

# The Engineering Crisis and The United Front

By J. T. MURPHY

ON March the 11th, the lock-out of engineering workers began. This is not the first time these men have been flung into a great struggle. But never have they been dealt with in so ruthless a manner. Never have they had to face such a crisis in such conditions as obtain to-day.

This is no isolated crisis. Any attempt to measure its significance simply in terms of the engineering industry is doomed to gross misconceptions.

It marks a new stage in the struggle of the Unions, and a new stage in the vicious capitalist offensive which was launched early in 1921.

It may be regarded as a natural sequence to Black Friday. But this blow was carefully prepared long before Black Friday, although that calamity encouraged the employers and emboldened them in their aggression. It is the culmination of the fight that is cutting into the very vitals of Unionism in every industry, and challenging the whole workers' movement to face the realities of the class struggles *as a class*.

The attack of the employers is aided by a series of important factors. Capitalist industry, in general, has broken down, and the engineering and shipbuilding section is particularly hard hit. It has received terrible blows by "winning the war." The spoils of victory depleted the shipbuilding orders and the cessation of the war left the engineering factories encumbered with a vast amount of machinery and plant which was almost useless for any new enterprise. In addition the Unions had secured important concessions during the war, and these had to be won back at all costs.

The present crisis, therefore, is not only the result of wise forethought on the part of the employers, it is also the inevitable outcome of a conflict of forces which compel the employers to fight for their existence as such, at the expense of the workers' movement.

When 1914 presented the employing class of this country with an almost inexhaustible market, it demanded a number of important changes which affected the engineering and shipbuilding industry more than any other industries in the country. J. T. W. Newbold has shown in his "*How Europe Armed for War*," how much of this industry is of a parasitic character. Instead of the war cutting down this growth, it stimulated it to unheard of dimensions. It swept hundreds of thousands of workers out of other industries into its maw, and introduced mass production on an unprecedented scale. The effect of these changes on the Union movement was enormous, but we will consider that later.

The war had an equally drastic effect on the policy of the employers and the State. Prior to 1914, employers' organisations

dealt directly with the workers' organisations and were loth to have the intervention of the State. When the State did intervene it posed as the impartial authority trying to square the differences between the contending parties. The war altered this completely. The State became not only the customer, but also the arbitrary ruler, placing the interests of British imperialism as a whole above the interests of any firm or any industry. Strikes were prohibited and so were lock-outs. Free trade was abolished and an effective State control of industry superseded competitive trading. The State became all-powerful internally for the purpose of conducting an external conflict. But the class character of the society over which it ruled demanded a policy of concessions to conflicting interests to maintain harmony for war. It conceded advances in wages, reductions in working hours to the workers, enormous profits were granted to employers, and it created a very complex machinery both coercive and conciliatory. There were Munitions of War Acts, Munitions Tribunals, Whitley Councils, Conciliation Boards, Arbitration Courts. In effect, we had industrial conscription with concessions to employers and workpeople. All these changes were carried through with the promise of restoration after the war.

In no industry were the effects so radical as in the engineering and shipbuilding industries. Sir Allan Smith stood side by side with Mr. Arthur Henderson, preaching the doctrine of conciliation. The State was supreme, and Capital and Labour were the instruments of the great power. Such was the doctrine. Factories were built on a great scale, and "skilled" labour was diluted to a degree undreamed of by the employers. They knew, as everyone knew, who gave any thought to the situation, that restoration was a promise to be broken. The employers had nothing to be alarmed about so long as private property was left untouched and profits were secure. The rest—the concessions and encroachments of the Unions, could safely be left until a more convenient season. They were quite certain, so long as they prevented nationalisation, that private industry would re-assert itself at the termination of the war, and in the chaos of restoration they could re-assume their previous autocracy with the added gains accruing from the revolution in industrial methods. Hence the vigorous opposition to the nationalisation of the railways and mines in the later years of the war, and the great campaign for the return to "normalcy" immediately after the war. The State is alright for the capitalist as an instrument for coercing the workers or for opposing a foreign foe. For themselves, the employers want freedom. Not for one moment have the employers relaxed their hold of the State. But they have made the State relax its hold upon them. They need the State but hate it. It is a contradiction which is tearing capitalism to pieces. Only by means of developing State power could they consolidate their victories, make new victories in the world market, and secure the subjection of the working class. But the upkeep of the State costs money. It is burdened with a colossal debt which imposes great taxation upon industry. The victory over the foreign foe has been crushing, and in the process a great market has been destroyed. The contraction of the market has intensified the struggle for the remaining avenues of trade. Hence the demand for the cheapening of the costs of production and unhampered competition. The State thus loses even its temporary appearance as a conciliator and is revealed

in all its nakedness as the coercive weapon of a class demanding freedom to rob and exploit the masses in terms of their individual interests, whilst their industrial and financial consortiums assume the same dominating rôle as before the war. Sir Allan Smith and the Federation of British Industries drop their olive branches into the laps of the labour leaders and can now talk business to Mr. Lloyd George and the Trade Unions alike. They have played their cards admirably. They patiently waited for the subsiding of the political ferment accompanying the demobilisation of the army, then launched their attack, partly driven by their needs, partly with malice aforethought.

Then began the period of the offensive of industrial capitalism against the fetters of State control and war-time concessions.

The State ceased its policy of conciliation and now ruthlessly drives the bargains of its dictators.

Whitley Councils have proved a farce. Conciliation Boards, Arbitration Courts have all gone west, and are recognised as of no value as a means of defence. The progressive partnership of capital and labour has burst like a bubble. We are face to face with the raw facts of the class war intensified by the results of an industrial revolution and an economic collapse.

After the defeat of the miners, neither the employers nor the State met any resistance until the revolt of the engineers against the memorandum which strips the Unions of the last vestige of the concessions won during the war period. The defeat of the miners was the defeat of national control of industry. The new struggle is the fight for control of the conditions of labour. The engineering industry was subject to the most drastic changes in this direction and the defeat of the engineers on this issue is vital to the future of Unionism.

It has been the fate of the engineer to be the pioneer of his own undoing. He hates "dilution," but creates the means of dilution. He prides himself upon his skill and by his skill simplifies the labour process, including his own. He objects to the labourer taking his job, but exclaims of his handiwork—"It is so beautiful and simple, a child could work it." He has produced the machinery which is machining him into the ranks of "general" labour. For years his only means of defence has been by Union combination.

Slowly yet surely the process was defeating him before the war.

The war swept his defences away. The Unions were tied to the chariot wheels of the imperialist state and his protests were smothered in patriotic appeals, wage advances, piece work systems, and unlimited overtime. Millions of workers were turned into the industry. The Union leaders made no stir against the innovations. Indeed, they were the servile agents assisting in their introduction without offering a single constructive idea as to how the workers should handle the new situation. They accepted the Munitions Act without a murmur, and the dilution schemes, Military Service Acts, provisions for avoiding disputes, tribunals, courts, Whitley schemes—in short, they were nothing more nor less than Government agents.

It was left to the rank and file to tackle the situation in the factories. Under the guidance of the revolutionary leaders they organised the new comers with the skilled workers and insisted on the control of the conditions under which the transfer of labour should take place. Factory or works' committees sprang up throughout the industry, and forced the adherence to terms as to the employment of all kinds of labour. It was because of the successes gained by these activities that the Government patronised them with its Whitley scheme and the Union leaders produced a scheme for the adaptation of the shop stewards organisation to the Union constitutions.

The policy of the shop steward committees was such as to check innovations without the aid or consent of the workers, who insisted on the application of the war-time schedules governing the dilution process.

When the officials adapted the schemes of organisation to the Unions they left this practice to be implied in the instructions, and advocated the practice. Hence the employers to-day are in the position, with the abrogation of war-time legislation, of tying the Unions down to a literal interpretation of agreements and explicit definitions.

Throughout the period of the war these practices became part of the life of Unionism. Unemployment was absent and the workers were conscious of a security of tenure which gave them confidence to exercise their strength.

Forgetful of the future restoration problems, the whole movement became infected with the idea of a continuous development along these lines, broadening into a new social order, with the workers steadily advancing to a higher status. They facilitated the industrial revolution and forgot its implications, the parasitic character of a large proportion of the industry, and the reactions which were to follow.

The shock of "peace" changed the whole situation rapidly. The Union leaders were let loose by the State, in spite of the desire of the Union leaders who preferred to nurse the policy of the State as the conciliator. But the State chafed at this encumbrance in the same way that the employers chafed at the State. Its promises of restoration proved utterly futile, the Unions were left to prosecute any employer who did not carry out the return. No records of the changes were kept and the Unions were in a trap without the slightest chance of gaining anything from the promises. At the same time the industrial revolution was a fact and no return was possible.

Under these circumstances the employers had only to smash the practices which had been established through the vigour and energies of the revolutionaries during the war, and they would be free to make the fullest possible use of all that had been gained by mass production, dilution of labour, etc. They were committed to none of the new Union practices by agreement. They had always safeguarded themselves too well for that. The vagueness of terms of agreements are always of advantage to the dominant party, and it is no use anyone who is weak trying to read into any agreement what is not explicitly stated.

The interpretation of the overtime agreement of 1920 gave the engineering employers the opportunity they desired to challenge the invasion of Unionism into the factories. This agreement stated that "where necessary" 30 hours overtime per month may be worked on production work." The agreement made special provision for repair work, etc. The argument centred on the question—who shall determine "where necessary"? The employer claimed the sole right to determine this. The Union claimed the right to confer previous to consent, and a special letter was issued on Dec. 7, 1920 insisting on the Union's organisers and officials adhering to this method of procedure, in view of the growing unemployment amongst the members. The employers challenged the interpretation, seeing quite clearly that if this practice became confirmed it would stabilise the innovation of job control, vigorously defended during the war period.

This challenge they held over the heads of the engineers for nearly twelve months, whilst pursuing the policy of wage reductions. 1921 witnessed a continuous retreat on the part of the Unions. Unemployment increased and drained the Union's finances. Then down came the memorandum which developed the claim of the employers not only to control overtime, but also to eliminate every obstruction to the fullest use of the war-time dilution gains. Fearful of struggle, the A.E.U. Executive Council and organising delegates agreed to and recommended the employers' memorandum, which reads as follows:—

Memorandum of conference between the Engineering and the National Employers' Federations and the Amalgamated Engineering Union, held at Broadway House, Tothill Street, Westminster, London, S.W. 1, on 17th and 18th November, 1921:—

#### I.—GENERAL.

1. The Trade Union shall not interfere with the right of the employers to exercise managerial functions in their establishments, and the Federations shall not interfere with the proper functions of the Trade Union.

2. In the exercise of these functions the parties shall have regard to the Provisions for Avoiding Disputes, of 17th April, 1914, which are amplified by the shop stewards and works committee agreement, of 20th May, 1919, and to the terms of other national and local agreements between the parties.

3. Instructions of the management shall be observed pending any question in connection therewith being discussed in accordance with the provisions referred to.

#### II.—OVERTIME.

It is agreed that in terms of the overtime and night agreement, of the 29th and 30th September, 1920, the employers have the right to decide when overtime is necessary, the workpeople or their representatives being entitled to bring forward under the provisions referred to any case of overtime they

desire discussed. Meantime, the overtime required shall be proceeded with.

Signed on behalf of—

The Engineering and the National Employers' Federations—  
Allan M. Smith, Chairman; James Brown, Secretary.

The Amalgamated Engineering Union—

J. T. Brownlie, Chairman; A. H. Smethurst, Secretary.

This was turned down by ballot vote, and the lock-out of the A.E.U. has followed.

The agreement strikes at everything gained during the war period. Indeed, if put into operation, it completely destroys every atom of control of any job. Not only can the war-time dilution be consolidated at the expense of skilled and unskilled workers, but it continues without the slightest chance of controlling the conditions under which it shall proceed. The A.E.U. Executive Council have shirked this issue throughout the proceedings and have tried to confine the issue to the control of overtime on production work—a most unwarrantable and cowardly interpretation, as the engineers will find to their cost if it is still forced upon them. The memorandum has now been pushed on to every Union in the industry. This crisis, therefore is the culminating point of the employers' efforts to get back to unbridled control of the workers' conditions in every detail. It is an attack which strikes at the very foundations of Unionism, and it comes at a time when the united front is the only defence worthy of consideration.

There is not, however, a single incident from the beginning of the negotiations on the issues raised which encourages us to believe the Trade Union leaders will rise to the occasion and fight. If they do fight, it will be because they have no option and not because they are anxious to save the workers from the disastrous consequences of the agreement. The A.E.U. Executive, along with the Engineering and Shipbuilding Unions have done more abject dodging of issues and running after the employers and State officials since this crisis began than any decent man of courage would do in a lifetime. At the hour of lock-out the A.E.U. leaders gave permission to the non-federated firms to carry on, the apprentices to work, and the black-coated foreman to continue his supervision. All out of consideration for the Union's finances! The E. & S. Federation decided to take a ballot to cover a fortnight, whilst the General Council of the Trade Union Congress gave birth to the brilliant and courageous demand that the Government shall establish a Court of Inquiry into the causes of the dispute.

If the united front is to come out of this struggle, therefore, it is abundantly clear that it will come as a result of pressure from the masses and not because of the will and purpose of the Union leaders. Demands are surging in from all quarters for an All-in Congress. The demand may be conceded, but only after every effort has been made to avoid it. There is not a channel which will not be explored to deflect the energy developed by the struggle. Indeed the leaders are making a virtue of their efforts to avoid a united resistance to the attacks of the employers. Every Union

leader is measuring the situation in terms of his own little constitution. Even if the All-in Congress is conceded it is certain that the leaders will make it a means, not of rallying the masses for a united struggle against the employers, but as a means of conciliation and compromise.

Although the lock-out of the A.E.U. has been on for a fortnight, no alternative programme or agreement has been submitted to the masses by the leaders as the basis for the development of the struggle. Only the Communist Party and the Red International have put forward an alternative and striven from the beginning of the dispute to widen the front for a class resistance to the class attack. The significance of this isolation is important. It points to the difficulties which encumber the path to the united front.

The struggle will reveal them more and more clearly. It will show the limited vision of the leaders, the futility of the so-called "democratic" methods, the vested interests of officialdom, the leaders' lack of faith in the masses, and, above all, that the united front will have to be attained without the good will of the Trades Union bureaucracy. Not without them, but in spite of them. No unofficial movement in the Unions has the slightest chance at the moment of calling out the Unions which are still at work. The workers in the factories dread unemployment and will only come into the arena of action when their vested interests in the Unions and all their traditional prejudices are mobilised. These are under the control of the leaders, and the leaders know it.

It is true that a new situation is created when the workers are out. Then they want others to join and become quite revolutionary in temper. Consequently the barrier between the vast numbers of unemployed and locked-out workers, and the extension of the battle front is the Trade Union bureaucracy. They hold the key to the situation and everything depends upon the pressure brought to bear upon them as to whether the key is turned which makes for class action. If this is done, then new problems arise which will determine their fate. But the question of the moment is—Can the unemployed and locked-out workers compel the Union leaders to make the United Front?

We shall see.

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