Engineering Workers Fought Back

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The general post-war slump hit most of British industry about two-and-a-half years after the 1918 Armistice, but shipbuilding was in depression almost at once, for the Coalition government's policy of "Make Germany Pay" took from her a great deal of merchant shipping and set the German yards making ships for "reparation". Naturally, this threw out of work British boilermakers and fitters.

General wage reduction in all trades, beginning with the lock-out of the miners, took place during 1921 and 1922. After several wage cuts, the shipyards and engineering workers were locked out in 1922 and defeated. The unions, particularly the Amalgamated Engineering Union, lost many members. Pessimism and defeatism prevailed. Southampton marine engineering workers were badly hit. The wage of fully skilled men was £2. 7s. a week of 47 hours — that is, 1s. an hour. Compare this with £2.16s for the Tyne and Clyde, £3. 0s.11d. for London, 1s. 6d. an hour for the provincial dockers, 1s. 2d. for building labourers. (1s = 5p in today's currency.)

"Semi-skilled", many of them highly skilled machinists, received less, labourers less again. Holidays were unpaid, work often temporary. In ship repairing, men stood each day in the dockyard, hoping to be picked up for a few days' work after being looked over by a few men in bowler hats, in the manner of a slave market.

In 1924, opportunity to redress the balance a little came with the "lay up" of Atlantic shipping for annual repairs. But few expected the long upward fight back of the engineering workers to begin in Southampton. Union membership as low, Scots and Northern workers did not have much regard for the port as fighting unit. Southampton's two M.P.s were Tories, each enjoying a big majority. But fight the Southampton workers did. Led by the local AEU, the unions demanded an advance in wages. The employers refused and referred to the employer-union agreements, particularly the "procedure for avoiding disputes", the "machinery" which creaked for six months to a year over every case and reached no decision. The union executives stood by this agreement and refused to back the men.

The Mauretania, "Blue Riband" of the Atlantic, had her turbines dismantled, the rotors slung in the engine room. Despite the threats of the AEU and other executives, the ship repair engineering workers voted a strike. A scratch organization had to be created at once and a strike committee of experienced trade unionists, with necessary sub-committees was formed.

When considering the work of this committee, one should remember that trade union members were a minority of the workers concerned. The strikers had to fight the employers, backed by the State and the trade unions. No strike money was paid by the unions.

Fitter Handled the Finance

Money, then, was one of the early problems to be tackled. Local trade union branches and AEU branches throughout the country were circularised. Well-organised local events helped to raise cash and strike money was paid out of this "unofficial" fund. The financial business of the strike was handled splendidly, though the middle-aged fitter who was treasurer was told by the professional auditor that he, the fitter, must know nothing about finance or he would not have carried an odd halfpenny down through the books — and that was the only fault he could find.

But what of the non-unionist strikers? They, too, received strike pay with the union members — penny for penny, pound for pound. First, however, the "nons" had to be got out on strike, and meetings were held at all factory and dock gates. All, irrespective of union or non-union, were promised a fair share of all money raised, and protection against victimisation, "one back, all back; one out, all out," a promise that was honorably

kept. Many of the "nons" had dropped their previous membership because of the high rate of union dues, 2s. a week in the case of the AEU, and some were still trade unionists at heart — but not all.

There were those, too, who refused to join the strike. They had to be encouraged by additional measures. Picket lines, good, solid, militant picket lines were formed each morning to draw out the waverers. Whatever, in those days, may have been the law about the "right to peaceful picketing," in fact the Law usually acted as though all picketing was illegal. As an extra, a flying picket organised, squads of loyal stalwarts, some on cycles, who met outlying blacklegs on their way to work, often in the country lanes which were then close to Southampton docks on the Woolston side of the Itchen.

I remember, in particular, two red-headed brothers of about 23 who took alternate days on the flying picket. The efforts of police and assaulted scabs to bring a prosecution against one or the other and the defendants' alibis made a delightful comedy of errors.

Frequent meetings were held, so that all were kept informed and encouraged to join in strike activities. Amusements, sports, and concerts were organized, for boredom and personal isolation are inimical to strike success. We had a good supply of singers, musicians, and comedians. I doubt if such an array of talent could be mustered at scratch today, for there was then no telly and more people developed their own talents.

There was propaganda too. A panel of speakers was active every day, visiting union branch meetings and anywhere else they could get a hearing. But printed and duplicated means of presenting the strikers' case were insufficient. There was no national organisation directly sympathetic to the strike cause and trade union officials were active in the districts of trade unions to curtail support.

Tough times were ahead. The Engineering Employers' Federation threatened to lock out all members of the AEU and other unions concerned in the strike — a complete lockout on a full national scale. The employer got permission from the Government to move the Mauretania, with her engines suspended, to be taken to Cherbourg by tug to have her overhaul completed.

The full victory which had been just possible escaped the strikers, but they did get a two-stage advance of 7s. a week, the first win for the engineers since the big defeat of all trades in 1921-22.

Aircraft Men Reap the Harvest

Aircraft workers in Southampton had wanted to join the strike, but this would not have helped the marine engineers, who were fighting other employers — Harland & Wolff and J.1. Thomeycroft. The aircraft men worked for A.V.Roe, Faireys, and Supermarine. Then, too, the slender strike fund would have been more heavily drawn on. The aircraft men pressed their claim in the climate created by the strike, and got an advance of 15s. 8d. a week, a direct fruit of the marine workers' action.

Engineering workers in other parts of the country were encouraged by the Southampton example, initiating small actions, usually in one factory at a time, to regain a little lost ground and dispel the spirit of defeat.

One weakness of the strike was the failure to persuade the French workers to declare black the Mauretania; lack of communication, of international organisation and contact, were largely responsible for this. That is one lesson. Another comes from consideration of the sort of men who took part in the strike. Southampton was a Tory stronghold and, as any strike to be successful must have at least 90 percent support, many strikers must have been Tories, some Liberals, and many non-voters. On the strike committee there was no faction which could be defined as "left-wing" much less a majority, though some were more radical than others, of course. Most were just good solid, perhaps rather old-fashioned trade unionists, but they were quick to learn the changing facts of life.

On the strike committee there was unity of purpose and respect of others, from right wing to rebel. The Communist Party tried to muscle in, sending down Pollitt and the rest of its top brass and a cohort of full-time officials with Moscow-made slogans, "Defend the Soviet Union", "Vote Labour", and the rest of the ragbag, but the strikers had their own slogans — the aims of the strike. After the strike the C.P. tried to persuade the strike committee to become the district committee of their newly-formed Minority Movement. The offer was rejected with scorn.

This unity, mutual respect, and tolerance, a major factor of success, was never understood by the C.P. but the militants understood the importance of recognising, as the Prayer Book says, that there are "all sorts and conditions of men."

Common sense in organisation and absolute honesty in the collection, care of, and distribution of money were also ingredients of success. All this contrasts, as light to murky darkness, with the Communist sponsoring of strikes in the following years, with their confusion, sectarianism, and lack of financial frankness, the double-dealing of their trade union bureaucrats, and the leadership's eagerness to get them back to work after about the tenth day.

For the will to win is the greatest single factor in winning a strike.

Additional Information

Taken from Kate Sharpley Library's "British Syndicalism: Pages of Labour History" (1994) by Tom Brown.