



A few weeks ago, the national press, never noted for its sympathy to women's liberation, suddenly discovered a new "working class heroine". The Daily Mail waxed lyrical with enthusiasm about Mrs. Caroline Miller, who was leading housewives in a campaign to:

"Encourage the management to sack the militants ..." The Birmingham Evening Meil reported: "Carole's army is planning to step up the campaign." By that it meant Mrs. Miller was in business to get Birmingham car workers' wives to set up a strike-breaking force and give Birmingham employers the same reactionary encouragement.

No wonder the press pounced on Mrs. Miller. More than a good news story was at stake here. The ruling class hoped to exploit the possibility of using Miller to fashion a national movement of "wives" against strikes.

The thought of creating an anti-strike force that is working-class in composition presents fascinating possibilities. This is far different from the pathetic offers by retired colonels to "keep Britain going" or the use of irate letters from well-bred ladies in Cheltenham so beloved by the *Daily Telegraph*. The possibilities of dragging such a movement behind the Tory Party or in tow behind a right-wing populist like Powell, and away from its traditional support for Labour, are also attractive for the ruling class.

There did exist a real base for such a movement. When the three-day week ended, a series of disputes broke out as workers fought back against management's ruthless and constant attacks on the factory agreements. Workers, despite their desire not to lose wages, can still be won to support of these strikes because of their actual workshop experience. They know from first hand what the arbitrary use of "workshop experts" means and they know what speed-up is all about. Their wives do not have that experience.

The wives' experience is that of booming prices, rocketing rents and mortgages, soaring food costs—an apparently never-ending increase in the cost of living. Most wives, particularly those with children, are not involved in the collective struggle in the factory. They often remain isolated in fragmented family units. Invariably it is them who bear the main burden of loss of earnings from strikes and as a consequence tend to associate the union with *loss* of earnings. The very personalised experience of their daily lives, its often boring routinism and their enforced dependency on their husband's earnings *can* make them view the union as a force which dashes their expectations and cuts across the struggle for existence.

REAL PRESSURES

These real pressures *can* create a basis amongst wives for antipathy towards the unions. When, as in Cowley, the hardship arises not from a strike in which their husbands are directly involved, this pressure, if cleverly manipulated and not fought against, can flare into downright hostility against the union.

The media, the ragbag of rightwing politicians and the management set out to exploit that hostility at BLMC Cowley. They did not have to create new divisions. They were able to exploit those real divisions which already exist, which arise from the division of labour in capitalist society and which relegate women to an inferior role. In major disputes which are caused by strikes of small groups of workers—a not uncommon occurrence in flow production industries—the other workers are often not clear on the reasons for the strike. Wives not working at the factory rarely know the reasons.

The situation which emerged at Cowley-the ruthless drive of the management, the extolling of the Miller "break-strike-mob"-have to be seen in the context of the present crisis of British capitalism. British capitalism is locked in a severe economic and social crisis. It can only resolve that crisis by breaking the power of the organised working class.

Every time that the capitalist class has taken on the well-organised, more powerful sections of the working class it has been forced to retreat with a bloody nose. Twice the miners have broken the pay norm. Their second strike, in open defiance of the statutory pay laws, resulted in the fall of the Heath Government. The dockers and engineers have both reduced the

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Industrial Relations Act to an unworkable fiasco. But the severity of the capitalist crisis means that there can be no real solution other than that of an open confrontation between the classes.

One of the aims of the ruling class is to create the most favourable circumstances for itself as it prepares for that confrontation. It therefore sets out to build a base of support within the working class—a base that it can use against the more militant sections and also exploit for electoral purposes. The events which took place at Cowley—although they failed—are in many senses a miniature of that strategy at work.

OFFENSIVE AT COWLEY

BLMC, like most of its counterparts in British industry, is facing a severe crisis of profits. This is a crisis sharpened by increasing competition on the world markets. The company was once ranked No. 2 in the producers' league of car companies. Now it has slid to a poor fifth in the league. Its "experts" gloomily forecast that BLMC will sell 20 per cent less units in Europe in the next year than they did in the previous year. At home, they predict a sales drop of 30 per cent. The three-day week helped to drive a few more nails in the coffin. Over £1000 million in revenue was lost. Losses in profits totalled £16 million. The prospect for the future looks distinctly grim.

Steel costs are going up by 25 percent, petrol costs are soaring and the firm's electricity bill will rise this year by 30 per cent. With a nationally-predicted rate of inflation set by the more cautious observers at 15 per cent, and unemployment estimated to rise to the one-million mark, sales of cars in the home market can be expected to take an even bigger dive in 1975.

Management have been quick to draw the conclusions. They must *cut* production and *increase* productivity. Immediately the three-day week ended, they set out to do just that. Their first objective was to cut production on the *Marina* assembly line and boost up the work effort. This meant all workers faced an increase in speed-up of 10 to 15 per cent. Those working on *Marinas* for sale in the USA faced a speed-up of 20 to 30 per cent. Beforehand, roughly one worker in six worked on the American exports. Now three in every five will work on these cars with their much more stringent safety regulations. A group of women workers on the *Maxi* were blandly informed that their work load would go up by 125 per cent. They responded with an immediate sit-in which forced the management to retreat. The company agreed to withdraw all "work studies" and negotiate with the stewards.

Elsewhere the management were more successful. Three years ago, after a long bitter strike, the company managed to replace the old piecework system by Measured Day Work. An hourly flat rate was introduced aimed at boosting production without a corresponding increase in wages. Since 1971, wages have steadily failen behind the cost of living. After nine months' negotiations and several stoppages, the stewards secured an important agreement concerning work studies. This stopped the management getting complete control over the shop floor. The agreement stated that the results of work studies could only be implemented after agreement had been reached with the stewards. In practice this meant that every time the management jacked up output, the stewards demanded an increase in men on the job.

At the end of April, the company set out to smash this obstacle. In breach of the agreements, BLMC insisted on its right to use the Industrial Engineers—its time and motion "experts"—at any time. In a deliberately provocative and absolutely unprecedented action, the Industrial Engineers were used on the night shift; the day shift were already on strike. In another flagrant breach of the agreement, reorganisation of the assembly tracks began to take place.

The workers' resistance at first was spasmodic and uncoordinated, and restricted to small groups, but it rapidly grew to the whole assembly line. In those critical early days, the senior stewards failed to give any lead. The stewards seemed to lack confidence in the workers' ability or preparedness to fight back, although strike action was taken. Accepting a proposal from deputy senior steward Alan Thornett—a leading member of the Workers Revolutionary Party, successor to the Socialist Labour League—the stewards offered the company the right to use Industrial Engineers at any time. The only condition that they attached to this was that mutual agreement must be obtained before increasing the track speed. Sensing the weakness of the stewards, encouraged by their inability to give any coherent lead to the struggles of the workers, the management peremptorily tossed this out. On the Tuesday of that week, confused by the lack of leadership, seeing no policy being put forward which could offer them victory, 2,500 *Marine* workers voted to end the strike.

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The management had every reason to be self-congratulatory. A key agreement had been openly breached. A decisive step towards breaking the power of the union in the factory had gone through. But production could not yet be re-started. One hundred and fifty transport workers were also on strike. Before the end of the *Marina* dispute these men had struck as a result of being laid off, which was in breach of their lay-off agreement. The strike of these men in Internal Transport meant that 12,000 men were laid off. In a clever move, management announced that they were no longer prepared to recognise Thornett as an accredited shop steward. If accepted, this meant that he would no longer be deputy senior steward, chairman of the shop stewards committee or steward for Internal Transport. The company hoped to fasten the blame for the lay-off of the 12,000 workers round Thornett's neck. The transport drivers who had declared their willingness to return to work pending negotiations then insisted on *their right to elect their own shop steward.* The dispute continued with the factory at a halt.

MRS. MILLER ARRIVES

The time had arrived for the appearance of Mrs. Caroline Miller, erstwhile spokeswoman for the "Cowley wives". This self-styled leader of the "wives" was latched on to by the Oxford Journal. The Oxford Journal is a "free" paper—which gets its income from business advertising—with a circulation going into "96,000 homes and businesses in the new Oxfordshire" (masthead on 26 April). Although its "freedom" is rather limited by its need to please its advertisers, the Journal was only too pleased to give Mrs. Miller a welcoming hand. It reports: "When Mrs. Miller put her thoughts to us later that day (19 April) we decided the matter needed more urgent airing than we could provide at this stage. We put her in touch with Radio Oxford.

"By mid-morning on Saturday, after they had broadcast an interview, telephone calls of support were pouring in."

It reports that by "... Monday—with interest from the national press growing—the first demo of the week resulted ..." The Journal is being far too modest. It was, after all, the Journal that placed the story in the Sunday nationals. The chairman of one of Mrs. Miller's public meetings obviously intending to give it an air of neutral impartiality—was none other than the Journal's editor. At least his advertising clients could rest assured that he was a man concerned about the solid virtues of preserving business interests. Support from Mrs. Miller came from all the usual expected sources. Quickly onto the scene was Margaret Butler, prospective Liberal candidate for Oxford—obviously a woman with an eye for the main chance. Mrs. Butler knew about economic hardship, after all her husband was employed at Cowley. But she at first "forgot" to mention that his job in the Technical Publications Department prevents him from being affected by lay-off. As she is also a landlord of substantial property in East Oxford, she "obviously" knows what a struggle it is to "keep the wolf from the door". James Prior, Tory Shadow Home Secretary, jumped in on the act by telegramming Mrs. Miller: "The lead and example that you and your fellow-women have given to the men at Cowley is an inspiration to the whole country."

The National Housewives' Association vigorously applauded Mrs. Miller's "stand". This organisation was founded in Derby, allegedly to "fight rising prices". One of its first acts was to send a toy mule to the TUC, thus making clear that rising prices were all due to the stubbornness of trade union members in fighting to defend their living standards. The NHA, which is rather short on members but long on verbosity, has advertised in *Acorn*, a magazine noted for its racist views and with strong National Front connections.

Radio Oxford also happily jumped on the bandwagon, inviting another protesting "wife", Mrs. Eileen MacGibbon, to run a series of "phone-in" programmes. The aim of this special programme was to gather forces for a petition calling for a special T&GWU branch meeting where a vote of no confidence could be put against Thornett. The theme was simple—Sack The Militants; No More Strikes.

Naturally this struck a responsive chord in management's heart. Mr. Colin Hill, well-paid economic adviser to British Leyland, told the lunchtime forum of the New Baptist Road Church that he hoped the trouble was only caused by "mindless militants". No doubt chilling the blood of his pious and god-fearing audience, he added: "But there is a suspicion that it is really more coldblooded than that, and that it is a group of people who because of their

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political beliefs are trying to ensure that the industry will not survive." Aware of the connections between the kingdom of heaven and earthy things like money, he reassured his audience by saying: "If we could cut down interruptions by only half, the company would make so much money it would be embarrassing." Doubtless all the good baptists then fervently prayed for a quick end to those ungodly interruptions.

The local press-the Oxford Mail and Times-and the national press used every possible angle of the "wives" revolt". Mrs. Miller and company became front-page news.

Management were slightly more cautious but no less enthusiastic. They saw this as an ideal opportunity to crack the transport workers' strike and hound the militants from the plant. First it was to be Thornett. That however would be only a beginning, as is now shown by the fact that the company also made a complaint (now dropped) against John Underwood, deputy AUEW senior convenor. Coincidentally, it was identical to that made against Thornett. On Monday 23 April the "break-a-strike mob" marched on the plant demanding the dismissal of the militants. John Symonds, plant director, and Mick Newman, industrial relations manager, met Miller and five others for a cosy chat over tea and biscuits. The management representatives surprisingly told them they were "100 per cent behind the demonstration" and encouraged them to "go on protesting". Gambling on the impact of the wives' influence on the situation, management then re-opened the plant. They assured everyone that this was dependent on getting full production going again. This would have meant ending the strike of the transport workers and denying them their right to elect their own shop steward.

Drivers since then have suspended their striker pending a mass meeting of the T&GWU 5/55 branch, ordered by the regional secretary, which will vote on whether or not to call for official backing for the strike.

PARALYSIS OF UNION AND W.R.P.

The trade union leaders and the militants remained silent-they had no strategy to combat Miller and company. The WRP, the most powerful political presence in Cowley-an organisation which includes amongst its members Thornett and a number of the senior stewards-printed in Workers Press a few letters from wives defending the union and attacking Miller, but contented itself with nothing more than this propaganda approach. The only organised fight back against Miller and company was organised by a group of Oxford women trade unionists. This consisted of women from the Maxi trim-shop, Cowley canteen workers, wives of laid-off workers, trades unionists from the town and local socialist women's groups. When Mrs. Miller appeared at a special meeting at the Oxford Town Hall to set up a National Association, she met a vocal and militant opposition. Instead of being turned into a strike-breaking jamboree, an overwhelming majority at the meeting voted in favour of the reinstatement of Alan Thornett and for the defence of basic trade union rights. Once it was clear that Miller was going to be routed, the television cameras switched off, the gentlemen from the press yawned, put away their pencils and affected a look of boredom. The story had died. The plans of management had been disrupted. A setback had been recorded for the hopes of a national chain of strike-breaking committees.

That resistance had been built by a campaign amongst militant women. It had included visiting women workers, leafletting trade union members as well as housewives and getting them to take action in defence of their own class interests. So that militant women with children could be present at the meeting, baby-sitting was organised and men press-ganged for this. It is proposed the campaign will be followed up with the aim of strengthening these forces and widening their base of influence not only amongst wives but also amongst male workers.

NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The emergence on the scene of Miller and MacGibbon has implications that extend far beyond Cowley. This is shown by how quickly the press and particularly the *Birmingham Evening Mail* get in on the act. By the Wednesday of 24 April it was reporting: 'Wives of some Birmingham car workers plan to join the 'petticoat power'' movement....' This followed a visit by their reporter to see Miller in Oxford who told him she 'would gladly go to Birmingham'. She said if the Cowley strike-breaking operation was successful she intended to 'get in touch with the wives at Longbridge and other Leyland works in Birmingham to get them to follow our lead.' At Port Talbot, scene of another dispute, the first question put by the press to management was: 'do you think women here will organise against the strike?' In a period of crisis bedevilled

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by the chronic inflation the ruling class desperately needs to attach the plame for inflation away from the system and onto the trade unions. The strike weapon—a key weapon in the hands of the working class— has to be blunted and discredited. Cowley is no flash in the pan. A new potential weapon lies at hand for the ruling class and they will make every attempt to use it to the full.

In a period of chronic inflation, workers and their wives can often see the importance of struggles over wages. However, employers can much more easily exploit the sectional disputes,

which are such a common feature of flow production industries. Furthermore, the drive against militant trade union leaders. leading to victimisations, are less clear issues. The capitalist class understand that to defeat the working class, a main priority is to smash the union organisation at factory level. Red-baiting is an important part of that attack and it is here where the employers can find a weak link.

The measures taken against Miller's 'strike-breakers' were excellent, but they were a response to the situation. What is needed is a strategy to ensure that such situations do not arise in future. Wives will not give their support to their husbands' unions simply out of a sense of duty and loyalty. They have to be convinced that the unions act in their interests and can help them to solve the problems which they confront. This means that the unions have to take up the issues which confront their members and the wives of their members outside the factory.

SOME STEPS TO BE TAKEN

There are many ways that these issues can be taken up by the trade union movement. Two vears ago women workers on the Cowley estate, which is adjacent to the factory started a campaign for nursery facilities. This was a clear case where if the union had given backing and encouragement to their demands it would have been a big boost to the campaign. This would not only have affected the wives of car workers, but would have brought *into* united action with the trade union, wives of workers from other industries. It could have been used as a spearhead to initiate a similar movement throughout Oxford, drawing in other unions and winning support from wives in other parts of the city.

In a similar way the union could be involved in the fight against rising prices. Actions against rising prices could be taken up at two levels. Firstly, the fight against prices increases can be taken up at the local level by joint pickets from the unions and women shoppers against increases in prices of particular goods. If the shops fail to come to heel delivery drivers, many of them members of the TGWU-the biggest trade union in Cowley-could be asked to 'black' the shop.

Fights against price increases can be taken up most effectively against such practices as 'marking over' and hearding. This means attempting to develop action by workers in supermarkets and wholesalers. A campaign should be waged amongst workers in the public sectors to fight price increases. Bus workers—also often members of the TGWU—could be encouraged to refuse to implement fares increases but continue to operate public transport and still provid a service to the public. Threats of disciplinary action against municipal employees could be me by workers in Cowley and other firms announcing that they would take strike action in defence of any victimised bus workers. These measures are one way of showing working women and working class housewives that there is a working class solution to capitalist inflation.

At a national level the union could instead of just discussing how big the next wage claim shou be, take up the fight for the sliding scale of wages and a nil threshold agreement. This means that there would be a monthly review of *all* price increases and would mean automatic increas in wages to compensate workers for these increases. At present the threshold agreement only starts when prices have gone up by seven percent. The threshold agreement should start at nil so that every single penny on prices is taken into account. Furthermore the threshold agreemen now affects less than one worker in five and should therefore be extended to cover *all* worker:

Women are obviously disturbed at the threats of factory closures and mass redundancies. They have no wish to exist on the pittances of social security or some ill-paid job. It is therefore necessary to state that British Leyland Motor Company—like many other firms in Britain does face possible closure. If BLMC is to continue and exist in the fiercely competitive world of capitalism it must smash the power of the unions in the plant and create the conditions where

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it can cut production costs by keeping down wages and boosting speed-up. If it is not able to achieve those objectives then it can go to the wall. For the workers, to accept the price which BLMC must demand for its continued existence would be disastrous. It would mean drastic outs in living standards, the introduction of sweat-shop conditions, arbitrary sackings and ectensive redundancies. The union must therefore have a policy to meet this threat. It has to be a policy that prepares both workers and wives of workers to fight back. That means the unions must declare that any threat of closure or redundancies will be met by the occupation of the factory and the seizure of the Company's assets. That these assets will be held to force the government to nationalise BLMC, or other factories faced with closure. The occupation of the factory and the workers' seizure of capitalist property must be used to ensure that nationalisation takes place under the best possible terms for the workforce-guarantees of no redundancies, workers rights to veto speed-up etc. Such action would represent a complete rupture, with the policy of calling on the trade union leaders and the Labour Government to carry out these measures. It would mean a break from propaganda methods of struggle and their replacement by mass working class action. It would be action dependent on support that extends beyond the factory by winning wives and other sections of the working class to a policy of independent mass struggle where their own initiatives are at a premium. Unless the union actively prepare for this in the present period it will be able to offer only token resistance to closures and redundancies and be unable to win wives to the side of the unions.

But such a programme, need fighting for. That means holding mass meetings of trade union members in the area, inviting working class women to attend these meetings and winning them to such a programme. These could then organise meetings in streets, at shopping precincts, and in local communities. Committees could be set up to organise these meetings, arrange mass leafletting etc. But if such actions are to be taken seriously the weary lament of some male trade unionists that 'women just will not come to meetings' must be overcome. That would entail organising creches, arranging baby-sitting facilities for married workers so that the wives could sit on the committees, speak at the meetings and play a real organising role in the campaign.

Every attempt must be made to ensure that women workers also are able to attend the trade union branch meetings which means the branch must discuss *their* specific problems, encourage *them* to speak and ensure that *they* are represented on the committees of the union. Women who leave the factory to have babies should be treated as 'continuing union members' and the unions should take up a serious fight for full-paid maternity leave.

WOMENS' CHARTER

The working Women's Charter, drawn up by the London Trades Council can be a most effective way of raising the issues confronting women at work. A number of trades councils and union branches have already adopted the Charter and it has become the basis for organising local activities. Hackney Trades Council will be holding a Charter Conference in September and is planning a series of local meetings as a build-up to the Conference. These meetings are projected as forums for discussion on such topics as equal pay and opportunities, prices, nurseries and health facilities. Shop stewards have been sent a questionnaire, inquiring about womens' pay and conditions and what the unions have done about them. In Hackney Wick an investigation is to be carried out into the situation of women workers in the factories, hospitals and schools in the locality. The chairman reported: 'I spoke at a May Day Rally, and afterwards about 50 women said that they were willing to help. We are particularly anxious to reach the women, many of them immigrants, who work in the tailoring sweatshops........

The example of Hackney should be followed on a national scale and the responses, particularly of those 50 women at the May Day relly shows that a working class alternative can be built against the Mrs Millers. It would be wrong to simply subordinate the struggles of women to those of the working class. The decay of capitalism, its increasing need to strengthen its means of repression and the ever growing alienation of women under capitalism makes them much more critical of their family situation and enforced life style. Their attempts to fight back against these forces has the possibility of giving to the struggle of women an anti-capitalist dynamic of its own. The objectives of this struggle can of course only be achieved in the independent struggle of the working class in the fight for socialism. The fight of women for their own emancipation can and will act as an important base for their radicalisation on a whole series of other issues. Its need for an independent voice is imperative.

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The working class movement has to champion and put to the fore the issues raised by women, and in this way make the struggle against womens' oppression a key part of the working class programme. A failure to do this means that some fifty percent of the working class is excluded from playing a full part in the struggle.

By the active involvement of women on the lines outlined above one does not simply win an immediate demand or a particular strike. Their involvement in taking decisions, organising campaigns, organising on the picket line, writing leaflets, speaking in support of a strike or a campaign helps them to come out with a better understanding. It enables them to know what they are, to understand the situation that they are in, and how they can collectively begin to change that. That is why women must be involved at every level in disputes and policy making, and not just relegated to making the sandwiches, doing the typing or running the nursery. This is simply to extend their role in the family—the very thing that revolutionaries should be fighting alongside women to break down,

WRITTEN FOR THE IMG BY JEFF KING 10/6/74

This is one of a series of pamphlets being produced by the International Marxist Group on the oppression of women in capitalist society and the fight of women to change their conditions.

Further copies lof this pamphlet and other material can be obtained from :RED BOOKS, 97 Caledonian Rd. London,N.1.

ALSO AVAILABLE: Copies of the WORKING WOMEN'S CHARTER.

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