

SHOP STEWARDS

AND THE

CLASS STRUGGLE



SHOP STEWARDS & CLASS STRUGGLE

INTRODUCTION

WHEN WE STARTED INDUSTRIAL ACTIVITY IN THE MOTOR INDUSTRY TWO YEARS AGO, WE HAD LITTLE OR NO ANALYSIS OR CRITICISM OF THE STEWARDS. IN FACT OUR FIRST REFERENCE POINT AT FORDS WAS LEFT WING STEWARDS, WITH WHOM WE STARTED INITIAL CO-OPERATION. --- ONE OF OUR LEAFLETS ACTUALLY WENT OUT BEARING THE NAME OF ONE OF THE PLANT SHOP STEWARD COMMITTEES, NOW IN THE FORDS BASE GROUP NONE OF THE PEOPLE ACTIVE ARE STEWARDS AT THE MOMENT. WE WANT TO EXPLAIN WHY THIS IS, AND WHY WE THINK OUR CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON STEWARDS HAS BEEN SUBSTANTIALLY VALIDATED: IN OUR OWN PRACTICE AND BY OBSERVATION OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN INDUSTRY eg. THE PHASE TWO DEFEAT.

Such an analysis is necessary to deflate the myths of right and left. Tony Cliffs statement that stewards are--"The representatives of shop-floor democracy and hence the pillars on which any revolutionary socialist policy must lie"--in the recently published World Crisis may seem a little crude to I.S. now, but it is still true that most of the left take shop-stewards as their starting point in their industrial activity. We also believe that a full understanding of the potential and weaknesses of the SS movement must mean going beyond talking about their bad 'authority relations' with the rank and file. Its not just that there needs to be more shop-floor democracy.

Before we start the discussion its important to make clear which shop-stewards and which steward organisations we're talking about. The SS movement is not a single thing. Our experience is in the engineering & motor industries and the docks--industries where it is most developed. In areas where stewards are just emerging, like in the hospitals, very different problems may have to be faced.

THE ORIGINS OF THE STEWARDS MOVEMENT

The growth and development of the stewards movement as we know it, has to be placed in the re-organisation of capitalist production after the world-wide slumps of the 1930's. The previous stewards movement was destroyed by un-employment, slump and their own political limitations after the First World War. Stewards started appearing on a large scale in the late 1930's and during the war in the aircraft, engineering and munitions industries. But their major growth happened after the war and was directly related to the position and needs of British Capital.

In the 1950's the British employers, forced into a corner by the size of their own problems--strong foreign competition, uncompetitive plant and strong shop-floor militancy, especially under piecework--chose a very dangerous strategy. To streamline production and make it more competitive they began to use the wage militancy of the working class as a motor of capitalist development.

Management's strength in the post war years was the size of demand for what it had to sell at home and abroad. But this was also a big weakness at a time of labour shortage, since it provided workers with a big lever in bargaining. For a long time the largest businesses did well. They could afford to pay for the labour they needed and the frequent pay rises to stave off stoppages. But in some industries the smaller firms were faced with the choice of losing scarce workers to competitors, or paying near impossible wage rates and going bankrupt, followed perhaps by a takeover. The firms which survived passed on their higher costs by raising prices (inflation) and by trying to raise productivity in proportion.

The state through planning began to play a key role in this process as the

the political brain of capital.

So the struggle for better wages and conditions actually helped to strengthen the capitalist economy, by helping to encourage the rationalisation and concentration of capital. This is not to denigrate the working class struggle of that time, it just examines its effects.

SHOP STEWARDS AT THE CENTRE OF THIS WAGE MILITANCY

In Britain the shop stewards were at the centre of this process, were the 'leaders' for a number of reasons.

- *Labour shortages for employers gave the shop floor a local bargaining power to rival the unions attempts to negotiate nationally.
- *The introduction of new machinery and the extension of the piecework system meant a mass of detailed negotiating which varied from shop to shop and which meant that they couldn't be dealt with nationally.
- *Many managements preferred to deal with stewards rather than local officials because they were at hand and understood local problems better. The stewards were generally trusted by the men and so were able to settle disputes in minutes rather than days. Increasingly the stewards replaced officials at the lowest rung of grievance procedures.

The decline of the union officials vis a vis the stewards was also helped by the increasing integration into the state of the unions. Feeling responsible for the development of the economy, the union leaders became increasingly susceptible to the 'national interest' argument. However true this might also have been of the stewards, they were compelled to forget it more and more when fighting for the best prices for wages and conditions for their 'members'. The stewards largely replaced officials as the middle men in the sale of labour power to the bosses.

EFFECTS ON THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF STEWARDS

The limitations of the stewards at the present time--their failure to confront and go beyond the ruling class offensive--must be seen in terms of the conditions in which they grew up, and began to operate in the 1950's.

Wage rises were won relatively easily, and wage militancy was taken for granted, whilst rarely extending to a general understanding of the class struggle. This period marked the decline of what was thought of as 'politics'. The working class became less dependent and more cynical about the labour party. And while the stewards home-made reformism could get results inside the factory, there was little need to consider issues outside the workplace and the whole question of the state and power.

A consequence of this was that wage militancy could be compatible with reactionary political positions on race and women and so on, 'Economic struggle' became institutionalised in the stewards and unions, while 'politics' was left to the LP. or simply forgotten.

SECTIONALISM. The isolation between factories and even within factories of the struggles for better wages etc. also moulded the stewards movement to an ideology and practice of sectionalism. Sectionalism has always been a problem inside the working class but in this period it was accentuated because it had material roots. It paid off. Solidarity was a luxury principle to be kept in cold storage until the stewards felt it could be used without upsetting the balance of power inside their own situation.

FINANCIAL SETTLEMENTS. The stewards role under piecework, the constant renegotiation of money rates for increased work rates or changed work practices, led them to look for a financial settlement to every grievance. The idea--and it still persists -- that workers put up with anything as long as enough cash is offered. In this

present situation of wage control and profit squeeze, this economism tends to leave the stewards with no strategy at all.

PASSIVE DELEGATION. The complications of piecework led also to a total delegation of the power of the rank and file to the stewards. Their very success in individual and specialised negotiation (knowing the rule book etc.) excluded the shop floor from taking an active role in their struggle. The result--widespread apathy among the rank and file, with the steward too often prepared to ignore his own role in forming it.

Far from being the 'pillars of democracy' the relationship between the stewards and the rank and file grew to be hierarchical, although their closeness to the shop floor always held out the possibility of rank and file control.

CHANGED SITUATION IN THE LATE 60'S.....THE NEW OFFENSIVE

By the early 60's it was clear that the plan to use working class struggle to develop capital had backfired. It had fostered strong shop floor organisation and confidence, which in the long run worsened the fundamental problems of British capitalism. The twin pressures of wage militancy and foreign competition threatened a serious crisis of profitability. This crisis came to a head in the late 60's as one after another of the ruling class and state measures bit the dust.

There began the process of attempts to shackle the working class, to cut out the damaging effects of wage militancy. Initially there was no success. Labour's attempt to streamline capitalism...rationalisation, mergers, voluntary incomes policies, use of the unions to keep the workers in line....failed. It was rejected by a working class who were determined to advance their living standards and resist any attempt to cut them back--even by a labour government.

After a major upsurge of workers struggles, the bosses always respond with an attempt to restructure their way of organising production. This meant the acceleration of tendencies that were already becoming clear, plus the introduction of new strategies with the Tories as overseers.

*The increased use of contracts of up to 3 years in length. Giving away staggered sums of money in return for social peace in the factories.

*The shake out of 'excess labour' in the factories or workplaces to cut costs. and discipline the workforce. Capital was to be made more competitive by rationalisations, or take overs.

*The introduction of methods like Measured Day Work to regain control of wage costs that were lost under piecework.

*Increased direct intervention by the state through 'legal' means, e.g. The Industrial Relations Act, The Immigration Acts, and in wage confrontations to control the working class (e.g. The Postmen, The Miners.)

The state also led an attack on a more general front against working class living standards. The cutback in state expenditure on housing, education, health (all initiated under the Labour Govt.) is an attempt to redirect wealth away from the working class in order to make it available for investment and capitalist development in general.

Through much of the 60's the key organised sectors of the working class, still led by the stewards, managed to maintain their advantages in wages and conditions. But as the attack became more complex and greater, the stewards found it more difficult to provide political leadership for the working class----precisely because of the way their ideas and practices had been moulded by a different era of struggle. Because the present phase of class struggle in Britain is characterised by a total and co-ordinated ruling class offensive, administered by the state, and reaching into all areas of life.

THE RESPONSE OF INDUSTRIAL WORKERS TO THE NEW OFFENSIVE

The response of industrial workers to the new attacks in the last few years has been mixed--some spectacular successes have been won (the Miners and Dockers stand out) but the defeats over the Tories Phase Two policy have shown up the extent of their weaknesses. We can get a clearer idea of what these weaknesses are by talking about two aspects of them. Firstly the continuing reluctance of the labour movement to mix 'politics and economics'. And secondly the false belief that it is enough to struggle just at the point of production and even there to restrict all struggles to one industry or even one factory (sectionalism).

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STRUGGLE

At one time, especially in the 60's, the ability to push up wages constantly seemed to compensate for the need to confront many other political issues. This material situation which encouraged economism reinforced the traditional split by which the unions and stewards severely limit the spheres of their activity. Ignoring issues inside and outside the factory which are seen as 'political' and therefore outside the scope of their activity, and organisation.

The last year has provided two glaring and damaging examples of this--the almost total indifference of the Trade Unions to the Housing Finance Act and the fight of tenants against it; and their subsequent refusal to make more than token efforts to resist the government freeze.

But its not just the labelling the issues outside the factory as political thats important, its also how the issues inside the factory are seen and fought.

We were involved in the struggle to resist the introduction of Measured Day Work at Standard Triumph Liverpool, in 1971-72. Most of the stewards completely failed to understand the implications of M.D.W. Their practice had been geared to getting more money for changes in the organisation of work such as this one. MDW is a change of work system that is intended to regain control of costing and wages, and in the long run to hold them down. As such it is part of a definite political strategy of the bosses to get them out of their crisis at the expense of the working class. It has to be fought politically inside the factory. To go beyond getting more money in the short term in return for allowing MDW (which is what happened) would mean challenging the whole capitalist rationality of work--the bosses right to rule and to organise production in the interests of profit.

But the stewards are unable to do this, as they are tied within the framework of the bosses right to rule, by their role of bargainers inside capitalism. This framework is no longer adequate to cope with the political attack on the working class, inside and outside the factory, especially as it is planned and coordinated by the state.

SECTIONALISM

Trade Unions see their job as looking after their own particular members. They are not built on any conception of the total power of the working class. This was clearly seen in the series of phase two defeats as unions and steward bodies stuck to their special cases arguments.

Sectional thinking is also rooted in the way the stewards structure works, based as it is on a delicate balancing act with the management and the rank and file. For an individual steward the legitimate area of action and authority is supposed to be his own section. If he spreads his influence he's open to charges of going beyond that sphere of legitimacy. Stewards committees, led by convenors base their existence in the daily conflicts inside thier own workplace. This is why they have developed. Typically issues outside of this domain become very secondary and at best tend to receive token support.

In the past the glaring exception to this sectionalism has come from the dockers, especially on Merseyside. For them solidarity actions, blacking goods etc., has been an almost daily principle. But even here things are beginning to change.

The change is partly to do with the growing weariness of the dockers with working class sectionalism--with being the only ones who ever seem to do anything about 'wider issues'. And it is partly to do with the growing integration of the docks stewards into management, and management schemes for making the ports more viable at a time of crisis.

For example, on Feb. 20th this year, one section of Liverpool dockers went on strike. 3,500 others struck in support. At a mass meeting to vote on a return to work, the stewards thanked the men for their action--but then told them not to do it again. "We want disputes confined to ships or areas while negotiations take place."

THE RIGHT TO WORK

As we've said, the 50's and early 60's were boom years. For the time being it seemed that the interests of the workers and their employers were the same:--production....profits...prosperity for all. This situation influenced the thinking of thousands of workers, and helped to mould the politics of their organisations that were dominant then. They saw the need to fight for their part or 'share' of the goods, but saw no reason to question the existence of capitalism in doing so.

But the boom didn't last. Constantly rising wages, and sharpening foreign competition compelled the bosses and the state to tighten its grip. One of the main features of this was mass unemployment. This gave rise to massive and frequent struggles against redundancy. But all these struggles were haunted by the past and the ideas that had grown up during the boom--the working class could solve its problems inside the framework laid down by the capitalist organisation of work, and the necessity of making profits.

So most of the fights against redundancies were based on the belief that shut-downs were the result of 'bad management'. The main slogan was 'The Right to Work', which meant finding another boss and working on his terms. But the way, 'good management' could survive was by extracting more profit from their workers. The Right to Work slogan always led to a cowed work force, whose demands for a job at any price led to worse conditions than before: this was the story of UCS and Fisher Bendix.

Eventually the employers realised that the mere threat of redundancy could produce the right results, provided the workers slogan was the Right to Work. Recently in Liverpool, we've seen the docks stewards forced into all kinds of retreats and compromises. They accepted temporary labour because, they said, if something wasn't done, trade and therefore jobs would be lost. They have also co-operated in a series of study groups designed to make the handling of certain cargoes more efficient. Their argument--if they don't, cargoes will go elsewhere. It is a very short step from fighting for the right to work, to accepting the bosses problems as your own.

WORKING CLASS AUTONOMY

We have not the space to elaborate what we think an autonomous strategy against redundancies on the docks would be. But some general points about class struggle must be made.

The capitalist class is launching an offensive against us. The working class can not afford to see its needs and interests linked to the development of capital. We have to be clear on this. On the one side there is the development of profits and capitalist accumulation, on the other there are working class living standards. One is got at the expense of the other. Understanding this and applying it in the day to day struggles is what we mean by autonomy. In the future we intend to produce a pamphlet goes into this in full. For the moment, to make more concrete and clear what we mean, and how autonomy differs from a strategy like The Right to Work, it is useful to look at the recent (Sept 73) events at Ford Dagenham.

Lay-offs had been frequent at Dagenham. Whenever there is a shortage of parts, or an internal dispute, which disrupts production, the Co. will lay off whole sections of the plant. It cuts their own costs and makes the workers suffer for the 'problem'.

And if it is a question of an internal dispute, by laying off other workers in the plant, and therefore stopping their wages, the bosses isolate those workers in dispute and operate a divide and rule policy. Its the same old story:--production how it suits them.

But in September, the Dagenham workers came up with a very clear answer to lay-off, which in one case was won by 300 workers:--8 HOURS GUARANTEED PAY, WORK OR NOT. This slogan is a very good example of autonomous action and demands. It showed how those men were not interested in sharing the company's problems. They realised that their living standards had to be protected above all else--despite the fact that it goes against everything the system stands for.

The unions and the steward committees were fighting with a completely different perspective--The Right to Work. At a mass meeting in a later part of the dispute one of the convenors urged the men to go round and look for work, and prove to the management that there was work to be done, and therefore no need for lay-off.

The convenor was stuck with the idea that workers incomes are only justifiable when the bosses are exploiting us in return; and in that instance this was particularly fruitless and damaging. There was no work from the managements point of view--no work that could be profitably done at that time, because of shortages--so obviously they didn't want to pay up. It was a simple conflict of interests, and you had to chose between the dictates of Fords production, or the needs of the workers to live.

THE CRUX OF OUR CRITICISM OF THE STEWARDS MOVEMENT, IS THAT ON THE WHOLE IT TENDS TO HOLD BACK THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORKING CLASS AUTONOMY. THE FIRST FACTOR IN THIS, WHICH WE'VE DESCRIBED, IS THE INFLUENCE OF THE 50'S AND 60'S, THE SECOND FACTOR IS THE ACTUAL ROLE, THE JOB THAT THE STEWARD HAS TO DO IN CAPITALISM IN THE 70'S.

STEWARDS IN THE FACTORY

INTEGRATION INTO THE UNION HIERARCHY:--The deficiencies we've just outlined, of the trade union movement, have become more and more obvious to whole sections of the working class. The picket of the union office is becoming almost as common a feature of strikes, as the factory gate picket. People now expect a 'sell-out' by the union leaders, what remains in doubt is its timing and form.

When shop-stewards line up with union leaders, they can expect similar treatment, as at the recent Perkins strike. But do stewards have any choice in the matter? Increasingly the unions are making concious attempts to incorporate them into the formal union structure. Until quite recently, union rule-books hardly mentioned stewards--a sign of their relative independence--but now the 'functions' of stewards are being more closely defined. In some industries, its getting harder to make out any dividing line between steward and union.

This is partly because the material basis of local bargaining (piecework and so on) has disappeared, and national negotiations by officials taken over. And partly because most unions (and most bosses) have realised that stewards can be used to control the "membership"/"employers". Shop stewards were 'nt introduced on the Liverpool docks until 1967--and least they were 'nt institutionalised until then--and the unions did 'nt make that move to increase militancy.

The incorporation of the stewards into the union structure is more than just the desire of individual stewards to become officials, because it is not just individuals who get assimilated (if it was, other individuals would still be free to act independently of the unions.)...but also the steward organisations.

As a response to the changed situation, where the emphasis is on factory and national bargaining, stewards committees, joint factory and national convenor committees have grown up. (Ford convenors even have a European Committee). But these have developed as part of the official union structure, and not

independently of it. These stewards organisations fill in the gaps between the union leaders and the individual steward and place the latter at the bottom of a pyramid of communication and control. The freedom to manoeuvre of even a revolutionary steward becomes more and more restricted.

INTEGRATION INTO MANAGEMENT. At the same time the attitude of many 'progressive' employers towards stewards have changed. The Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations had this to say on stewards:

"Trouble is thrust upon them. In circumstances of this kind they may be striving to bring some order into a chaotic situation, and management may rely heavily on their efforts to do so." (page 29)

And the authors of a book for managers on shop stewards write:

"In a sense, the leading stewards are performing a managerial function, of grievance settlement, welfare arrangement and human adjustment, and the stewards systems acceptance by managements.....has developed partly because of the increasing effectiveness-and certainly economy-with which this role is fulfilled.

Having realised that once the bargaining position of the stewards has been eroded, and once the unions have begun to assert their own control, these employers have begun to see the stewards as a tool for their own use. They give them their own offices, finance stewards 'education' courses, booze ups at plush hotels, trips abroad to study other parts of the combine, and various other perks which improve the position of the stewards in comparison to the rest of the workers, and encourage them to identify with the firm.

Increased contact with the management, and plain indoctrination, tend to make stewards more aware of managements problems, so that participation of stewards on joint committees with management, poses no real threat.

Firmer management control

But this in itself is not enough to control the shop-floor to the extent needed by British capitalism at the present time. MDW, job evaluation, work study, complex long term contracts etc., were introduced as an attempt to establish firmer management control over production and costs.

The Ford contract of 1971 was in many ways a prototype---something the other employers and the government looked at enviously---in it the unions signed away the right to take any action, for the duration of the contract, for higher pay or against the grading system. The stewards acceptance of this (and their allegiance to the unions left them with little choice) left them with almost no useful role beyond whipping up enthusiasm on the shop-floor once every two years for the new management/union contract.

Procedure

Most workplaces have developed rules, written or unwritten, for dealing with day to day disputes. Stewards retain their role as defenders of the shop-floor against the arbitrary action of managers and supervisors, but more and more they are bound by complex grievance procedures, agreements which serve only to delay the inevitable. The example of Fords will be useful here.

Ford is notorious for the way he has always insisted on his right to manage, to have the last say on the vital issues like work allocation, line speeds etc. But there is the famous Blue Book, which is the written up agreement between unions and Ford management. It lays out a complicated procedure for day to day disputes which at least recognises the right of the stewards to be consulted or to negotiate any change or conflict.

The early days at most Ford plants saw bitter struggles to enforce this

recognition. It checked the tyrannical way that Ford preferred to run his little business. But there are some serious drawbacks to the procedure that have become clear over the last few years.

Procedure recognises the stewards in as far as they don't challenge the basic principle: -Ford's right to make profits by exploiting the workforce. The stewards job in the factory is laid down by procedure and it means that their way of 'fighting' is based on a compromise from the start. The needs of the workers are tied to an underlying acceptance of the interests of the company. Take a simple example:

Just after Halewood had returned to work in April 73, a militant was sacked for 'bad time-keeping'. He was seen walking out of the gates early. It was clear victimisation because he was only one of a 100 men going home at that time. But still it was true, he had walked out early

From management's point of view, bad time-keeping is not on. They don't want to pay anyone for doing nothing--it cuts down their productivity. So it's reasonable from their point of view that they take disciplinary action. But from the workers' side of things it's different. You wouldn't survive if you worked as hard and as long as Ford wants you to, and it's only profits for the company anyway. You certainly don't want to be disciplined if you're caught going home. Many stewards, as men who work in that place, understand all these things well.

Since in this case, bad time-keeping could be proved, it was impossible to argue that the management were lying. Instead if the man was to be defended the case had to be fought on the basis of not caring about the company's productivity. It had to be made clear that the workers' sanity and freetime, his needs as a worker were more important than Ford's needs as a capitalist.

But when the convenor, and stewards stepped in as stewards, they were prevented from using this line of argument. Procedure forced them to take account of Ford's productivity, so since bad time-keeping was proved, they finally had to accept some form of disciplinary action. In April, procedure was followed right up to the involvement of the district official. The man was sacked.

We do not deny that some stewards are militants, or even revolutionaries. But however left-wing he is, the steward is ultimately trapped by the rules of his job.

Of course procedure can be used from time to time. It is useful to sling the rule book at management every time that they break it. But as this and other examples show, it is disastrous if it becomes the basis for fighting.

Passive Delegation. The other main feature to procedural agreements is the way they try to demobilise the rank and file. People who criticise the lack of democracy of the stewards fail to see how this is part of their job. For instance there is a section of the Ford's Blue Book which runs--

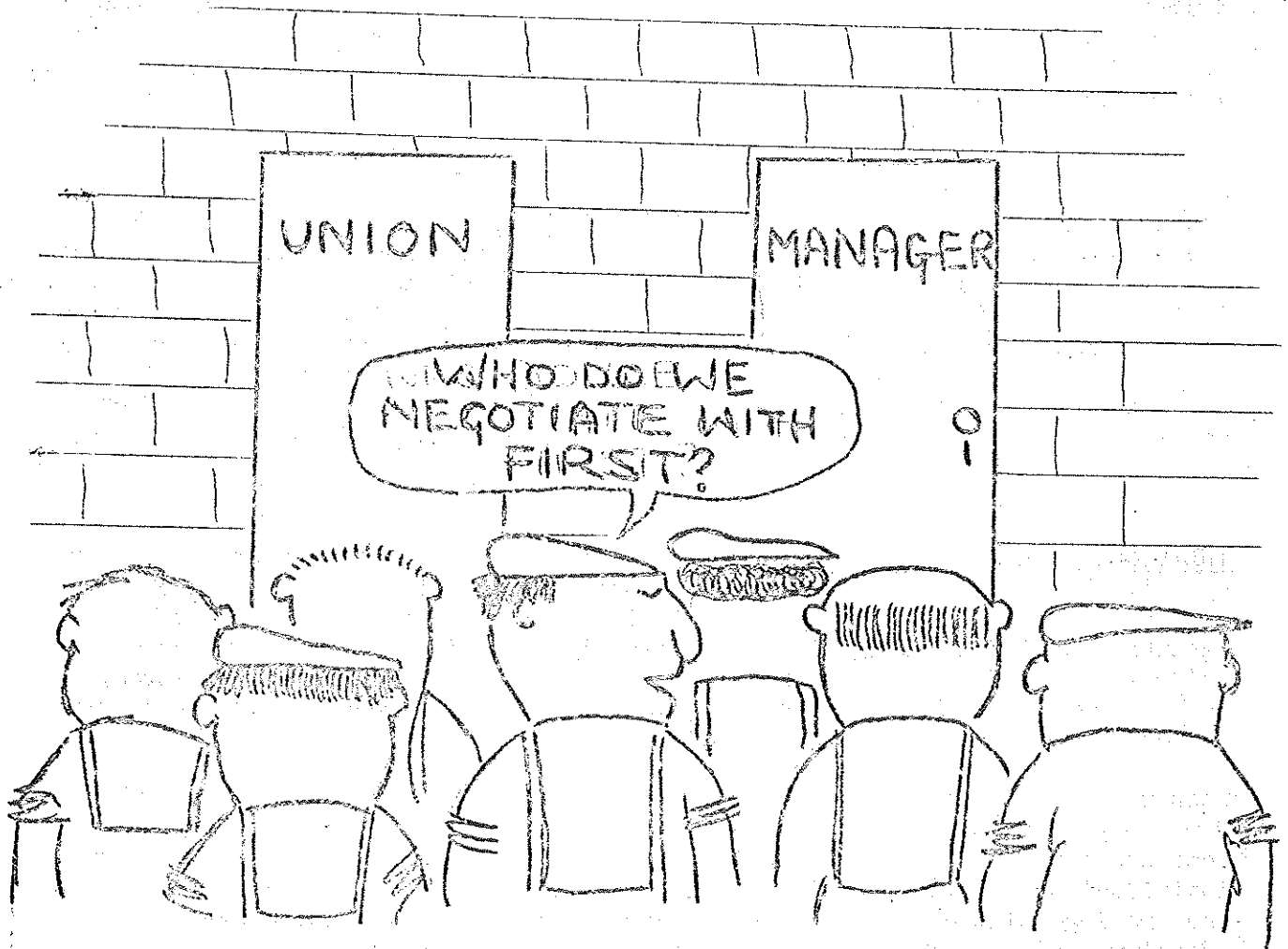
The parties agree that, at each stage of the procedure set out in this agreement, every attempt will be made to resolve issues raised and until such procedure has been carried through, there should be no stoppage or unconstitutional action.

The greatest fear of any management is the collective initiative of the shop-floor. This fear is shown clearly by this extract. Procedure is meant to take all disputes out of the hands of the rank and file, and put it into official channels. It's safer there.

The Shop Steward is the first official channel. When a dispute breaks out, his job is to step in and sort it out. It's his job to take over from the rank and file, and by accepting this role he continually holds back the development in their self confidence and strength. It also cools the situation down. Procedure can

take so long that by the time that decisions are made, most people on the shop-floor have lost their initial anger and fight.

If stewards are to be a progressive part of working class struggle in the coming period, they will have to consciously struggle against their role, their position as stewards, and the tradition of the stewards movement.



'STRATEGIES' TOWARDS THE STEWARDS MOVEMENT

Despite all the changes we've outlined,.. "How many stewards have you got?"... could still sum up the industrial strategy of most left groups. Stewards are still made the natural target for recruitment, non-stewards are encouraged to seek election, left-cliques are built on the stewards' committees. All without a real understanding of the objective role of stewards and their organisations.

Some would accept what we say about the limitations of the stewards, but see this as an inevitable result of industrial struggle. Industrial struggle is accepted as 'economic' or 'trade-unionist'! 'Political' fight, anti-capitalist and autonomous strategies can only come from the political party.

As far as we are concerned there is no principle against becoming a steward. At times it might be tactically useful to elect left-wing stewards. Where the stewards committee is still the dominant organisation, it is usually necessary to develop initiatives with it. The point is that all this has to be done from a position of clarity about the function that these organisations tend to have. There can be no illusion that the Shop-stewards movement will become the revolutionary leadership inside the industrial working class. And it is important that work with/inside the stewards movement, does not compromise the building

of independent organisations, that are politically and organisationally distinct, and which are trying to become rooted amongst the mass of the workers.

SOME NOTES ON THE WAY FORWARD

In contrast to the strategy of taking over the stewards movement, we've tried to develop an alternative reference point in our industrial activity. We've ~~tried~~ tried to locate and bring together those militants who provide the leadership in the everyday fight against capitalist production, not the passive and purely ideological socialists, but the 'natural vanguard'---those who are able, through their relationship to the workers and the struggle, to develop the consciousness and organisation of the rank and file.

Saying this however only takes on significance when ^{we} keep in mind that the key question of these groups is their ability to develop the level of struggle towards class autonomy. This is the crucial point that makes them fundamentally different from a cell or factory branch of an organisation like IS. Superficially there might not seem to be much difference. But as far as our experience shows, organisations like IS do not have the capacity to develop the level of struggle: either because of their hierarchical and bureaucratic structures; and because their analysis of the conditions of modern capitalism is defective and leads to reformist politics, and to reference points and strategies (in relation to the unions and the stewards) which are a block to class autonomy.

INDIVIDUAL STEWARDS IN THESE GROUPS. Building up groups of militants active in a particular area, helps in relation to those militants who will still chose to become stewards. In many places this is still a natural choice, as at Ford Dagenham for instance. Organising politically with other workers can act as a guide and a different environment for such isolated revolutionary stewards. Such a group must also work out how such stewards can break down the passivity and delegation implied in how the stewards role has developed.

When we were active at Standard Triumph, there were a couple of stewards who were very aware of the problems and limitations of their position. They had some success in their sections in the struggle against MDW by avoiding constant individual negotiation, holding regular report backs and section meetings, encouraging political discussion and direct action tactics which were both effective and a political advance from passive strikes.

As stewards they were in a position to do this, but the counter pressures were great. Other stewards were constantly attacking them, as their methods were undermining their own position of dominance. And there was the pressure of the constantly escalating struggle that their practice pushed them into.

Caught between men and management the pressure to retreat from such a level of activity is very great. The alternative may be to resign the stewards job in order to carry on the struggle; or to lower the level of activity and struggle to seek support within the stewards structure. At Standards our base group was unable to offer an all-round alternative avenue of political activity, so the people working in it became increasingly hamstrung by a way of working in which they didn't want to upset the balance of power in the stewards structure.

THE FUNCTION OF BASE GROUPS. In our experience, particularly in the car-industry the need for the base groups we are referring to, organised around the politics of working-class autonomy, is posed very directly by the spontaneous struggle itself. This will have to be gone into in full, in a further publication on 'Autonomy', but a few preliminary things can be said now.

Working-class politics---the way capitalism is met and challenged by the working class---is a changing phenomenon. This corresponds to the changing composition and experience of the working class. For example the great 'factory council'/workers control' movement in the earlier parts of this century, was based on a

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skilled, industrial working class. There was an identification between workers and industry, workers and their job, that made immediate sense and relevance of the central slogan, 'workers control'. This is completely different in the modern assembly line factory. The division of labour, the alienation and the sheer impersonality of production has broken down much of this. You work in a car factory, for instance, because you need the money, not because there is any satisfaction in producing cars. A slogan like 'The mines for the miners' (an old miners slogan) has no equivalent coming from car workers (like 'The car-factories for the car workers').

This does not mean that a socialist society will no longer be based on workers control and management of industry. What it means is that inside the experience of many sections of the working class, rejection of work replaces the immediate desire to control work. There are no skills that endear you to the labour process. And as working class struggle tends more and more towards this rejection of the capitalist organisation of work, it involves a much clearer rejection of the whole development of capital. The modern labour process creates an industrial working class whose struggle, spontaneously, becomes increasingly autonomous from capitalism.

The most recent example of this is the one referred to earlier from Ford Dagenham. The slogan '40 hrs pay, guaranteed, work or no work' completely separates the needs of the workers, from any 'duty' to work, to produce for the bosses. It completely overturns the basic concept of the traditional TU movement--'A fair day's pay for a fair days work.' And in doing this, it potentially breaks down much of the sectionalism inside the working class, which is based on different wages according to a difference in skills and experience.

ORGANISATION. But if autonomy is more and more the spontaneous expression of sections of the working class, its full development will not be a straightforward process. Given the traditional hold of the official trade union movement--both as an organisation and a set of political ideas---it will be a struggle itself to make autonomy into a fully conscious and organised factor in class struggle.

For example, again from Dagenham:--the outburst of autonomy there at a mass level, will be lost and recuperated by the unions unless there is an organisation that can emphasise and develop the radical meaning of the slogan of 'Guaranteed pay,', and resist the unions clouding over the difference between this and their own slogan of 'guaranteed work! And it will be recuperated unless some of the militants who were at the head of that fight are not brought together into an organisation to carry on consistent agitation and intervention around all future issues in that factory.

Our base groups are organised to carry on this process of making permanent the autonomous gains made in the course of the class struggle. We are trying to build groups which are a real political and organisational focus in situations.

Without the extension of base groups and these politics, at the point of production, there can be no talk of a more general revolutionary organisation for the industrial working class, nor a more generalised understanding of class struggle in all its forms.

DOCKS & FORD

—DISCUSSION

THESE ARE EXTRACTS FROM A DISCUSSION IN LONDON, WHERE WE BEGAN TO EXAMINE THE QUESTION OF SHOP STEWARDS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE. THE DISCUSSION WAS MAINLY ABOUT THE DOCKS AND FORD.

1. Stewards and management

"..... On a Fords stewards training course, the older stewards were on an advanced course, and younger stewards on a beginners course. They played a game, with the older stewards playing management and the younger ones playing stewards. The older ones rang rings around the younger ones, because they knew the ropes—procedure, the Blue Book, being able to pull the right argument at the right time etc. THE ART OF PERSONAL NEGOTIATION, WHICH MANY YOUNG MILITANTS ARE TAUGHT TO ADMIRE.

But a steward is caught between using procedure etc. and the way that fellow workers want to take action off their own backs. If, for instance, his section decides that they want to walk out, he would have to go down and advise them to go back to work, because that's the way procedure works. The shop-steward is caught in a chain of command that goes from the personnel manager, through the foreman and the shop-steward, to keep control of the shop-floor.

One of the things about being a steward is that first of all you get a great kick out of getting yourself up on the rule book and knowing how you can screw the company as an individual. Then getting into a stewardship so that this knowledge can be applied on behalf of men on your section who haven't bothered to get that same skill. This puts you in a special position, which encourages you to turn away from the idea of mass action.

The situation is similar for stewards in the docks. They are also put through training courses, initiated by management, to specialise men in 'skills'. Like the courses at the Institute of Transport. Five different subjects, full-time, and management will pay you for a year to do the course. And once you've got this certificate, it opens the way towards managerial status and all that sort of thing. And at the same time they're sending round letters asking for applications for foremen's jobs, and a lot of stewards are applying for them.

'SCIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE'. These ideas about 'science' and 'knowledge' are important. When stewards are trained by management, they're given a lot about work study, time and motion etc. They take in a little bit of this 'science' and even this immediately separates them off from the men. They can discuss all this stuff with the management at a 'scientific' level, and the rest of the workforce are excluded because they are not supposed to understand.

This goes side by side with the trend in wage negotiations. For instance the 1971 Ford wage claim, where whizz kids from Ruskin College made the claim a 75 page document, examining in detail Fords investment and profit per man, etc. Useful research but it transforms the class struggle into something over the heads of the Ford workers. It becomes a squabble between two sets of accountants, one putting forward profit figures, and the other denying them.

The trick nowadays is to bring science in on all levels. In this way you can separate off those who 'know' from those that 'can't know'.

PRIVILEGES In the docks there is a lot of workers who can see how the stewards are compromised by their privileges. They come to work and have their own office, with their own telephone, their own photo-copying equipment all access to records, accounts, shareholders etc. They do no work. They're employed as full-time stewards. And they get £10 more than the bloke who goes down the ships hold. And they work every weekend....they've got to be

there every weekend, because a steward's got to be on duty in case there is trouble.

Further privileges: when you wanted a steward, you'd ring a certain number and you'd hear: "Hello..stewards office here". That's if they're not at a dinner and dance or taking cocktails with management, or going on trips to Europe. One minute they're going on guided tours of Rotterdam and the next they're off on a world cruise - stewards going off on Churchill scholarships, like Brian Nicholson, chairman of the Institute of Workers Control. This is what you call creating an elite.

It depends though. It's not only the question of privileges that's going to make stewards more conservative. For instance, in a smaller engineering factory the stewards don't have those kinds of privileges. The only people who do have them are the Convenor and the senior steward, and the only privilege they have is that nobody chases them up if they're not on the job. All the rest of the stewards work, and have to get permission to leave the line on business. In a situation like that the other factors are more important - an opportunity to do something, to express yourself, get a bit of status above other people. The privileges don't necessarily explain why people want to become stewards in the first place. It's more an attempt by management to consolidate their position once they're already stewards.

On the other hand, the two things can't really be separated. Because the more privileges you get, the easier it is to feel that you're different from the other blokes."

FORDS

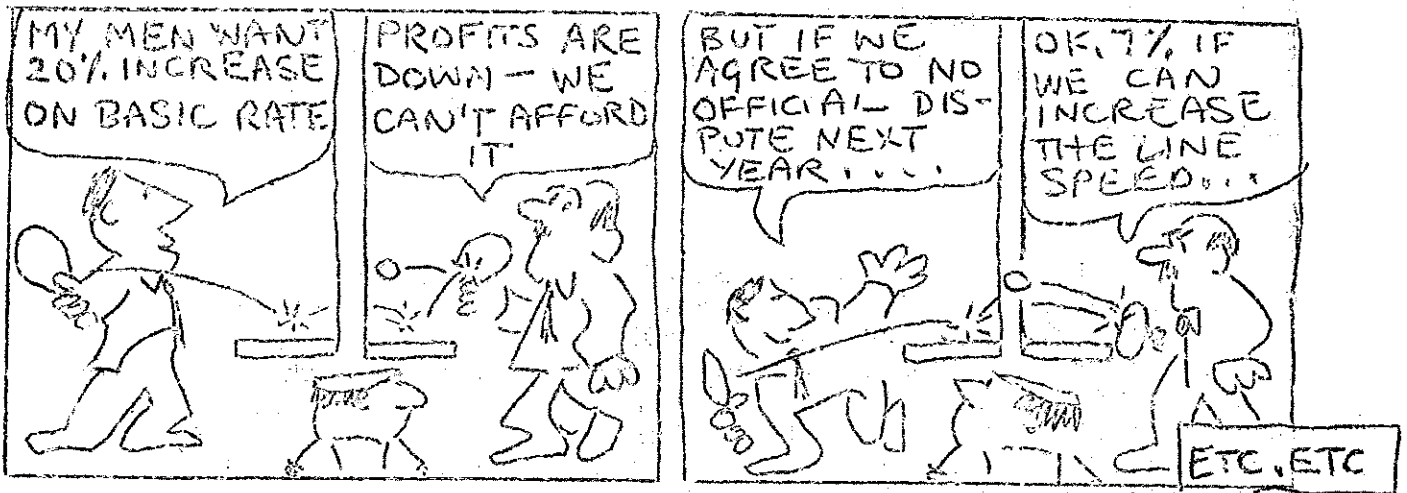
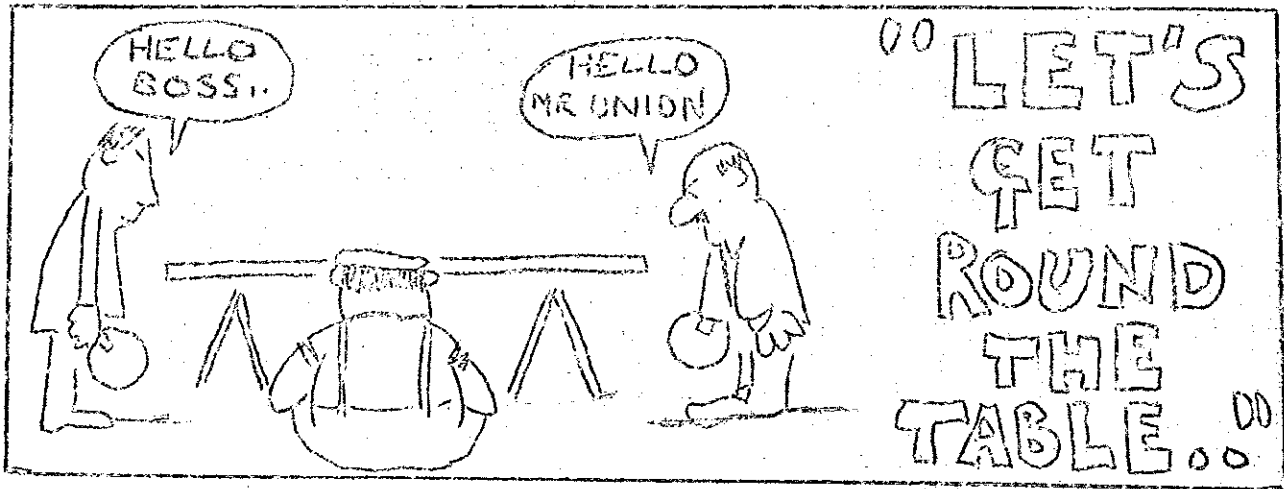
"..The Ford situation is very different from the docks. Ford has been very reluctant to recognise the existence of the shop stewards and to give them any rights. So it's hard to talk generally about the role of stewards right across industry, because even inside Dagenham the position of the stewards in the Body plant and the PTA is very different. In the Body plant, because of its earlier history as the Briggs plant, the rights of the stewards seem to be much more worked out, and it's much easier for Body plant stewards to get off work so as to go and negotiate. They have much greater access up into the office.. much more mobility..which all seems to have been won through the struggles of the late 50's and early 60's. Because of this though, the Body stewards seem to be much more distant from the workers, as we've seen from the recent situation where there's been a lot of hostility towards them, when the stewards were trying to get the men out on a strike when the men didn't want to strike.

In the PTA on the other hand, the stewards are much more controlled. It's much harder for them to get off the line. He has to get a slip of paper from the foreman before he can go up to the office. On the other hand though, there are some stewards in the PTA, perhaps the older ones, who seem to spend a lot of time in the office, drinking tea with the foreman.

At Fords there's a process. At first they try to break the young, militant steward. Putting a lot of pressure on him. Making him feel he's got to be a 'good steward' and fight. And then when he's won the fight he can be allowed to drift into the control structure. And you find that, even if you're watching out for it to happen, you often don't notice just how much you're getting detached from the shop floor situation.

At Ford Amsterdam they also have steward training sessions. But it's not

only the stewards; You have stewards and management sitting in a room together in a sort of encounter session. They act out imaginary situations, and you've got Fords very own resident psychologist supervising the game-playing. Everything is turned into a game. The point of it is to break down the idea that there's any class divisions in this society - encounter groups where everyone gets on as equals.



In the docks it's difficult for a steward not to be sucked in. He's working full-time, doing nothing except running the job, and the management will leave him to it. And after a while the steward will begin to see everything from management's point of view - their finances, their problems etc. - which is what management wants. The lads come up to him to sort out a certain dispute, and he'll say: "Look...there's a bill, and this order to be done, and this quota to be fulfilled." Even raving red militants find themselves slipping into this."

PRODUCTIVITY

"For instance, you get a figure set for tonnage, and then the stewards will negotiate for a higher rate of for going over that figure. You've got the situation in the docks now, where national policy is being pushed by the stewards, to go for a clocking-on system (which has never been accepted because the lads have always smashed the clocks) and for an extra £5 per week they go in for a tonnage figure...a target figure. And once that target is produced, you get an extra bonus. If it's not achieved you lose money. So you'll have all the guys back on a piecework

system, and anyone who's slacking will be told to pull his finger out because otherwise the others will lose their £3-4. The stewards are really pushing this system from port to port. And the reason is because in each port they want to compete with the other ports for fear of losing trade. And all this is in the face of the demand, which has been in the air for years, for a national wage structure, which would avoid ports being played off against each other. The trade unions themselves believe in inter-port competition, raising tonnages, raising turnover etc.

In the docks elections for stewards are held every two years in London. At mass meetings. They used to have a ballot, but the Unions were told to get stuffed with that. But not many people will put up for it. Stewards are put under so much pressure- training, going to colleges etc -that people think you have to be super-intelligent to do the job. The fact is though that it's dead simple. Then they offer you a foreman's job..then the use of the governor's yacht.. try to buy you. The way to treat stewards though is to keep the pressure on them- a few threats and he'll jump fast enough. "We know he's a bastard. We know he's a management stooge. And the moment he steps out of line...wallop!".

The trouble is a lot of people don't see it that way. They think the steward is something special...that he or she knows that much more than them...and they won't make a challenge, even when they know the steward is doing the dirty on them."

2. Stewards and the Unions.

"Now the steward isn't only in a sticky position in relation to management. In many ways he's also a tool of the Union.

For instance, where you've got pickets out during a strike and the Union sends down an order "Such and such a depot is not to be picketed for reasons of public safety. This is an instruction from the Union". As the steward is part of the union he's supposed to turn round and tell the picketers to call it off. He's supposed to be bound by the union constitution, and if he refuses to do what he's told, he's in... dead trouble.

This happened at St Leonards Hospital in Hackney during the hospital strike. They had very strong pickets, with a lot of very militant women. The issue came up whether the dustmen should be allowed in. There was a directive that came out that morning from the NUPE executive saying the dustmen should be allowed in for health reasons. The steward on the picket was really caught. He had a special position as an official of the NUPE, a position which most of the women didn't have. Off his own back he decided the dustmen would be allowed in, and as a result the picket just collapsed because the women were so pissed off with this.

So, once again the steward is caught between the Union and where his strength really lies- alongside the people he's fighting with. In this case he made the wrong analysis- that directives from the executive should over-rule everything felt by the workers on the picket. When he's faced with a situation like that the steward ought to go along with the people he's fighting with. If the Union wants to disown him that's fair enough. They can take away his credentials, but it doesn't mean a thing. You don't need credentials. If workers want a steward to go and speak for them they'll ask him- if they don't they won't.

This has happened in Italy as well. Stewards who didn't represent the workers were simply ignored. Other people went and did the representing.

However, although this contradiction becomes clear in times of action and strike situations, when everything's quiet again the steward goes back to

routine Union business- collecting dues and so on- and begins to fit back into the union structure. However, it's clear from Ford that the steward still continues to be involved in the everyday struggles that go on inside the plant - and a lot of the time they're sitting on them. And when they're not sitting on the struggles they're playing that role of mediator between workers and management and the Union.

Increasingly on the docks now the pressure is to avoid having directions coming down from the top for the men to follow. There are meetings of the various firms in the docks, where proposals are raised, and these are given to the firm's stewards as a mandate to build policy. This comes from mass meetings- rather than giving directives, trying to get the true feeling from the floor. But the response of the Union has always been to ignore these decisions, because they say that decision-making in the docks should come from the branch-meeting structure of the Unions. It's laid down in the Union constitution that you go to the union branch meetings and decisions from there are referred to the executive, who then take a decision on whether your case is right or wrong. But this is just a joke. There's nobody at branch meetings. Often it's only the delegate there, with maybe 2 or 3 members. The delegates are on the executive anyway so they've got their own pre-conceived ideas. This is the so-called 'branch-structure' which is supposed to control decision-making in the docks. There's just no comparison with the mass meeting structure where you get 5,000 men making the decisions. The branch procedure, whatever union you're in is a complete con-trick. There's no other word for it. But at the same time there's a lot of stewards who won't have anything to do with the mass meetings.

It should be said that although the Port Shop Stewards Committee was pushing the line of having all decisions made by mass meetings, they overstepped the mark with the business at the end of the '72 strike. They tried to take the mass meeting where it didn't want to go. And largely as a result they've since lost most of their credibility and disintegrated.

00 "LET'S GET ROUND THE TABLE (PART 2)" 00



'Outside the stewards movement'

"...Its a hell of a job to work outside of the stewards movement, because you're completely shut off from all the channels of communication information, resources etc. But at a time when the stewards are becoming more and more tied to management, you have to think about working outside of the stewards. You've got to be prepared to bypass them when necessary and take the side of the dockers themselves. This is already beginning to happen in the docks and its been leading to effective actions.

Instead of calling stewards for disputes, in some places dockers have in some places decided to take matters into their own hands. A hundred or so marching into managements offices, and just refusing to leave until they give in. Lock the door and frighten them. And the stewards of course are very indignant when this happens.

And in the London docks, during phase two of the Tory freeze, when the decision was reached to bring in a work to rule, according to the 35 principles, the stewards had no control over the struggle--which was why they were so keen to bring everything back to normal. You had men doing one ton in 8 hours, and the stewards were going round telling them that this was pushing it a bit far, for 20 men. They started talking about how companies might have to close down, how trade might be lost to other ports etc..

"...Stewards obviously can't be written out of the picture as a militant force. For instance, during the agitation over the '73 wage claim at Fords a lot of the internal disruption that was taking place was not a spontaneous rank and file reaction. It was a conscious policy by young militant stewards at Dagenham. The instructions from the unions, the ideas (very limited) from the convenors etc., were so confused that there was a lot of leeway for stewards to take action off their own backs. A lot of the time the convenors weren't even around, because they were so embarrassed by what had happened over the rejection of the March 1st strike call. So, obviously there are positive things that stewards could do at Fords. Like ignoring the backward directives from the trade-unions. Like winning the right to call meetings in company time, on company premises. Like making sure that each section meets regularly.

But one thing is becoming clear, you can't base a strategy in industry on shop-stewards. You can never separate stewards from the function of the unions: continual go-betweens, negotiating between the bosses and the workers. However its been learnt from experience that if a group of workers, instead of delegating an individual to go up to the offices to speak for them, if they all decide to go up together, the management disintegrates as often as not.

Apparently in Halewood there are very few militant stewards left. More and more clearly at Halewood, its the men who take the action themselves if anything is to be won. The 'left bloc' which existed among stewards a couple of years ago has more or less disappeared. There's so much pressure on stewards now to act in a certain way thats its very difficult for them to be 'good' stewards.

PRESSURE FROM OTHER STEWARDS Its not just the pressures from management and the union hierarchy, its also pressure from other stewards. You'll get real tearaways being elected stewards, and what you'll find is that the established stewards will ignore them, or not take them seriously. Like not telling them whats going on, not telling them about meetings etc.

because they know these new lads will be a disruptive influence. They hope that they will get disillusioned when they come up against this brick wall, and they'll just give up. It's a real effort fighting the conservatism of the established stewards, let alone fighting management at the same time.

THIS BRINGS US BACK TO THE BEGINNING OF THE DISCUSSION. WE'VE SEEN THAT IN THE DOCKS THE STEWARDS ARE DISCREDITED MORE AND MORE, AND THAT THE STRUGGLE IS INCREASINGLY BY-PASSING THE WHOLE STEWARD STRUCTURE. AT THE SAME TIME, IN FORDS, IT SEEMS THAT YOUNG MILITANTS ASPIRE TO BECOME SHOP-STEWARDS AS A WAY OF ORGANISING THEIR MILITANCY, BUT COME UP AGAINST A BRICK WALL FROM OTHER STEWARDS, AS WELL AS SEEING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSITION THEIR CAUGHT IN, BETWEEN MANAGEMENT, THE UNIONS AND THE MEN. AND SO YOU FIND, IN BOTH SITUATIONS, THAT MILITANTS ARE INCREASINGLY TURNING TO POLITICAL GROUPS AS A WAY OF SUSTAINING THEMSELVES AND DEVELOPING AS MILITANTS, AND PROVIDING THEMSELVES WITH CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION THAT OTHERWISE THEY ARE DENIED.

(july 8th '73)

This pamphlet contains two articles:

1. Shop-stewards and the class struggle.....Big Flame Liverpool

2. Docks and Fords: a discussion on the stewardsBig Flame London.

Big Flame has often been asked to explain in full its analysis of the British shop-stewards movement. We would have liked to produce a much longer and detailed pamphlet on the subject, but there has not been time. Instead we reprint the two short and compressed articles here.

The first gives a brief framework to our position on the stewards. The second takes up issues raised in the first, and expands and details them.

The pamphlet argues that the shop-stewards movement in this country is becoming an instrument for holding back working-class industrial struggle. Militant, left-wing stewards are under enormous pressures to conform to the role of peacemaker in the factory.

For more information about the politics and activity of Big Flame, write or ring.....

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