

# workers power

people's EMPLOYED . . . . . 10p  
UNEMPLOYED . . . . . 5p

## MARCH special

INSIDE: Organising the unemployed in the Twenties and Thirties.

# March must launch

**THE PEOPLE'S MARCH** can either become an explosive call to action against the system that has officially thrown two and a half million workers on the scrapheap or it will be a safety valve for that system. The organisers and backers of the march have chosen the safety valve option.

Unless it is taken directly into the hands of the unemployed themselves, it will not be a rallying point for a real fight with the Tory Government. If the organisers have their way, the march may ease the consciences of its Liberal and Labour hangers-on, may give the impression that the TUC is doing something to fight unemployment but it will pose *no threat to the Thatcher Government*.

The trade union leaders and their Communist Party backers want the marchers to arrive in London pleading and begging for help from the Tory Government. Len Murray put his idea of what the march is about in his usual bleating style: "The People's March for Jobs - starting in Liverpool on May Day - will provide yet another compelling call for compassion. These pleas for sanity must be answered." Supposedly the march will attract enough support and sympathy that it will prick Thatcher's conscience and persuade the Government to change course!

### THATCHER'S WEAPON

This is no way to wage a fight against unemployment. Thatcher will not be persuaded to change course by a petition pleading the woes of the unemployed. Neither will she back down if the church bells of England ring out their pity for the unemployed. Thatcher is not ignorant of the misery and degradation that unemployment brings. In her view it is a weapon to cause 'greater realism' amongst the labour force. The only bells that affect her are those of the Stock Exchange ringing up record share prices.

The Conservative Government is braced to see the official unemployment total reach the three million mark by the end of the year. It is banking that a multi-million army of the unemployed outside the factory gates will serve to weaken the resolve and ability of those in work to defend hard earned living standards and rights to organise. It hopes that it will force workers out of the unions and isolate the resolute minority of class conscious militants. And it is having some success!

A purge of militants has been carried through in Leyland, the steel workers were beaten back, there are signs of declining membership in the major unions. As the Ansell's, Lee Jeans and Plansee workers have seen, jobs will not be saved by appealing to the conscience of the employers and the Government. To turn our back on their example of occupations and militant picketing - to go cap in hand pleading to the Government - is to positively divert the fight against unemployment.

The Communist Party's plan has been to build as broad a cam-

paign as possible. They have set out to pull in the backing of ex-Labour Prime Minister Wilson who doubled unemployment while in office, MP businessman Cyril Smith who has threatened to heave his frame for a mile alongside the marchers and assorted clergy and businessmen.

The entire politics and presentation of the march is so designed as to keep this motley assortment of backers behind the march. The CP's excuse for covering up the Labour and trade union movement character of the march (Peoples' not Workers, the attempt to ban red banners, the choice of green as the march colour, the contingents of clergymen, small businessmen etc) is to make it a 'broad' march. To maintain this 'broad unity' between workers and their class-enemies, the CP seeks to divide the real forces of the working class to exclude or reduce to a minimum the young, women, blacks who all suffer disproportionately heavy unemployment. Hundreds of thousands of the most angry and effective fighters are thus ignored in favour of small businessmen, vicars, Liberal MPs.

What this means in practice is that none of the real answers to unemployment can be presented by the march. Len Murray will be allowed to parade himself as a man of compassion and concern for the unemployed. But it was Murray and the TUC who left the steelworkers to fight the Tories alone in what could have been a decisive battle to stop the Tories plans for wholesale sackings. The TUC has done no more for those out of work than bleat occasionally to Thatcher and advocate the formation of advice centres for the unemployed in the localities. But none of this can be said by the Peoples' March for fear of losing the TUC's support. Unless Murray and Co are put on the spot at meetings and rallies up and down this march then the march organisers deliberately, and thousands of marchers unintentionally, will have given the TUC chiefs a fig-leaf to cover their inaction.

### GAGING THE MARCHERS

The march organisers have made much of persuading businessmen and liberals to support this 'cry for compassion' from the unemployed. But unemployment is the direct result of the anarchy of capitalist production that keeps one quarter of a million building workers on the dole while the cities and services decay. Unemployment is used by the employing class to discipline and intimidate the working class. But the People's March can't say that for fear of losing the support of employers such as Merseyside building contractor Tysons.

The CP peddles the necessity of

# WORKERS'

# fightback

## General Strike May 29th!

an alliance with small businessmen. This is part of their so-called anti-monopoly alliance. This alliance is a ridiculous blind alley for workers. Small businessmen bankrupted by Thatcher's policies are a broken reed for the working class to rely on. Most of them pay lower wages, are more resistant to union rights and recognition and offer worse conditions than the big monopolies. They are usually linked-up to the big banks and monopolies anyway. Any kind of solidarity with them can only lead workers astray, as it did the Hadfields workers in Sheffield who scabbed on the steel strike only to be thrown out of work less than a year later.

### PEOPLE'S FRONT

This type of campaign, which ties the working class to an alliance with sections of the bosses - on a programme acceptable to the bosses is an old one in the history of the Communist Party. It was souped up and dusted down by the SWP with its Anti-Nazi League. It is the method of the People's Front. Against this we fight for a Workers United Front.

In order to keep their alliance together the Communist Party has to remove anything from the march's programme that might offend its backers. They have to make sure that the march is tightly policed and regimented so that the real anger of the unemployed and the real solutions to their plight are stifled on every day and at every stage. That is why march organisers have regularly declared that they will supervise all banners and slogans raised on the march.

That explains the extraordinary bureaucratic vetting procedure that militants have had to undergo to get on the march at all. The met-

hod of relying on trade union branches to sponsor and nominate representatives for the march not only gave considerable discretionary power to the officials and march organisers as to who could come on the march. It automatically militated against the previously unorganised, young unemployed who have no access to sponsors or trade union branch meetings. Unless decisive steps are taken to organise and mobilise such youth, there remains the threat that it will be the fascists and racists who will capture the imagination of an important section of unemployed.

Trade unions must recruit the unemployed and continue to register all their members who are on the dole. But that in itself will not reach out to the thousands of young unemployed, for example, who have never been in a union or trained for a particular trade. We must build a National Union of Unemployed Workers that organises the unemployed, is under their direct control and is recognised to speak for the Unemployed in the TUC, on Trades Councils - at every level of working class organisation.

### UNEMPLOYED UNION

The TUC leaders, 'Left' and 'Right', are vigorously opposing calls to form such a union. Arthur Scargill, for example, spoke out against it in a recent interview in the CP's Marxism Today: "I'm against making special unions for the unemployed. I think it is a dangerous diversion because all that happens is you organise people who really have got no effective industrial muscle. It is much better if the trade unions to which they belong recognise that they still belong".

Such complacency and arrog-



ance reflects the refusal of the trade union leaders and their People's March backers to go out and organise the unemployed and give voice to their anger.

If the People's March is not to remain a tightly policed passive protest, if the energy that has gone into mobilising for the march is not to be wasted, militants must intervene from the start of the march to change its course and direction. They must insist that the march is under the control of an openly elected committee of the unemployed and that all tendencies in the workers' movement be free to distribute their material argue their programme and carry their own placards and banners. All decisions on activities, routes and propaganda should be made democratically by mass meetings of the marchers themselves.

In every area that the march passes through the top priority should be addressing workplace meetings and visiting and supporting all picket lines and occupations. Only in this way can the march serve to strengthen the unity of the unemployed, those fighting job losses and those still in work. The march organisers must not be allowed to divert the march into endless rounds of church services and civic receptions.

### NAMING THE DAY

Similarly militants need a perspective that can prevent the marches ending with the presentation of a petition and a weekend demonstration of support. This means mobilising to make sure that May 29th is the date set for a General Strike against Unemployment and in support of the unemployed. In every union branch and on every trades council, resolutions must be passed calling on the TUC to name May 29th for a one-day general strike. The marchers should argue for that action in every factory and workplace they visit.

Whether or not the TUC is forced into calling it, militants must take the initiative now. 'Strike and join the marchers' should be the order of the day in every area that the marchers pass through. Shop stewards committees and trade union branches must ensure that the marchers are welcomed not by reception parties of mayors and clergymen but by striking shop stewards and their members.

If the TUC and the CP have their way the march will be a damp squib of harmless protest. The marchers and the labour movement must ensure that it is an explosion of anger that will set off an avalanche of working class anger that can sweep away Thatcher and her 'free enterprise' system for good.

In March 1921 Harry McShane led his first demonstration, "...a couple of thousand turned up and they were really wild and angry men. Some of them were carrying hand grenades they had brought back from the front - I also knew that some even carried guns on demonstrations. They were a very militant, threatening crowd." They had good reason to be. They were among the 1½ million unemployed in that month. In percentage terms that meant about 12% of those covered by unemployment insurance.

The following month an event took place that was of great significance for the unemployed, the founding of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM). Although he himself was not directly involved in its inception, Harry McShane's life ran parallel with that of Wal Hannington, the founder of the NUWM. Both had, by that time, dedicated themselves to Communism and the fight for the rights of the unemployed. Now, sixty years on, with two million on the dole, that fight has to be taken up again.

At the end of the First World War, those who had survived the carnage were confronted with a crisis-wracked world. Hundreds of thousands of the recently demobbed and those from the armaments industry who were no longer needed, found that the "land fit for heroes" that they had been promised was, in reality, a land of no work and little or no maintenance.

The revolution in Russia, the five years of upheaval in Germany and the militancy of the masses in France and Britain had sent shivers down the spines of the European bourgeoisie. They knew that their very survival depended on smashing down working class resistance to their attempts to impose wage cuts and permanent mass unemployment.

The Twenties and Thirties were years of continuous struggle. True, there were periods of downturn, between 1920-24 and again 1926-28 for example, but they did not contradict the general trend of revolutionary crises and social upheavals that characterised the two decades. The 1926 General Strike was a high point in the British class struggle, but its aftermath was not all gloom and retreat. By 1929, sections of workers, the Durham miners, for example, were again locked in bitter strikes against the employers. While 1926 was a serious defeat, it did not extinguish the fighting spirit of the working class by any means. The events in France and Spain in the Thirties, the mass strikes and civil war, found a less noisy but not insignificant echo in the struggles of the unemployed in Britain.

The courage and determination of the NUWM was an example to the employed and unemployed alike. It constantly fought against attempts to divide the working class and against the treachery of the leaders of the working class. In 1931 Ramsey MacDonald led a defection to the Tories which led to the formation of the National Government. In the same period the policy of the TUC leaders was 'Mondism' which aimed at the integration of the unions into the State, thus crippling them as fighting organs of the class.

Against this the NUWM took to the streets, mobilised thousands, fought with the police and helped to smash the Mosleyite Fascists.



We can learn from such struggles by re-examining the programme, strategy and tactics that Hannington, McShane and others developed in their struggles, learn from their experience, their triumphs and failures and see how revolutionaries can apply these lessons today.

In 1920, thousands of militants previously active in the rank and file movements of, for example, the Clyde Workers' committee and the National Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee movement, found themselves victimised and among the unemployed.

The first organisational form the unemployed had adopted in the post war period was that of the local Ex-Servicemen's Association. These bodies were primarily concerned with wandering the streets begging for charity. It was not uncommon to see rival demonstrations actually competing for the pennies of the rich in Oxford Street. The likes of Wal Hannington soon put a stop to that. He and others had gone through a communist training in the rank and file movements and they began the struggle to transform these local organisations into a fighting national organisation.

In October 1920, the London District Council (LDC) of the unemployed was formed, helped by a particularly vicious attack by the police on a demonstration in support of a deputation of London mayors, led by George Lansbury. They were demanding an interview with Lloyd George over unemployment. As

Various contingents of hunger marchers set off.



Hannington puts it, "The Whitehall baton charge .. had the effect of sharply awakening masses of the unemployed to a clearer understanding of their class position and making them realise that they would receive no redress for their plight as unemployed by quietly looking to a capitalist government for sympathy."

A delegate conference was held and within a few weeks the LDC was meeting twice weekly with representatives from thirty one London boroughs. By February of 1921 the LDC had decided to press for a national organisation, bringing together all the local groups throughout the country which had been formed in the struggles against the Boards of Guardians, in order to co-ordinate and lead these struggles.

The basis of the NUWM was laid down at the first national conference which met on 15th April, 1921. Fifteen months later there were 300 local committees with a combined membership of 100,000, linked up by the NUWM and its fortnightly newspaper 'Out of Work'. As a result a permanent, well organised mass unemployed movement was established, with enrolled members and accountable leaders.



In the following years the NUWM developed and refined its tactics considerably. The main plank of its platform was to be the slogan, "Work or Full Maintenance at Trade Union Rates of Wages".

Later, at the second national conference, the full programme was agreed upon as :-

- i) Work or Full Pay
- ii) Abolition of Task Work
- iii) Relief for Unemployment to be Charged to the National Exchequer, administered by the Trade Unions
- iv) Abolition of Overtime.

These points were supplemented by additional demands such as, "No distraint for rent and rates on the goods of an unemployed person" - important demands in the context of the eviction struggles.

However, key elements of a full action programme for the unemployed were missing. The call for work sharing was posed, later, (in the "Unemployed Workers' Charter") as a cut in hours to be determined by "the requirements of the industry". This formulation lets the employers off the hook. A clearer basis to fight on would have been to call for workers' control of the sharing out of work. Similar criticisms have to be made on the absence of the slogan, "trade union control of hiring, firing and productivity".

However, as well as the one penny weekly subscription, NUWM members did have to swear an oath, "to never cease from active strife against this system until this system is abolished". The many thousands mobilised on this basis showed the real revolutionary potential that the struggles against unemployment had.

In fighting for its programme, the NUWM carried out three basic types of activity on a local and national scale. It organised the unemployed locally to fight for their rights and entitlements - the fight to actually get benefit or against eviction. McShane was involved in a number of these, his own included, "We lived on toast, my wife said her stomach was all scratched from toast with nothing on it. There were many others in just the same situation. I had always said that the unemployed should feed their families and not pay the rent, and that is what I finally did."

Then there were the raids and occupations - both for meeting places and as a means of putting pressure on the local authorities. One such occupation, if it can be called that, was of Wandsworth workhouse.

Under the 1834 Poor Law, still in operation, the Boards of Guardians were obliged to give either outdoor relief or accommodation and work. Barbarous as this 'workhouse' system was, the NUWM worked out a way to exploit its provisions to the full. One day 700 people turned up to the Wandsworth workhouse and demanded accommodation until the local Board of Guardians granted outdoor relief. On the second night, a massive demonstration expressed its solidarity. Despite a large police presence, "from the hall of the workhouse speeches were delivered to the demonstrators



# "WE WILL NOT STARVE IN SILENCE"



Montage, bottom centre: Police break up a hunger march.

DAVE GARROCH looks at the review of two books about the NUWM (Pluto Press) and Wal Hannington (Wishart)

outside. Then, to the amazement and jubilation of the demonstrators, about 9 o'clock just as it was getting dusk, we saw the red flag run up on a flagmast over the workhouse."

The factory raid was also an important aspect of local NUWM work. From the very beginning, the unemployed saw the need for the employed to come to their aid, just as they were pledged to "assist in every possible way workers who may come out on strike or who are locked out." Thus, raids would usually be carried out on a factory where systematic overtime was being worked or where wages were being paid below union rates. At a given signal, a disciplined squad of unemployed workers would rush the gates, guard the exits and phones, until the police came, and a speech would be made explaining the need to ban overtime, to fight for the going rate and on the need for the employed and the unemployed to unite. Major successes were achieved with these tactics in stopping regular overtime and getting workers taken on. However, the demands and tactics were never developed further towards actually agitating for workers' control of the hours.

In 1922 the NUWM was in the vanguard of the struggle against the national lock out of the engineers. Scab factories were raided and pickets were reinforced. The unemployed and locked out engineers demonstrated together for the right to "outdoor relief" for the engineers - a magnificent example of the solidarity and class spirit of the unemployed.

However, perhaps the best remembered activities of the NUWM locally as well as nationally were the hunger marches and demonstrations. Hannington explains their elementary purpose as the refusal to starve in silence. They certainly broke the wall of silence behind which the bosses' press tried to imprison the unemployed.

The first hunger marchers set off from Glasgow in October 1922. After trying the total news blackout, the press lost its nerve and

began to shake with indignation as they no longer saw the unemployed as a mass of arms, and replete with Bolshevik gold, the 2,000 men were said to be plotting murder and mayhem on their arrival. In fact the declared aim was to present their demands to face with the Prime Minister, Bonar Law, hardly an insurrectionary act. Nor was the decision to attempt to deliver a petition to George V. Buckingham Palace and Number Ten were barred to them - by thousands of police - but 70,000 people demonstrated when they arrived in London. They received a tremendous reception en route, of course, from the authorities but from the working class districts through which they passed. As far as the authorities were concerned it is difficult to decide who gave whom the harder time of it. One of the aims of the marches was always to force the local guard to provide food and accommodation. Local offices and other municipal buildings were therefore, often the target for the marches.

A feature of the marches that impressed everyone was their discipline. "The discipline of the march was self-discipline, imposed men themselves, in everybody's interests," McShane puts it. Despite the long and arduous miles in the terrible weather, they took great care to preserve it. The value of such discipline was illustrated in Glasgow. On September 1931, an unemployment march was savagely attacked by the police. The next day a 50 strong protest demonstration was staged. The time it was protected by a disciplined corps of 500 unemployed workers, armed with sticks - the police kept their distance. Alas, such workers' defence corps did not become a general feature in other cities as unemployed often paid the price for their serious injuries at the hands of the police.



Enormous demonstrations were staged in support of the hunger marches when they arrived at their destinations and often the turned into savage battles when the police attacked. The early Thirties saw many street fights between unemployed workers and brutally repressive state. In Birkenhead, trolleys were ripped up by workers as they defended themselves against unprovoked attacks. A few nights later the police took revenge throughout the working class districts dragging men, women and children from



Below, centre foreground: Wal Hannington. Below, left corner: Fights against the Means Test.



...march.  
**Unemployed struggles between the Wars in a**  
**— Harry McShane's "No Mean Fighter"**  
**Unemployed Struggles" (Lawrence and**

beds and beating them mercilessly. A report from a Mrs. Davin to the International Labour Defence inquiry revealed the extent of police violence, "My husband got out of bed without putting on his trousers and unlocked the door. As he did so, 12 police rushed into the room, knocking him to the floor, his poor head being split open, kicking him as he lay ... I tried to prevent them hitting my husband. They then commenced to baton me all over the arms and body. As they hit me and my Jim, the children and I were screaming and the police shouted 'Shut up, you parish-fed bastards.'"

The workers in Belfast faced even more savagery. There, the police force was heavily armed and barricades were thrown up when the police opened fire. Several workers were killed and Protestant workers, who believed that the Six Counties was, 'their' state found out to whom the RUC really belonged.



1933  
 When such bitter class battles were taking place what, one might ask, were the official representatives of the class doing? Where were the TUC and Labour Party leaders? Then, as now, they were holding conferences.

A delegate conference on unemployment was convened by the TUC and the Labour Party in 1921. Hannington's report of it may sound familiar to today's militants. "Many of the delegates had come prepared to vote for 24 hour strike action to compel the government to face up to the question of unemployment. The platform refused to allow the delegates to discuss anything other than the official resolution which they had put forward. This resolution contained no proposals for action, it simply condemned the failure of the government on unemployment and referred to the five parliamentary by-elections which were in progress, urging that the best way in which the workers could express their opposition to the Lloyd George government on its failure in respect to unemployment was to work for the return of the Labour candidates in these by-elections."

However, in 1922, the TUC General Council decided to organise a national, "day of action". Powerful demonstrations were to be held ... on a Sunday! Hannington, it must be said, fails to point out the function of these "Unemployed Sundays" (another was held in 1924) which, in fact, kept employed workers out of the direct action struggle against unemployment but, at

the same time, allowed the TUC to present itself as, "doing something" on behalf of the jobless.

The TUC consistently refused the NUWM affiliation and equally rejected its call for a, "24 hour general strike against the government in regard to unemployment". In the aftermath of the 1926 General Strike the TUC, in line with its "peace in industry" policy, severed its connections with the NUWM completely and broke up the Joint Advisory Council which had been set up in 1923. From then on the TUC did its best to sabotage and betray the NUWM's work.

The 1927 miners' march was denounced as a "Communist stunt" which did not have the support of the official trade union movement. This signalled, as Hannington points out, "an outburst of violent abuse and excitement from the capitalist press, who called for the government to ban the march and for the police to, 'show no mercy for the political incendiaries who were organising it against the wishes of the respectable elements of the Labour movement'". The police duly obliged by stepping up their campaign of harassment and intimidation.

Walter, later Lord, Citrine went so far as to specifically instruct Trades Councils not to render any assistance to the march.

The marchers set out with a grim determination nonetheless. The first day's march was to end in Newport, "Our reception in Newport surpassed all expectations. Men and women of the Newport labour movement overwhelmed us with their eagerness to serve food and provide every possible comfort. Here was the real heart of the labour movement, beating to greet us! Here were the typical men and women, examples of the great mass of hard-working folk who really constitute the life and vitality of the movement."

This support, that ordinary workers gave unstintingly, contrasts dramatically with the actions of the contemptible Citrine and his cronies. Between 1927 and 1933, the TUC repeatedly tried to set up bureaucratically strait-jacketed unemployed committees which did nothing for the unemployed. However, the general secretaries were unable to organise in a sphere that was "non-negotiable" with the bosses. This ensured that even these feeble



efforts came to nought. For his services as a saboteur of the struggle against unemployment, Citrine, the TUC leader, was made a Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. As the Daily Telegraph noted at the time, this was a, "generous admission that those also serve who oppose the government of the day." The bosses have always been glad of the service of men like Citrine whose opposition to them is a gentlemanly bluff — but whose opposition to workers defending themselves is real indeed.

The betrayals of the reformist leadership reached their culmination, however, with the Labour government which came to power in 1929. It was this Labour government which refused to abolish task work, which refused to cancel the relief debts of the boards of guardians and which presided over a vast increase in the ranks of the unemployed. These measures were justified then, as now, as "economies" that were necessary to save the pound etc.



1934  
 The 1930 hunger march was the first to include a detachment of women marchers. Ironically the first woman Minister of Labour, Margaret Bondfield, was personally responsible for the unceremonious ejection of a deputation of the marchers from the Ministry of Labour. She had a long history as an enemy of the unemployed. A signatory to the Blanesburgh Report (1927) which had proposed a severe cut in benefits that the Tories had not dared to carry through, she and her ministerial colleagues succeeded where Baldwin and Co. had failed. They did this via the Anomalies Act and the introduction of the infamous Means Test, which deprived the unemployed of £30 million in benefits.

It was an attempt to carry through a further cut that finally split the Cabinet and made even the TUC jib and led to MacDonald's defection (with Margaret Bondfield!) and the creation of a National Government. At the same time, Citrine blocked a delegation of unemployed Welsh miners from addressing the TUC at Bristol. When they were baton-charged outside the Congress by the police, Citrine attacked the marchers and praised the police.

As the dole queues grew, so did the determination of the TUC and Labour leaders to defuse the extensive wave of militancy and to preserve the capitalist system that guaranteed them their privileges.

The legendary 'Jarrow Crusade' was, in fact, a clear example of how the reformists neutered the struggles of the unemployed. It is no accident that this march is the one that is kept alive by the reformists' and the bosses' propaganda, as the symbol of the Thirties. It was one of the smallest marches ever to go to London from the unemployment blackspots. It was organised by the Jarrow Labour MP, Ellen Wilkinson who ensured from the outset that it would be a law-abiding, passive, pleading demonstration. It was a far cry from the NUWM marches of the Twenties and early Thirties which set out fully aware that the only official reception they would get was from police truncheons. The non-political nature of the Jarrow march was guaranteed by a grotesque form of class collaboration. Two agents were appointed to arrange the eating and sleeping arrangements — one from the Labour Party and the other from the Tories!

On the other hand, as a result of Special Branch intervention, a CP member was expelled from the march. Fears were expressed that the NUWM might take advantage of the crusade but Wilkinson reassured the authorities by refusing to have anything to do with an NUWM march from the North-East taking place at the same time. The Home Office rewarded this respect for the rule of law by organising a tea for the Jarrow marchers in the House of Commons as a "good way of encouraging and placating them." (From the Special Branch report on the Jarrow March, 1936)

The Jarrow March, despite the undoubted sincerity of the marchers and many who supported them, was a typical example of the TUC and Labour Party attitude to the unemployed. It was class collaborationist to the core and reduced the unemployed to pitiful objects of charity. Its aim was to provide these leaders with cover for their own inaction.

The mid and late Thirties saw a change in the CP's and NUWM's attitude to the reformist leaders. Between 1929 and 1933, the CP's politics were dominated by the notorious "Third Period" line dictated by the Communist International. Stalin's famous dictum that Social Democracy and Fascism were "twins" meant, in Britain, calling the Labour Party "Social

Fascist", striving to create revolutionary unions and abjuring the united front tactic. McShane and Hannington, in practice, ignored the worst lunacies of this line which would have spelt doom for the NUWM. The CP leaders were unable to call them to account because the NUWM and the militant battles it fought were the only mass actions that the CP was involved in.

The CP's change of line in 1934/5 to the Communist International's 'Peoples' Front' tactic (which called for class collaborationist fronts between communists, ILPers, Labour Party members, Liberals and even 'progressive' Tories) blunted the cutting edge of the NUWM. Gone was the merciless exposure of the TUC and Labour Party leaders.

By 1936, the CP's criticisms had become so mild that Clement Attlee was quite prepared to share the platform at a London rally welcoming the march of that year. A contemporary police report remarked, "speeches were moderate in tone and the communist speakers avoided provocation or extremist remarks".

Indeed, such an approach undercut the very existence of an independent, rank and file based unemployed organisation. The 1936 march was the last major unemployed demonstration of the 1930's.

Wal Hannington's and Harry McShane's books vividly evoke the atmosphere of the class struggle in the Twenties and Thirties, the poverty and degradation that capitalist crises visit upon the unemployed and their families. They also show the militancy and courage, the pride and dignity that sprang from resistance and organisation. On that basis alone they are worth reading. But there are also lessons to be learnt, and problems to be addressed. One problem with which the NUWM had to grapple, and which is still with us today, is how to unite the unemployed and the employed. The NUWM, correctly, never ignored the official movement, despite its sorry record. They continued to demand that the TUC do what it claimed to do — serve the interests of the working class.

The NUWM consistently fought for the right of the unemployed to take their place inside the official labour movement, in Trades Councils, and at the TUC itself. It fought for the unionisation of the unemployed and against the betrayals of Citrine and Co., who were eager to forget the plight of their ex-members.



1935  
 The life blood of the NUWM was its local organisations, born out of the struggle against Boards of Guardians. They provided the solid foundation for the hunger march mobilisations, the organised resistance to police brutality in Birkenhead, Belfast, Glasgow and elsewhere. They ensured that the unemployed were mobilised against capitalism — and not against their employed fellow workers.

Such local committees need to be established today. They need to be built in every town to organise the unemployed, especially the youth, on a permanent basis, bringing them into militant action against the bosses. Such local roots will provide the best basis for national initiatives, marches etc.

A national organisation of the unemployed must be built around a clear programme, clear political answers to the crisis that the unemployed and the employed face together. For they do face it together, and if unity is not welded in action the working class faces serious dangers. There is no doubt that deep frustration and growing despair could develop within the ever-increasing army of the unemployed, particularly so in regard to the youth. If that frustration and despair, that anger, is not directed against its class enemy, there is a real prospect of it turning in upon itself in the cancerous form of fascism. Not only the fascists could benefit from a leaderless army of the unemployed. The spectre of a chronically weakened Trade Union movement lies before us in the shape of a divided and demoralised working class lacking the strength to even defend, let alone improve, wages, condition and social services.

Such a prospect need never become a reality provided, at every level of the labour movement, in every town, every plant, every Trades Council the question of the fight against unemployment is taken up. A mass national unemployed movement, based on uncompromising hostility to the capitalist system and linked to the employed workers, the trade unions can, and must, build in the months ahead.

Each symbol represents 200 000 unemployed.



# workers power

# Lee Jeans occupation

# shows the way

# FOR A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO WORK



When the Tory Social Services Minister Patrick Jenkin remarked: "If the Good Lord had intended us to have equal rights to go out to work, he wouldn't have created man and woman." (Guardian November 6th 1979), he was succinctly outlining the Government's whole strategy against working class women. Using the handy smokescreen of the first woman Prime Minister, the Tories have embarked on a campaign to drive women back into the home.

They aim to make a traditionally weaker section of the working class, bear a proportionately higher share of the burden for the recession. If the organised working class, the trade unions, fail to fight for the defence of a woman's right to work, as well as that of a man's, then they will naturally aid the Tories. By dividing women (over 40% of the work force) against men, the Tories hope to split the working class, literally, down the middle.

The real number of women unemployed is considerably larger than even the 700,000 admitted in the official figures. The official figures for unemployment have now topped the 2.5m mark. But, the *real* figure is nearer 3.5m. The missing million are in part accounted for by young people, taken off the dole queues temporarily, by a variety of no hope "opportunity" training schemes and courses. The majority of this million, though, are married women.

## GENERAL ONSLAUGHT

Over 60% of married women don't pay National Insurance when they are at work and are not eligible for unemployment benefit as a consequence. Also, being married means that they can't get Supplementary Benefit either. So why bother to register when there is no hope of a job and no benefits? This doesn't mean that these women are not being thrown out of jobs though. Quite the opposite in fact. In manufacturing industry during the year up to October 1980 the number of male operative workers fell by 9% whereas the number

of females fell by 13% (51st TUC Women's Conference Report p.39). Between 1972 and 1978 the proportion of women out of work went up from 27% to 45%. The rise in the proportion of women employed over the same period was only 2% (38% to 40%—figures from CIS Report—Women in the 80s p.20). Within this general onslaught on women's jobs the 40% of all women at work who do part-time jobs, have been particularly badly hit. Treated as mobile workers—mobile, that is, between the dole queue and the workplace—they have been shunted out of work, in every sphere of employment, at a consistently faster rate than full time workers. In the local authorities for example, between June 1979 and September 1980 part time employment fell by 7% as compared with a fall of just over 1% in full-time employment.

## UNEMPLOYMENT TREND

This trend of higher unemployment is intensified during every recession. In manufacturing women workers are not needed as production shrinks. In the service industries employees (mainly women) become a luxury item. Better to have women as unpaid service workers—in the home. The cut-backs in services, the raising of school meal prices, the ideological campaign to make women feel that their rightful place is in the home are all designed to increase, but at the same time hide, unemployment. The Tories will stop at nothing to achieve this. The nutritional value of school meals has been reduced in a move designed to cut costs and place responsibility for giving children decent meals on the shoulders of mothers. The most obscene example of their offensive against women, in the 'Year of the Disabled', is the extra test which disabled married women have to go through to prove they cannot carry out their household duties before being eligible for non-contributory Invalidity Benefit.

But what has been the response to these savage attacks on working class women? The trade union bureaucracy either ignore the question of defending a woman's right to work altogether, or simply make passive gestures (usually speeches) aimed at deflecting criticism from women rank and file trade unionists of themselves. Nor do those trade union leaders with specific responsibility for women's rights take the question any more seriously. Speaking in tones distinctly similar to her male cronies in the TUC General Council, Marie Patterson, Chairwoman of the TUC Women's Advisory Committee, could only offer support for the TUC's Campaign for Social and Economic Advance, and the week of lobbies in April, that were supposed to forward it.

The feminists, within the Women's Movement, have retreated more and more from the field of class struggle. The focus of their activity is not to defend women against the major threat posed to them by the recession—unemployment. Rather it is to engage in a variety of separatist activities directed against a number of the social effects of mounting unemployment and deteriorating living standards (violence against women for example). The thrust of feminist activities have the main affect of pitting women against men, thereby

reinforcing the divisions between men and women, the very weapon which the Tories are using through wholesale unemployment.

But the response of the women workers at Vanity Fair Lee Jeans stands in stark contrast to both the Trade Union bureaucrats and the feminists. They have occupied their plant in Greenoch Scotland and given a loud and clear answer to the employers and Tories: "We are women workers fighting for our jobs with the only weapons available to us. Women's jobs are as important as any other and we aim to prove that women can fight for them."

The Lee Jeans women have cut right through the arguments used by Tories and by hostile trade unionists, that women don't have the right to work. They are not stealing men's jobs, they are not working for pin money, and they are not "unreliable" trade unionists. In Greenoch the high levels of male unemployment mean that many of these women are in fact the breadwinners (a situation now typical in many towns). They have won support throughout their community. The male workers there know full well that if Lee Jeans sacks 240 women their jobs will not be filled by unemployed men—they will be gone for good. And, the excellent organisation of the occupation, the tireless building of support for it around the country, the solidarity of the whole workforce, demonstrate that women are more than capable of being full active trade unionists.

But the example of Lee Jeans needs to be heeded. The fight for a woman's right to work is one that has to be waged, urgently, throughout the working class. At every stage of this fight the bureaucracy's aim to defuse and head off action will have to be taken on and defeated. The only message that will be understood by the bosses and the Tories is one spoken in the language of direct action. Women's jobs won't be saved by reasoned argument with people whose profit margins demand sackings. They can only be saved by strike action and occupations.

## HOSTILITY TO MILITANCY

It is hardly surprising that the organisers behind the People's March, chiefly the Communist Party, have not made any serious attempt to use the march to highlight women's unemployment and the need to fight it. In line with the TUC's own hostility to a militant defence of every job, the organisers have so far resisted the call for a Women's Right to Work contingent on the march. They rightly see that such a contingent, involving workers such as the Lee Jeans women, could play an important role in transforming the People's March into a militant demonstration and launching pad for widespread action against unemployment. To allow this to happen would be to risk the potential allies that the CP is wooing.

They are even prepared to excuse the Tories for their attacks on women in the hope of winning some of them to their broad alliance. This was made explicit by CPer Jean Gardiner in the March issue of 'Marxism Today': "...the Tories have neither an explicit nor a united position on women, and probably less so on this issue than on

some others, e.g. trade unions. Some Tories have campaigned actively for sex equality in some areas. A commitment to women's equal rights can co-exist with moral beliefs about the family which give rise to policies that go against women's interests. The Tory government is neither explicit about its attacks on women nor even probably aware that its policies have this effect." (p.3).

For the CP, therefore, the People's March can serve as a way of making the Tories 'aware' and thus help persuade at least a significant section of them to change their minds. A militant Women's Right to Work contingent attacking the Tories would, of course, upset this schema. The logic of Gardiner's hopes is to say do nothing now, turn your back on the example of Lee Jeans, and hang on until enough people in high office have changed their minds. She pessimistically argues: "Whilst a complete reversal in women's position may be unlikely the conditions for developing an effective resistance to present attacks do not yet exist." (p.9).

## RESISTANCE EXISTS

We reject this cowardly tripe. The conditions for resistance do exist in the struggle of the Lee Jeans women and in the example of many other struggles in which women workers have played the leading role. This is why Workers Power has been arguing for a Women's Right to Work contingent in the People's March. It would be a contingent that carried the message of the Lee Jeans strikers to as many women—and men—workers as possible. It would visit the hospitals, the factories, the offices where women worked, encouraging them to take action, to fight to defend their jobs, their services and their rights. The potential to build such a contingent can be seen in the fact that both Rover Solihull and Longbridge shop stewards have sponsored women marchers. If the organisers concede to this pressure and organised such a contingent, then the marchers and their supporters must ensure that it is in their hands and not reduced to being a passive appendage to the main march.

A contingent on these lines would have nothing in common with the separatist ventures of the feminists. It would not be a separate march—it would be a demonstration *within* the march that would make the reality of women's unemployment visible to all. The contingent would be built through the organisations of the working class—union branches, stewards committees etc. The very building of it would be a fight to integrate the struggle for a woman's right to work into the struggles of the whole working class. It would involve winning the arguments with male trade unionists in order to win their support. This could not be done via the women only projects of the feminists which exclude the possibility of winning *class wide* support from the outset. Nor can it be done, in the manner suggested by 'feminists' within the CP, the Labour Party and the Socialist Organiser backed Women's Fightback. Typical of their approach is the planned Women's Festival against the Tories. A venture that fails to challenge the inactivity of the union and labour leaders in defending women from Tory attacks. This effect-

ively separates women's struggles from the general struggle over pay, jobs and against the Tories, thereby reducing women to pressure groups on the official leadership of the working class.

This was clearly revealed in Birmingham where the CP women argued for a 'women's' feeder march into the People's March only as it passed through Birmingham. The organisers would of course accept this because it did not pose a threat to their 'people's march' scheme for the march.

Workers Power rejects these approaches. We fight for a Woman's Right to Work contingent on the People's March because in this way we can highlight women's unemployment, organise a springboard for action and challenge the trade union bureaucracy and the CP over their refusal to actively fight women's unemployment. Our fight to build such a contingent is part of a general fight to involve women at all levels of the struggle inside the trade unions and inside the struggle to build an unemployed workers union.

It is part of a fight to build a working class women's movement which, won to revolutionary leadership, can take on the reformist do nothing traitors inside our own ranks and play its role alongside male workers in getting rid of capitalism altogether.



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