock. In 1972 or 1973, Jimmy Walker and W. O'Farrel took the Dock Labour Board and the T&G

to court because their sons had been rejected for the dock, They won a judgment that all applications had to go through the Dock Labour Board and jobs were to be given to the NAS&D. But from that time there was no further recruitment on the dock. In 1972 the leadership of the NAS&D agreed with the TUC that there would be no further recruitment of Blue Union members in the north. So we were further squeezed because a large proportion of our members were in the generation that was now approaching retirement, most of them were between 50 and 60 years old as the 1970s came in. However, we had over 200 members in 1982 with just 2,100 dockers in the port of Liverpool."

At this time, the Blue Union in the north ended honourably. Hughie Cunningham reports:

"At the end of 1982, there were six months of talks between the Blue Union and the T&GWU on amalgamation. A delegate from the Blue Union represented Merseyside and Manchester. There was another one from Hull. In January 1983, there was an agreement reached between the executives of the two unions."

Describing the agreement, both Gerry and Hugh said:

"The name of every man who was a paid up member of the Blue was handed over to the T&GWU, and he became a fully paid up member of the White Union. He joined the branch he had left and was reinstated with his membership back to the time he had originally joined the T&G, with all benefits."

Hugh then went on to say:

"It was a national agreement, so it had to be carried out in all the ports. One or two branch officials here didn't like it. I had to go and see the T&G District Secretary, Jimmy Symes, to get my card properly stamped. I went back to the branch and said: We're not coming back with our tails between our legs. We are coming back like men."

The exact course of the struggle for the Blue Union in the north, when it began, could not be plotted and it was right to seek to build a national democratic organisation which could express what rank and file dockers felt in the 1950s. The outcome could only be determined in struggle and the tenacity with which the Blue Union clung to life in the north shows it had viability. Of course there were the old type conservative

elements among the leadership of the stevedores and their militant and democratic traditions couldn't carry them forward when the TUC and the whole weight of the official trade union movement came down on them. As Kerrigan says:

"The fight was made hard because of the simple fact that the leadership of the Stevedores and Dockers, in order to get back recognition from the TUC, were trying to show to the TUC that they were a 'responsible' organisation and it was the 'madmen of the north' - which is what some of these leaders began to call us - who wouldn't allow them to be so,

There was a conservative group in the London leadership which at the beginning thought they were going to become a bigger union with no trouble. Then they became the most vicious against us. The witch-hunt was done by Newman the dockers' secretary, who come up to Liverpool and helped to recruit the members in, but then had a row down in London with the northern delegates, and accused them of running it as a political organisation and he went to the *Empire News* and gave them a story, and said who the leading people were, with vague accusations. I was someone's lieutenant in Liverpool, Constable someone's in London.

There was also a farcical enquiry by the London executive, in which we were accused of taking a coach to a meeting of Michael Foot who was then supporting our struggle and editor of *Tribune*. *Tribune* supported us in the overtime strike. Later, we organised a coach from the 'Blue' Union committee to the Free Trades Hall in Manchester where Foot spoke. We met Foot and Foot said: 'Is there any particular policy you have on the docks that you think we could help get legislation on?' I think that the main thing was something else. I think in bringing the dockers' struggle and the left wing struggle in the Labour Party together, both sides got assistance. It was part of the political struggle which was necessary at that time. There were accusations by one or two Blue Union men from Merseyside brought to the enquiry which they appeared to believe this had sinister implications. One said that Foot had told him that politics and trade unionism went together like horse and carriage! In 1958 there was another witch hunt begun by the *News Chronicle*. I was one of those attacked among the 'twelve men who want to dominate Britain'. We were the 12 men on the editorial board of the *Newsletter*, the paper of the Socialist Labour League. We were called the most dangerous men in Britain and the *News Chronicle* attacked us in several issues. A docker came into the union branch and showed the paper and said: 'What about this?' So I said: 'What about it?' He was a member of Catholic Action - church boot on one leg and militant boot on the other."

The experience of the Blue Union, like the whole history of the docks, must be put in the context of the continuation of a right wing and opportunist left leadership of the trade union movement, and the weakness of a principled Marxist alternative leadership. But such a principled leadership could only be built by participating in historic movements such as that of the Blue Union break. If it was not an adventure, neither was it an artificial movement, the product of "politically motivated men" which

Labour leaders such as Attlee, Wilson and Gunter denounced as the hidden hands in great strikes. That is in line with the ideas of reformists and trade union bureaucrats that workers are a mass to be manipulated. Yes, there were "politically motivated men" who supported the Blue Union. We, Trotskyists, who later became the Socialist Labour League, supported them. We were almost the only group of politically motivated men - and women - who gave consistent and loyal support to their struggle, which took place after a decade of bitter experience of dockers.

In truth, it must be said, the greatest advances of the British trade union movement have been made with the assistance of a political, indeed Marxist, leadership - including the great organisation of the unskilled workers at the end of last century. The First International, which began as the result of the brewing employers attempting to use foreign workers to break a London strike, and which greatly assisted the formation of new unions, had Karl Marx as its most authoritative leader on the General Council.

The socialists who were around Engels, known by their opponents as "Engels' clique" - Tom Mann, John Burns, Will Thorne, Eleanor Marx, Keir Hardie and others - and their supporters led the Great Docks Strike and the movement to the 'New Unionism'. Eleanor Marx helped organise the gas workers, the rubber workers, and women workers of east London. She and her husband - Edward Aveling - helped Will Thorne to draw up the constitution of the 40,000 strong National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers, later to become part of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers in 1924. She was the only member of the executive council of this union to be elected unanimously at its first conference.¹ The political group which Engels advised did not come from outside the "New Unionism" movement and inject politics into it.² They helped unleash its political essence, Engels commented that while the members of these unions "are not yet socialists to a man, they insist nevertheless on being led only by socialists".³ The essence of this movement of the mass of British workers, including those in the "submerged tenth", was political. It was the great merit of these socialist leaders that they were able to bring out its political and international strength and express it in the decisions of the new unions, such as the gasworkers, to put up workers candidates independent of the Liberals, Out of this "New Unionism" came the progress towards a Labour Party. The "New Unionism" not only broke to independent working-class politics but also to working-class internationalism. It helped spur forward the Second International and the first celebration of 1 May as international workers' day, took place in Britain in 1990 under the slogan of the legal eight hour day. Three hundred thousand London workers, with great contingents from the East End, joined the international army which demonstrated for international solidarity.

It is also true that a great advance which won the right of workers to elect shop stewards in industry came out of the struggle led by socialist, political leaders in the engineering factories in the First World War.

The Trotskyists supported and assisted the break to the Blue Union in the north as a genuine movement of the workers and one in which they could gain a great deal of necessary political experience. I have no doubts that we were absolutely correct to seek to link it with the left wing movement in the Labour Party which was a central political phenomenon at the time. The policy of the unofficial committee in Birkenhead toward the left wing of the Labour Party was simply put in the editorial of their paper in July 1952, in which they wrote:

"For many years the genuine socialists among the port workers of Britain have been in the forefront of the fight against the right wing leaders and their anti-socialist policy.

The portworkers' strikes of the years from 1944 to the recent Birkenhead strike of only a few weeks ago were not only battles against the ruling class but also against the right wing dictators in the trade union movement. At the present time when throughout the Labour, Trades Union and Co-operative movement, a great swing to the left is taking place, all serious Socialist workers among the dockers must take heed of the connection that exists between this leftward movement and the portworkers movement nationally.

The portworkers' committees, being part of the broadening struggle against the Tories and the right wing, must intensify their efforts to expose the right wing in its citadel, which is the T&GWU of which we dockers are but a small section."

These Birkenhead unofficial leaders, together with other unofficial leaders became supporters and sellers of the *Socialist Outlook*.⁴ At this time, in 1954, the docks struggle had the support of the Bevanites - the Labour Party left wing around the weekly paper *Tribune*.⁵

Some of the most principled fighters on the docks in this period were either Trotskyists or influenced by Trotskyism. They were among the leaders of a great movement which, as we have shown, was pulsating with working class loyalties and initiative. It was a socialist duty to assist the opposition to the 'New Deals' and the Devlin Schemes and seek to give a political leadership.

1. *Eleanor Marx*. Vol ii. Yvonne Kapp. Virago. The Labour Annual for 1899, referring to her work for the Gasworkers Union said: "When that, the only completely successful union of unskilled labourers has its history written, her name will, like Abou Ben Adhem, lead all the rest". By 1890 the union had a membership of 100,000.

2. Engels wrote on 27 August 1889, when the dock labourers were still out: "They are, as you know, the most miserable of all the miserable of the East End, the broken down ones of all trades, the lowest stratum above the down and outs... That these poor famished broken down creatures who bodily fight amongst each every morning for admission to work, should organise for resistance, turn out 40-50,000 strong, draw after them into the strike all and every trade of the East End in any way connected with shipping, hold out above a week, and terrify the wealthy and powerful dock companies - that is a revival I am proud to have lived to see ... and all this strike is worked and led by our people."

3. 'May 4th in London'. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. *Articles on Britain*. Progress Publishers.

4. The Labour Party proscribed the *Socialist Outlook* in 1954 although 1,700,000 votes were cast against this proscription at the Labour Party Conference. The last issue of *Socialist Outlook* appeared with banner headlines: "The Dockers' Case".

5. During the strike against compulsory overtime in 1954, it was that support for the dockers which brought the anger of the right wing union leaders to white heat. On 22 October 1954, *Tribune* carried a front page article supporting the dockers,

condemning Arthur Deakin for his vicious attacks on the strike and on the leaders of the NAS&D. The General Council of the TUC passed a resolution that they immediately handed over to the NEC of the Labour Party, which dutifully themselves carried it. The resolution condemned *Tribune* for what it called its "unwarranted and scurrilous attack" on Arthur Deakin the right wing leader of the T&GWU. The right wing planned to discipline the editorial board of *Tribune* and proscribe the paper but could not carry this out.

They Knew Why They Fought - Chapter 15

Conclusion

On 28 July 1989, just before the end of the official strike of registered dock workers under his "leadership", Mr. Ron Todd, General Secretary of the T&GWU, said that the main concern now was to preserve union presence in the docks industry following "de-recognition" at Tilbury, the largest port.

That statement was more revealing than any other made by a trade union leader in 1989. Mr. Todd made his remarks as preparations were going on for the hundredth anniversary of the historic London docks strike of 1889 which was a high point in the mighty sweep of "New Unionism" - the organisation of the unskilled at the end of the last century. One hundred years later Mr. Todd was telling us that his union had its back to the wall in the last docks on the Thames

Very shortly afterwards, the lack-lustre, official "celebration" of the Great Dockers' Strike took place, in Bethnal Green. At the last minute, the 16 stewards who had recently been sacked at Tilbury docks withdrew their threat to picket the proceedings. The union's speakers at the rally made reference to the devastation of east London's dockland area. But it was tired, platitudinous, complacent demagoguery. The whole event was an insult to those who, in dockers' struggles, placed their mark on glorious pages of working class history. How could it be anything else? How could the representatives of the "official" apparatus of trade unionism do anything but ignore the real question: if there was this appalling debacle on the docks, which Todd so casually mentioned, then - how did it come about? Between them and the answer to that question was their own bureaucratic, complacent careerism. For they and their colleagues in the "official" leadership brought about the debacle. In the months of June, July and August 1989, there was only a concentrated pitiful repeat of capitulatory, compromising, manoeuvring leadership which has been an obstacle to dockers' progress for many decades.

On the one side in the post-war period, there is a sorry tale of leaders whose policies revolve only around their own bureaucratic interests and who are far removed from the feelings, aspirations and traditions of trade union membership. On the other side, there is a magnificent story of workers' will to fight and workers' solidarity. There is abundant material in this docks history to underline the conclusion of Leon Trotsky that, in this epoch, the crisis of humanity is the crisis of working class leadership.

In the centre of the history in this book is the dockers' struggle for de-casualisation. The struggle against casual work and the solidarity it created was the foundation of

the great dockers' militancy and their fighting traditions, At the end of its long struggle, the dock labour force has been decimated and its organisation weakened in what were formerly its citadels such as Merseyside and London.

After 42 years of the Dock Labour Scheme the employers were able to use the trade union leadership and technological advance to decimate the labour force and establish complete control over the docks transport industry. The vision of decasualisation which inspired dockers in the past was a vision of regular work, of decent living and working conditions for the docks communities. Now, dockers' jobs and communities have been destroyed. In dockers' feelings of deep going change - destroying the relationships of the past and destroying their strength and protection in solidarity - is also to be found the source of the crumbling of the strike. For the leadership of their union offered dockers no way out. In face of great problems, they could contribute, at best, only a wordy bombast, while they manoeuvred to settle the strike as quickly as possible.

Is it any wonder then, that old militants, in despair, took redundancy money, under the oppressive sensation of vast changes rolling over them without their union preventing it? To be sure, a whole period of docks struggle is ended. That, however, is not the end of struggle itself and the lessons of past struggle are certainly not lost. The biggest of those is that dockers certainly did not lack the potential strength to achieve the conditions that would guarantee a secure future for their families. Pessimism only arises through restricted vision. The progress of the working class has never been a steady upward curve.

The advance of technology could have provided the basis for a real decasualisation, with the complete end of back breaking and dirty work. It could have meant the introduction of shorter hours, better wages and the development of communities with increasing leisure and the possibilities of using that leisure for a fuller life. There could have been security for young workers instead of the spread of youth unemployment. Modernisation, however, increased the exploitation of the working class, and destroyed communities. Only a change of property ownership, a workers' government planning to build a socialist society, could have guaranteed technology would be used to benefit the whole of society. That is the simple practical truth and the last two decades on the docks have proved it. Very clearly Marx in volume one of *Capital* showed the meaning of technological advance and "modernisation" under capitalist ownership.

"Machinery, considered alone, shortens the hours of labour, but, in the service of capital, lengthens them; in itself it lightens labour, but, when employed by capital, heightens the intensity of labour; in itself it is a victory of man over the forces of nature, but, in the hands of capital, makes men the slave of those forces; in itself it increases the wealth of producers, but, in the hands of capital, it makes them paupers."

Later, he writes:

"Capitalist production develops technology only by sapping the original sources of all wealth - the soil and the labourer."

Not only was this a brilliant summary of a contradiction in capitalist society, but it was brilliantly prophetic. It brings immediately to mind the destruction of the labourer by unemployment or concentrated work and the destruction of the earth by pollution.

The drastic reduction of the number of dockers in the past decades was not an exceptional phenomenon. All sections of workers suffered, particularly in the basic industries. Unemployment rose dramatically in the 1970s. "Full employment", which had been trumpeted forth as the big achievement of post-war Britain, faded from the scene. Having long ceased being the "workshop of the world", the capitalist plans for Britain are that it should become one of the world's "sweat shops". Casual work, against which dockers, shipyard workers and other sections of the working class fought so bitterly, now returns throughout the economy. There has been a great extension of part-time work; of short-time contract work; casual work among the most defenceless sections of society - among women, immigrants and the youth. There has been the expansion of "lump" working, workers working without insurance and safety conditions. Labour-only firms operate a modern "butty" system, the system fought so bitterly in some of the coal fields before nationalisation.

According to official figures, by 1992 there were 4.6 million part time working women in Britain. There is a growing number of workers now on insecure short term contracts, employed by labouronly firms, employed in cleaning, refuse collection and road and other maintenance. "Almost a quarter of us now work part time. The government calls it a flexible labour market; in reality it means less pay and fewer rights." This was the streamer over an article by Will Hutton, the *Guardian* economics editor, on 30 March 1993. He reported that 40% of workers enjoyed no statutory redundancy pay and that many more did not qualify for the national insurance system. He remarks that "a growing proportion of the population is finding that making a living is rough, tough and poorly paid". He says that:

"The world of full-time employment is retreating before their eyes, and in its stead is emerging an insecure world of contract work, part-time jobs and casual labour."

Yet it still remains an extremely difficult task for capitalism to break the power and traditions of the working class. Sceptical people talk about the demoralisation of the British working class under Thatcherism. They express only their own paralysis. The history which these pages have dealt with shows that there has been nothing wrong with the fighting capacity of the British workers. It is the treachery and cowardice of leadership which has been responsible for whittling down its capacity for socialist struggle since the end of the war. The words "socialist struggle" are used because that is what was involved. Those who gave the greatest leadership to the dockers were those who were convinced that there was more in the struggle than the immediate demands, there was the ultimate aim of the ending of capitalism. The labour bureaucracy has no such aim. Their aims are narrow - the preservation of "normal" union life and advancement; the preservation of peaceful relationships with the big employers and the government. In these pages we see them assisting the loss of jobs and union strength on the docks. But this happened in every industry. And yet, a feature of working class consciousness in this period since the war has been the willingness of workers to defend jobs. The strike against redundancy, the occupation of factories to prevent their closure which has been a feature of this period, were unheard of before the war. This great desire to fight unemployment, however, brought among trade union leaders an increase in demagogic hypocrisy. They would support a policy of "no sackings" but as an abstract principle. In practice they would undermine or directly oppose particular struggles against unemployment.

Trade union leaders have been thoroughly hostile to any joint action on fundamentally decisive matters. Hence, their opposition to the Tory legislation

preventing solidarity action of workers is nothing else than rhetorical. In fact, it is natural that trade union bureaucrats should welcome such legislation as making life easier for them. The answer of T&GWU officials to dockers in the 1940s and 1950s really sums it up: "What can I do? My hands are tied". This type of union leaders prefers "tied hands" to leadership of struggle.

The more the demands of each section involve questions common to all, the more this trade union leadership strives to separate them. In the present day, economic and political processes in all countries are linked more than ever together in a web throughout the world. Throughout the world the pressure of capitalist overproduction forces a relentless drive to cut production costs. It takes the form, not only of a direct attack on wages, but of an attack on social conditions, the destruction of health and education services; the development of cheap labour among the youth, women, immigrants and the most defenceless sections of society. The state attacks the conditions of the working class while assisting Big Business, subsidising it through direct help and indirectly through privatisation. The present developments of world imperialist economic and political relations, and within those, the developments in Europe, bring out more sharply than ever the common interests of workers of all nationalities. The growth of multi-nationals roaming the globe has linked the struggles of the working class and oppressed people, in every country, closer together. In many cases, they face the same employer - Fords, General Electric, Phillips, Nissan, Toyota etc.

The struggle of the mass of the working population now takes a different and even more explosive form as the anti-Poll Tax movement and the reaction to the pit closures in October 1992 showed. The new fighters will turn to the lessons of struggle and leadership which are there in the history of the docks struggle. The dockers' leaders who built the unofficial movements knew through bitter experience that they could find no solution through joining with their employers to solve the employers' problems of trade and profits. They knew the solution could only come through building the workers' own independent strength. As we see in the great experience of dockers' movements after the war, the unofficial leaders built their organisations of struggle by constant agitation and a stubborn determination to overcome divisions. What is needed now is such stubbornness and agitation to bring out and build on the common interests of workers in Europe and the world. The advance guard of working class fighters in Britain must set as their task to bring British and European workers into the world front that is gathering against capitalism and workers' bureaucracy. The leadership of the working class today must be internationalist or it will be nothing. British development, particularly its expansion as the first capitalist nation, created the ruling ideology of "British exceptionalism" which permeated the left reformists and left trade union bureaucrats. It was encouraged by Stalinism and its British road to socialism. Britain, it was said, had come a special road, its Parliament, democratic processes, and Labour development had a unique position in the world - all this propped up a shameful reformism and chauvinism.

The conviction of Trotskyism is that the decisive force in Britain and the world is the working class. The working class both has the necessity and the capacity to free humanity from exploitation, to end imperialist capitalism and replace it with a socialist society. Those who start with that are the most consistent fighters. That is why the Trotskyists, while always seeking unity in struggle, condemned the vacillating, opportunist policies of the Communist Party-led unofficial movements which could not take struggles beyond certain limits. The real question is that Trotskyists do not

give up their conviction that any advances won cannot be permanent while the economic system is run for capitalist firms and business; that the class struggle is a fact of life until it is ended by an international workers' government developing a socialist economy; in facing modernisation, there has to be a defence of protective practices, agreements and traditions, but, in the final analysis, there can be no defence except by a revolutionary change in property.

Today in Britain, the Labour leadership have openly deserted socialism; the trade union leadership is worshipping the "new reality" of capitulation to the multinationals and strike legislation. As socialist policies become more urgent, the more they repudiate them. Yet, the problems facing workers, of developing organisation against multi-nationals and the world processes of capitalism, compel them in the direction of international struggle. The coming struggle in Britain must thus inevitably develop in line with the significant movement in the world today - the struggle against capitalism and the bureaucracies which reflect it in the workers' movement.

The experience of the dockers related here shows the need for an advance beyond the old type of militancy of the 1960s and 1970s. This period was marked by a great increase in trade union membership, the spread of the closed shop. In the 1960s, Barbara Castle could declare: "power lies on the shop floor". The peak of the advance of the dockers was shown by the results of the 1967 dockers' strike. The great lesson to be learned is that in this period, syndicalism and "pure and simple" trade unionism went to its limit. Advances it created could not be permanent, because it stopped short at a change of the ownership of the means of production and control in society; the central motive force of production was not altered. The stark reality, which has to be faced today by the advance guard of workers, is that the dockers could not achieve their traditional aim of the end of casualisation and the planning of the transport industry without a revolutionary change in society.

We have the example of the mining industry where also a powerful section of workers could make big advances but did not achieve the prize to guarantee all others - control of their industry. For many, many decades, the workers in the mining industry have been demanding an energy policy. But the lesson of history which now must be burned into the consciousness of workers who want to fight for the betterment of their fellow workers is that an energy policy, the planning of the industry, could only come about through the industry being democratically controlled by the mass of the working class. Of course, the struggle must be developed to the full against every attempt to close factories or mines and against all actions which increase unemployment and worsen the conditions of the working class. Those who are conscious, really conscious, of the only solution which will make for a future, however, will be those who campaign the hardest for the unity of the whole working people in struggle against each single attack. Without a socialist overturn the workers' organisations cannot win a real or permanent solution; what they can win is protection and the disruption of the Tory plans to place the burdens of the capitalist crisis upon the poorer sections of society and learn in these struggles the possibilities of a united struggle of workers. So that while trade unions must continue to fight for the immediate needs of their members, their fight on these will be all the stronger if they are conscious that gains on this terrain can only be temporary, and political aims must form their strategy.

The lessons of the past and the problems of the future pose as a first and most important conclusion: that the militancy and combativity of workers who will undoubtedly be going into struggle cannot be confined within a syndicalist framework

- that is to say in the framework of pure and simple trade unionism or sectionalism and narrow immediate interests. Trade unionism today must have a conscious political aim. Political not in the reformist sense, which time and again told workers to hold back struggles so that we could get a Labour Government, Political yes, in that trade union struggle is seen all the time in relation to the reality that there can be no permanent solution to the problems of the working class unless the working class gains the power and control in society through its own organisations which begin to create a socialist society.

In the 1980s, all the leading sections of the working class had their trade union organisations weakened. This was not the result of their lack of will to fight the attacks on their organisations by the state and their employers. The history of the miners, engineers, shipbuilding workers, railwayworkers, dockers, who formerly formed the backbone of British trade unionism has shown the resolve to struggle in defence of workers' organisations that existed in the ranks. It showed initiative from below, while the leaders of their unions and the TUC betrayed the will to fight of their members and capitulated before the plans of the state and governments to undermine and destroy the workers' organisations.

The miners' strike was a decisive point, both in the exposure of these leaders and in marking a decisive change in the movement of mass struggle. The workers' traditional organisations were weakened with trade union and labour leaders capitulating to a world of powerful international industrial and financial capitalist combines operating in a web of financial speculation, credit and corruption. These leaders betrayed workers under accumulating attacks on social benefits, on safety and security of working conditions, on trade union organisation, and suffering increasing unemployment and homelessness among working class youth.

While July-August 1989 is certainly nowhere near the end of struggle for the British working class - either on the clocks or anywhere else - it is the end of a chapter. The new one poses new problems for a changed working population in Britain or poses old problems in a new way. They are the problems that arise out of the nature of capitalism and the struggle for socialism.

The Anti-Poll Tax movement, which developed three years after the shock of the failure of the miners to prevent pit closures; the widespread spontaneous reaction which was shown to the plan of the Tory Government in October 1992 to complete the decimation of the miners' strength showed the widespread possibilities that can be brought by a united struggle of organised workers and communities.

The attacks on the conquests which the working class gained throughout the world since the end of the Second World War pose either a fresh advance toward socialism or new capitalist dictatorships. That fresh advance can only take place if we build a revolutionary internationalist leadership. In 1951, the Birkenhead unofficial dockers' committee decided to affiliate to the Fourth International. In future, in the new upsurge which is coming in Britain, and which will bring new fresh, young, working men and women into struggle in industry and communities, necessity will compel them to think in that political and international way.

The new forces of struggle in the communities and the trade unions are going to be turbulent and volatile, resembling the "New Unionism" at the end of last century and aspects of the surge to the Blue Union in the 1950s. I hope that this small work will help those leaders who will emerge in this new chapter of struggle.

Figures of registered dockers.

Year ended	National register	Liverpool
1947	79,769	
1957	75,700	16,085
1967	56,808	11,530
1969	49,225	11,100
1971	43,645	10,427
1973	34,590	7,550
1975	31,884	7,326
1977	29,168	6,402
1979	25,770	5,202
1981	18,219	3,402
1983	13,813	2,151
1985	11,922	1,862
1989	9,400	1,100 *

De-registration.

* Approx figures