

# Lessons of the Steel Strike



## & the fight to kick out the Tories

With contributions  
from Bernard  
Connolly, Ray  
Davies, Colin Herd,  
Brian Molyneux and  
other strike  
leaders.

An IMG pamphlet

FOR 13 weeks at the beginning of 1980, the steelworkers took the pride of place in the growing anti-Tory movement. They headed up the fight against one of the most reactionary governments seen in decades — one that is committed to rolling back the gains won by the working class since World War Two.

The steelworkers' actions followed months of anti-Tory struggles bought by tens of thousands of other workers throughout the country in defence of living standards and democratic rights. On every front — whatever the ups and downs of the struggles — workers were responding to Thatcher's attacks: from the thousands who marched on the Labour Party demonstration against the cuts, or those who rallied in Trafalgar Square against the racist immigration laws, to the 50,000 who responded to the TUC call and ultimately stopped the restrictive abortion law proposed by John Corrie.

After one year in office, Margaret Thatcher remains firmly committed to her monetarist policies with the disastrous consequences of a projected 2½ million unemployed by 1982 and other untold hardships for the working class. But it hasn't been smooth sailing for Thatcher! She is trying to put the British economy back on a more profitable footing for the bosses. To do this, she must weaken the tremendous power of the trade union movement.

The steelworkers' strike has many lessons for the anti-Tory movement. But if one thing comes out most clearly in the contributions in this pamphlet, it is the acute crisis of political leadership. Militants in the labour movement — and even Bill Sirs and Len Murray —

recognised that the steelworkers' strike was political. A defeat for the steelworkers was a conscious tactic in the Tories' strategy to deal with the capitalist crisis.

However, Thatcher confused the union leadership's lack of stomach for a fight, with the determination of the rank and file. And, as Bernard Connolly correctly points out, the final weeks of the strike produced a situation where 'soon a drift towards general strike' would be evident. Furthermore, he continues, 'It was clear that the union leadership was just as afraid as the government and the employing class'.

It was in these conditions — where the union leaderships remained attached to capitalism — that they failed to provide any long-term set of policies to counter the Tories' plans for the British Steel Corporation. The new rank and file leadership that developed in steel shows the path ahead. It will be in the heat of the struggle that an alternative leadership will be formed as the reformist bureaucrats are seen to be utopian and cowardly in the face of the ferocious attack of the bosses and their government.

It's from this perspective that other militant workers should study the steel strike. For militants in every industry need to develop a programme of action to defend themselves against the Tory offensive. No one will be left alone. It was because there was no programme of action which broke from capitalism that the movement came up against difficulties in finding a focus around which a general strike could develop.

The starting point for such a pro-





gramme must be the rejection of any idea that we should pay for the effects of the economic crisis. We have no control over the anarchy of capitalism, so we are not going to suffer the consequences.

A workers' solution to the capitalist crisis requires a complete restructuring of the whole economy — something which can only be implemented by a workers' government. Callaghan's government had nothing in common with a government which acts in the interests of the working class. A workers' plan for the economy calls for the expropriation of the core sections of industry and the finance institutions, and for a regime of workers' control over production. To soak up unemployment and stimulate

production, a crash programme of useful public works would be required, alongside a shorter work week with no loss of pay for all workers. And if there were to be moves towards a planned economy, a complete monopoly is vital on all foreign trade (not import controls, which are directed against workers in other countries). These policies frighten Callaghan and other Labour leaders. Yet they are the ones which today need to be fought for in the labour movement and in the Labour Party itself.

The moves afoot in the steel unions point to what is needed: a new Minority Movement, a militant organisation of all those that stand for a break from class collaboration and compromise and who aim to wrest the unions out of the hands of the reformist mis-leaders. A similar movement is needed to defeat the right wing in the Labour Party. The possibilities and difficulties, in organising such a movement were clearly revealed in the steel strike. This has to be our conscious aim in our efforts to mobilise the whole movement in a general strike to kick out the Tories.

Finally, we have to be clear that if the rank and file movement which developed could not finally defeat Sirs, an important factor in this was the absence of a strong revolutionary organisation with large numbers of steelworkers in its ranks that could knit together the local developments and provide an overall political framework. To build such a revolutionary organisation goes hand in hand with the fight for policies of struggle, not compromise. This is why we hope you will help us build the International Marxist Group.

## Lessons of the steel strike

by Brian Grogan (IMG national organiser for the steel strike)



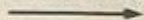
THE 13-week national steel strike ended with a 16 per cent wages rise tied to job loss and productivity increases. The strike was a sell-out by the union leadership, but not a defeat for steelworkers.

The large-scale redundancies demanded by the Tories, which before the strike seemed certain to go through without any problems, now threaten to become a battle ground. The steel strike raised the temperature of the class struggle in Britain and brought workers from one of the key basic industries out of hibernation.

The settlement is made up of two parts. Eleven per cent is to be paid on existing rates. On average this will mean a £10 rise. Finance for this, some £180m, has to be found almost entirely from future redundancies. Another 4.5 per cent on offer is dependent on the negotiation of local productivity deals involving massive changes in working practices and speed ups. This will result in 12,000 lost jobs, on top of the 52,000 already announced by BSC management. The 4.5 per cent rise will be paid for the first four months on account. But after that it will continue to be paid only if satisfactory local deals are completed. In many areas these are unlikely to be concluded.

Nonetheless, a 16 per cent deal is a far cry from management's original offer of two per cent. Steelworkers hardly became the sacrificial lamb the Tories intended them to be, and strong sectors such as the miners will not have been intimidated by the government's tactics. The situation inside the steel industry has been transformed. There was anger at the settlement. When the findings of the committee of inquiry were accepted, pickets lobbying the ISTC headquarters chased the executive members round the building.

The near unanimous view of the active strikers was to oppose the return to work. But these were only a minority of the total work force, which had by and large remained passive during the strike and subject to the pressure of the capitalist media. Accordingly, local leaders generally took the view that a united return to work was the best way to preserve fighting capacity. In the face of the executive's decision to settle, which was endorsed by ISTC's delegate-based negotiating committee — the militant areas considered that if they were to stay out they would become isolated and be picked off. Even so in South Yorkshire,



a key militant strong-hold, local leaders required all their prestige to win a small majority for a return to work at a mass meeting.

A 13-week strike by the steelworkers — the longest national strike in Britain since the Second World War — was completely unexpected, not least by the Tories. The government's plan, hatched while in opposition by Nicholas Ridley MP, was to pick on and defeat a significant group of workers as an example to the rest of the class.

What the Tories had learnt from the Heath administration was that they could not immediately take on the militant sectors without encouraging the sort of conflagration which Heath had touched off with the miners in 1972 and again in 1974. Thatcher's policy was therefore to compromise with the core unions in the present wage round. Miners won 21 per cent without any struggle and British Oxygen workers received over 30 per cent. Such wage increases cannot continue if the Tories are to put British capitalism back on an expansionary basis.

A swingeing defeat for the steelworkers was considered to be a necessary preparation to take on the stronger sectors in the next wage round. It would also be the first step in the Tories' plans to break up the public sector by shutting off state backing, or hiving off profitable sectors to private industry.

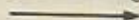
ISTC seemed to be well chosen. Bill Sirs, its general secretary, was renowned for his 'moderation', and there had been no national steel strike since the General Strike in 1926. Over the past two years the union leadership had agreed to 40,000 redundancies,

and in the last wage round it had accepted eight per cent when everyone else was obtaining 15 per cent. British steel workers are by far the lowest paid in Western Europe.

The British Steel Corporation's initial offer of two per cent on top of the massive redundancy programme was to spark ISTC into motion. Despite the union's leadership, the strike brought a total walk-out from day one, on 2 January. Even workers from plants such as Shotton, Corby, and Consett which were facing virtual closure came out solidly in support of the strike, even though they appeared to have nothing to gain from it. Within days the whole of the Steel Corporation was at a standstill. In the following weeks a massive flying picket operation was organised, aimed particularly at steel stockholders, docks, and private steel. Such actions were against the policy and in many cases the explicit instructions of ISTC's national leadership.

It was the local strike leaderships which formulated the strike aim of 20 per cent with no strings, and the South Yorkshire strike committees came to the fore in putting forward this demand. The scope of the flying pickets, the range of their targets, and the number of pickets involved far exceeded the previous highest level of struggle set by the miners in 1972. The level of rank and file self-organisation in the strike was remarkable. This was coupled with a widespread distrust of the union leadership which led to the popularisation of the demand for Sirs' resignation.

The policy of Bill Sirs was to attempt to find a compromise with management at every turn. With the backing



of Len Murray, Sirs proposed the form of the final sell-out formula — eight per cent plus five per cent local productivity — just one week into the strike. It quickly became obvious that a new strike leadership had to be forged.

The delegate-based national negotiation committee was somewhat responsive to rank-and-file demands. Thus the committee took just 20 minutes to throw out the two per cent plus 12 per cent pay-for-jobs deal offered by management and recommended by Sirs in the fifth week of the strike. But this body did not act as a day-to-day leadership. With virtually no tradition of struggle, it was militants at local level who took the lead in extending the strike. Their actions were not only independent of the bureaucracy but against the sabotage of the top officials.

The attempts to pull out the private sector, particularly the mass pickets at places like Hadfields and Sheerness; the extension of the picketing to stockholders and the docks; the attempt to close major steel users such as Metal Box, Fords and British Leyland all came from this layer of local leaders. It was the South Yorkshire strike committee which by and large played the role of establishing day-to-day leadership of the strike almost immediately forming themselves into a divisional committee under a coordinated command. The South Yorkshire leadership decided on national targets and organised and financed the flying pickets. It was also exemplary in developing rank and file and community participation in the strike, organising a series of rallies and demonstrations to keep the mass of strikers informed and involved. The

South Yorkshire strike committees were often elected and subject to mass meetings.

Throughout the strike, local officials in South Wales toed the national line of Sirs, resisting demands for better picket organisation and mass meetings so that the pickets themselves could control the direction of the strike. Despite this, South Wales steelworkers began to organise to increase rank and file control of the strike. In Caldicot, a small town housing Llanwern steelworkers, weekly picket meetings were opened to steelworkers, their wives and husbands. Each week, over 100 people crowded into the local Rugby Club to discuss the issues raised by the strike, organise picketing for the week, and set up a food cooperative for strikers' families.

From such a meeting, a women's picket was set up to increase participation of women steelworkers in the strike. Picket leaders became so frustrated by the lack of direction from the local officials that they organised two unofficial meetings of pickets in the last week of the strike. At the first of these, 300 pickets voted to ignore the Committee of Enquiry and stay out on strike until the jobs issue was settled. By the end of the week, it was clear that they were alone in this stand. Recognising this, the 400 pickets voted to return to work. But they also agreed 'to commit ourselves to take industrial action against redundancies if necessary. We should canvass unions nationally and locally to organise the fight against jobs loss'.

A committee based on a single region did not have the authority to



openly seek the leadership of the strike on a national basis. Many things had to be done behind the scenes. This laid the basis for the emergence of the unofficial national strike committee. Again the initiative came from South Yorkshire. The first meeting was held in the seventh week of the dispute with representatives from most areas. From then on it held regular weekly meetings.

The objectives of the unofficial committee were to make good nationally the strikers' determination to stop the movement of all steel; to extend the action to major steel users; and to popularise the objective of 20 per cent with no strings. It was the unofficial national strike committee which decided to try and close Ford Dagenham, the largest plant in Britain, which in the final week of the strike was under serious threat of imminent closures. This body also took the initiative in organising lobbies of the national leadership meetings to try to prevent a sell-out. The emergence of such a national strike committee based on class struggle militants in the localities has no precedent in disputes in recent years, and it threatened to take the running of the strike out of the hands of the ISTC bureaucracy.

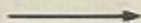
To be sure, it never achieved the credibility to challenge Sirs. For all the initiatives it was able to take, its weakness lay in the lack of firm contacts across the industry, the difficulty of gaining the confidence of key militants, and their lack of tradition and experience. But for this reason it was necessary for all those wanting to strengthen the class struggle leadership to aid the building of the unofficial national strike committee and to sup-

port the key militants involved.

Unfortunately, the activities of the Socialist Workers party only detracted from this. It first launched the *Real Steel News* bulletin, tied openly to the SWP. In many areas, *Real Steel News* was counterposed to bulletins produced by broader groupings of steel militants. In Newport, the SWP refused to participate with the IMG to help Llanwern steelworkers — many of them Labour Party members — to produce Llanwern *Steel Sheet*. The ten issues of this steelworkers' bulletin produced during the strike were the only contact pickets had with the local and national fight for 20 per cent, with no redundancy strings. *Steel Sheet* meetings had a regular attendance of around 20 steelworkers from different steel unions and will continue after the return to work to organise for a fight on jobs and democracy inside the unions.

In response to the failure of this project, it then launched *Steel Workers Charter*, but this came out of the blue, unconnected to the rank-and-file leadership of the strike. The formally correct demands of this charter were therefore not fought for as answers to the problems that this layer of militants was attempting to answer and the militants who looked to the SWP were directed away from the key task of building the unofficial national strike committee.

The total lack of influence of the Communist Party among the active strikers meant that the local class struggle leadership did not have the burden of the traditional 'Broad Left' strategy, which attempts to subordinate actions to the wishes of left bureaucrats. But the CP did play a role



in the strike — essentially one of sabotage.

For the strike to succeed, manufacturing industry had to be hit. Stewards and union officials led by the CP at a meeting of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions held in Sheffield during the sixth week of the strike refused to extend a boycott to all steel products. This was despite an impassioned plea by Bernard Connolly of the South Yorkshire strike committee, backed by Keith Jones, the local ISTC official.

Ford is another example. Dan Connors, the leading CP convenor at Dagenham, was party to an agreement to limit picketing — essentially to strip steel — which would have meant Ford could have continued working indefinitely. It was only the determination of the rank-and-file pickets from South Yorkshire which succeeded in changing this. But by that time, the strike was in its twelfth week. The CP recognised in words — as indeed did Sirs — that the strike was a struggle against the Tory government. But it refused to accept the logic of this.

If a defeat for the steelworkers was a defeat for the whole class, then everything possible had to be done to aid the steelworkers. It was vital to generalise the links which began to develop between the steelworkers, miners and dockers — as well as the pulling in of other sectors — into a general strike to bring down the government. It is hypocrisy to say that there wasn't support in the working class for the steelworkers. From the start of the steel strike miners, railworkers, and dockers in militant ports offered solidarity to the steel workers and implemented a boycott. It was the refusal

of the TUC to organise solidarity across the board that limited this. The real situation was seen in the docks. Dockers in the militant ports of Liverpool and Hull responded immediately. But action in other ports was patchy.

When an issue presented itself in the port of Liverpool, 6,000 dockers walked out. The day the steel strike was called off was to have been the start of an all-out national dock strike in solidarity with the steelworkers, decided upon by a national delegate conference. Such action could have been organised from the beginning, except for the refusal of the national leadership of the Transport and General Workers Union — the main docker's union.



At the beginning of the strike, trade unions throughout Wales demonstrated their support for the steelworkers fight on jobs. Two hundred thousand workers struck on 28 January as the first shot in a plan of strike action to culminate in a virtual general strike in March. Terrified of the implications of such action, Len Murray successfully pleaded with the Wales TUC to 'cool it' and postpone the action. South Wales miners had already balloted in favour of strike action for jobs. Faced with this retreat by the TUC in Wales and England, and the refusal of the steel unions to broaden their strike to the jobs issue, the miners were unprepared to strike out alone.

The TGWU leadership was the main





problem with another key sector — the lorry drivers. For the first crucial week of the strike, only a clear instruction not to cross so-called 'primary' pickets was given. The decision of whether to cross pickets of stockholders and major users was left up to the 'conscience' of the drivers. This was interpreted by most local bureaucrats as an invitation to cross picket lines, thus sabotaging effective picketing. It was only in the ninth week that a clearer instruction went out. The bosses were not so inhibited. They organised a massive operation to share the available stockpiled steel, and aided and abetted by BSC management, they kept imports rolling in through unregistered ports.

The sell-out policies of the union leaderships was all of a piece with their overall strategy. The thrust of the ISTC campaign was to indict the inefficient management of BSC and its lack of an aggressive export drive.

It is true that BSC management is bad. Bureaucratic management in both the public and private sectors will breed inefficiency — only workers' control of production by an informed workforce and within the framework of a workers' plan for the industry as a whole can eliminate waste and inefficiency in large-scale production. But the waste of resources exhibited by BSC management arises not from incompetence but from wrong planning predictions due to the chaos of the capitalist market. To demand import controls to deal with this is to continue to join with the bosses in trying to resolve their problem at the expense of workers — this time foreign workers.

But the needs of steel workers as revealed in the steel strike was shown

to be solidarity with foreign workers. The new class struggle leadership which is beginning to form out of the experience of the strike must centre its strategy on opposing root and branch the rationalisation strategy of BSC and the Tories. This must centre on the safeguarding of jobs, opposition to any hiving off and the total nationalisation of all steel, including stockholders.

The Tory cash limits have to be smashed, and a subsidy to save jobs forced on the government. The starting point needs to be the safeguarding of the guaranteed 40-hour week. This should be extended to a total policy of worksharing with no loss of pay. The shop stewards committees which have been established in South Yorkshire must be extended nationally and a national combine committee formed, committee to a class struggle strategy to save jobs.

Such shop floor organisation will be essential for South Wales steelworkers in the jobs fight ahead. They will have to cut through the inactivity and compromises of the national officials and their stooges at Llanwern and Port Talbot. Plans for an action committee to fight redundancies at Llanwern and Port Talbot should be given full support from steelworkers throughout the country. Proposals to open this committee to miners, Port Talbot workers, dockers and transport workers show that Llanwern steelworkers recognise they cannot fight for jobs alone.

The fight has to go on inside ISTC. The liaison committee for the reform of the ISTC, which existed before the strike, can now be placed on a higher level, integrating class struggle policies into the fight for democratic control of the union. This is now the task. ●

## A strike against the Tories

by Bernard Connolly (Crafts convenor, Rotherham)



The steelworkers' strike was not simply about workers' pay, or about jobs. This was a strike set up by the Tory Government, as a first round in a fight to destroy the trade union movement. There is no question about this, and everyone — unless they were totally politically naive — recognised it. All the officials of the unions involved clearly understood it.

What disappointed thousands of rank and file workers in the steel industry is that the officials of the labour movement allowed it to happen, knowing full well that their turn would come.

The steelworkers did not lose the fight. They won many rounds in the fight. True, it wasn't a knock-out; the towel was thrown in. What can the fighter do when the manager throws the towel in?

It is really as basic and simple as that. The steelworkers themselves don't consider they have lost. They consider they were sold out, and are very bitter about it. They are very bitter about the people who they have listened to for years; who for years have given militant speeches; but who, when the chips were really down, weren't prepared to pick up the gauntlet. These labour leaders shilly-

shalled, with an eye on the mass membership who affect their votes.

The TUC certainly did not live up to its responsibilities. Len Murray did nothing other than make attempts to get a compromise as the basis for a sell-out. There was never any realistic support; everyone was just trying to find an avenue to get the TUC off the hook.

Whatever might be said about the directive of some unions involved, like the Transport and General Workers' Union, we got tremendous support from the T&G in the docks and amongst many drivers — the tanker drivers, the British Oxygen Company drivers, and other steel-carrying drivers.

The railway workers gave us tremendous support and if every union in the TUC had followed them, the strike would have ended quickly. For instance, if the Electricians' Union had said 'We're taking out the breakers unless you satisfy our members with a reasonable settlement', or if the Engineering Union had come to our aid, then the strike could have been over in a month, successfully.

The TUC could have done much, much more. They just sat on their



hands.

During the strike there were discussions between the miners and the steelworkers in Yorkshire. The right wing in the Miners' Union were making noises at leadership level that the strike was not political. But they really knew that the government was taking on the unions in piecemeal fashion, and the TUC was allowing Thatcher to do it.

The executive members of the Yorkshire NUM gave a measure of support financially and morally. But when asked if they would call out the pits to support steelworkers, they replied 'Well, if we call them out and they don't come, then Thatcher will use it to her advantage'.

But surely she used it to her advantage when they weren't called out! If the miners had been called out, at least Thatcher would have seen the union's executive was with the strikers. When they weren't called out she could only have concluded that nobody was with us, and that everyone was standing by allowing the government to carve us up, piecemeal, as it intended in the first place.

The TUC and all the unions involved were very aware of the Ridley Report and knew exactly what was at stake. The TUC knew the battle plan of the enemy well in advance, yet sat back and allowed the enemy to fight based on that plan.

### **Organisation of the crafts in Yorkshire**

Prior to the strike, the crafts were strongly organised in Yorkshire. The South Yorkshire committee recommended to its members that no-one should cross picket lines. Our members have never turned down a

recommendation from the committee so, from day one, the crafts were out along with the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation members.

In Rotherham, a strike headquarters was set up for crafts, prior to Christmas. We set up a strike committee and from that elected a financial committee. Then picket control units were established. There were also various bodies for fund-raising, speakers, transport, meeting organisers, and so on.

The strike committee was a specially elected body from a shop stewards committee meeting. It was agreed to run the strike almost like a military campaign. There was to be no situation where volunteers were asked for. Instead, pickets should operate on direct instructions from the stewards who were made into marshalls.

The idea was for the stewards to look after their own members, in cells. There were a mixture of cells; some based on geography, others on departments.

This structure worked and at Rotherham, crafts had between 85 and 90 per cent of members actively involved: 90 per cent for the first 10 weeks; something like about 80 per cent in the last two weeks. Twelve hundred pickets out of 1400 members were on the streets for almost three months. At the end, people got a bit disappointed in the leadership. They felt they were being sold out and it was pointless to continue fighting against the hierarchy that was intent on selling them out.

The cell marshalls met weekly. They didn't come into the headquarters, because people sitting about wasn't encouraged. We never put tea



on, or coffee, or sandwiches. We merely paid picket money, in the form of petrol money to get the pickets onto the sites.

The marshalls rang in to the headquarters each evening at six o'clock to see if there was any change in their instructions. On numerous occasions, a bus-load of pickets would be needed at 12 hours' notice, and although it meant a lot of work for the picket control, the call was always met.

At Rotherham, there was a close liaison between the crafts strike committee and other unions. But Stocksbridge immediately got a single strike committee together, comprised of all unions.

Sheffield was very split, however. There was craft organisation in the River Don plant. In Tinsley Park, however, craft organisation was based in a local pub. The T&GWU and the General and Municipal Workers' Union met in another pub. Finally the ISTC operated from a caravan, with a call box down the road.

There was a big effort to get them all organised under one roof so that South Yorkshire would have three setups: a Stocksbridge, a Sheffield and a Rotherham group. This was successful. Premises were found and Sheffield got operative. They were struggling for funds, and didn't know which way to turn, so they were given aid.

In the early stages of the dispute, Sheffield workers were all pulling against each other. At one strike committee in a local pub, all the steelworkers sat having great debates while steel was passing under their very window into a firm not 200 yards up the road. In fact a Rotherham flying

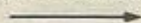
cell visited the firm, and shut it down within 24 hours! It was possible, but Sheffield was a bit disoriented at that stage.

In addition to the three works strike committees, we set up a divisional strike committee for South Yorkshire. This was organised by the ISTC but other unions got involved. The overall co-ordination of the strike came from this committee.

In some ways, this was disappointing because a Central Co-ordinating Committee was also set up, but for a variety of reasons, people didn't give this body the support and cooperation it should have had. If it had been able to operate in a co-ordinated fashion, it would have better prepared steelworkers for after the strike. A recognised, central committee with a lot of credibility could have helped weld together the unity gained in 13 weeks of struggle.

The Coordinating Committee managed to get regular meetings of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering, Number 28 — once a week, at the height of the strike. This body is a mixture of all sorts of firms with varying degrees of strength and organisation. The officers argued that there would be less resistance from the workers if they weren't asked to go out on direct strike and less total wages. Their argument was that soon there would be layoffs with lay-off pay and this would produce a better response.

But this approach failed to recognise the political character of the strike. Ridley had spelt it out clearly. The Tories were taking on what they thought was a weak battallion. It was on that basis that we urged Confed



members to come out. There were big stocks of steel that could, and did, keep them working for weeks. In fact, because the workers were not given correct direction, and were not all pulled out, the resolution of support was broken at some firms just as the strike began to bite. Scab steel began to be unloaded.

So although the Central Coordinating Committee got these weekly Confed meetings, it didn't really play much of a role, despite the good efforts of some militants. The great potential strength of this committee was that it involved a multi-union set up. The ISTC multi-union divisional committee came out of this Central Committee, but the ISTC didn't support the Central Committee as it was. It



might have been a question of trust.

The ISTC proposed that two members from each union should be on the Central Coordinating Committee, and delegates were elected accordingly. There were no full-time officers on the body. It was elected direct from the rank and file leadership. This body could have maintained the impetus

after the strike much more than the ISTC-oriented divisional committee. The ISTC divisional committee did a very worthwhile job and got lots of action pushed through. Yet something superior was in our grasp and we lost it.

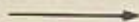
The Central Coordinating Committee could have been maintained as another form of committee after the strike. Because that didn't happen, the pieces now need to be picked up to give a central thread to all the unity created during the strike.

## National Organisation

The National Strike Committee came about because the hierarchy in the trade union movement failed to coordinate and organise the strike effectively. The suggestion for such a body came from a Sheffield meeting. Rotherham went along with this.

The committee involved delegates from Wales and Scotland, as well as South Yorkshire. But the Welsh delegates were very hamstrung and tied down with officialdom. The case of workers from the North-east was very similar. The officials were keeping a tight rein on the strike committees in those areas.

The reason they gave for not coming to the meeting was that they understood the committee was connected with the ISTC Reform Group, established before the strike to fight on democracy in the union. This was untrue. Steelworkers were concerned with the organisation of the strike. They wanted to avoid situations where South Yorkshire was sending pickets to — say the Midlands — and upon ar-



rival found Welsh pickets there; Scottish pickets there; and so on.

Furthermore the union leaders almost every week were making statements to the press involving U-turns. It was almost impossible to keep up with the contradictions, let alone keep the strike going in the right direction with the confusion this was causing.

The Committee existed for seven weeks. We sent off a number of telegrams to the executives of the unions involved; we attempted some lobbying exercises of executive meetings; as well as other actions.

For years the union leaderships had said to steelworkers, 'Give us the troops, and we'll give you the leadership'. Well, the troops were there, but the leadership was missing. We needed the National Strike Committee to make sure the troops went forward anyway. But here once again, this body had its limits — it started late in the strike, and there were big differences in the levels of militancy at a national level.

## The impact of the sell-out in Yorkshire

When the steel-workers claim was sold out, South Yorkshire had to consider whether it should remain out. It was clear the deal was rushed through the Committee of Enquiry. It has never been known before for a Committee of that nature to sit on a Saturday and Sunday, and the result of its effort smacked very much of the Samuels settlement of 1926.

The government had said before the Committee even started that it was having nothing to do with it. But since

they hold the purse strings it was very obvious that steelworkers weren't going to get much from its deliberations, and whatever was got would have to be paid for with jobs. So the Committee was set up to save the face of certain people in the leadership who found themselves in a situation they didn't know how to get out of — where they had lost control, and the strike committees were asking them to take a lead. The union leadership wanted to regain control of their unions, and so they wanted members back at work where they could exercise that control.

South Yorkshire had been instrumental in closing down the Ford plant at Dagenham on the Monday before the settlement was put to the negotiating committee. It was thought this would affect the thinking of the leadership. Furthermore, the dockers were ready to come out on national strike. A number of other industries were also coming up for negotiations and it was clear the leadership was just as afraid as the government and the employing class. It would soon be a situation of a drift into a general strike.

The bureaucrats were terrified of what the results would be if the strike had continued another month with the private sector in steel and the railways in the middle of negotiations.

There was a lot of anger in the park in Sheffield where the settlement was voted on. It was taken out against the platform which was comprised of members of the South Yorkshire strike committee. It was a difficult tactical decision to recommend Yorkshire should return. Perhaps the long-term effects of a national dock strike were



not considered seriously enough. But strike leaders on the platform argued that because the union executive had sold out the workers, the support already won would not continue. Then the directives to the drivers, and the dockers actions would be withdrawn. Furthermore, the money to maintain the pickets would have dried up, once other areas returned, and there would be no petrol money or other forms of assistance.

discovered they can fight; they do have the tenacity and energy for struggle; and they can win. This unity has been fought for. Now it's got to be well used.

In South Yorkshire it will be easier to develop further organisation. All the unions came out together and a general respect grew amongst the workforce. The crafts refused to go back before the rest of the workers, for instance. In South Wales this could be



### The gains of the strike

The main gains of our struggle were demonstrated the day after the return, when workers came out again. Great unity and solidarity was displayed. But this is tenuous even today, because it is not organised and channelled. Steelworkers have

more difficult. There the ISTC went back and the crafts refused. When the ISTC came out the day after the settlement, the crafts returned. So both crossed each others' picket lines after being on strike together for 13 weeks!

South Yorkshire has to ensure that the lessons it has drawn are maintained. We have to show what we have

learned in practice, so other areas will catch on, and see the advantages.

It is not possible today to sit back in one area and say: 'Well we seem to be all right in our particular division'. The stewards movement is under attack by the government. Thatcher isn't too worried about the bureaucracy, but she doesn't know how to deal with the stewards movement.

It's amazing to see what is happening in South Yorkshire today. The attack here is actually less than anywhere else, yet the dangers have been registered and workers have moved to collect their balance. In South Wales, Scotland and the Northeast, workers seem to believe they are in an isolated, insular positions. That's not at all good.

The fight for jobs in South Wales must begin. South Yorkshire is obviously opposed to job losses. But the fight must emanate from the area which is affected.

But today rapid moves are needed to organise the unity which exists. The last meeting of the strike committee has yet to be called. This committee should be wound up as a strike body, and started again as a co-ordinating committee.

It's clear that future battles lie ahead and we need to be prepared. Central to what is going to happen now is the fight against redundancies. The official leadership will not lead that fight. As far as it is concerned, the jobs have already been sold.

In the strike, the official leadership tried to sell us out from day one. It had to be dragged kicking and screaming every step of the way. This will be the case on jobs.

It is no accident that South Wales

has been picked off. There has been a campaign for some years to pump into their heads that it is their fault that the steel industry is in crisis. That logic of management and the Tories has to be fought.

When looking at the alternatives to the Tories' plans for the British Steel Corporation, the first thing to consider is not the needs of industry, but the needs of the membership. Faced with the threat of job loss, a shorter working week is essential. This can't be made an excuse for more overtime. On the craft side in Rotherham, 1,300 members work 10,000 hours of overtime each week. Think how many more people could be employed if that was cut out.

Sometimes overtime has to be done in an emergency, but it should be priced so high that management is forced to employ more labour. It should be treble or quadruple time.

It is the 1980s, yet still workers can't retire before the age of 65. Sabbaticals, longer holidays, and longer studying at schools would only benefit workers. How long is it since we won the 40-hour week?

Everyone is in favour of the new technology to improve efficiency. But who benefits? It should be the working class.

These are the kinds of policies that puts the interests of the working class ahead of the profits of BSC. Today there are many more activists since the 13-week strike, and it will be an uphill battle. The unofficial national strike committee had to organise during the strike because the ISTC wouldn't do it officially. And in the fight over jobs, it will be once again come down to militants taking a strong lead. ●



## Steelwomen's power

by Celia Pugh (Socialist Challenge correspondent in Wales)



'Men of steel' became a popular newspaper quip during the strike. So what about the women steelworkers who make up 10 per cent of the membership of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC)? A visit to any picket line during the strike showed that women were there, alongside men. And women weren't just confined to local picket lines.

In Stocksbridge, 60 women's names were on the picket list and as Enid, part of the picket squad that went to British Leyland in Cowley, explained: 'We had a vast response from women. We are trying to show that women will do what men will. We've been all over — from Hadfield's to Sheerness.'

Many women in the steel industry work in the offices, canteens and as cleaners. Majorie Hill, a cleaner at British Steel Stainless in Sheffield was on the Cowley picket line. She wanted to help out in the strike 'to get out of the house and in touch with other strikers'.

Many women in the industry work on production. Pauline Sendrawich, for instance, works as a table driver in the Cargo Fleet Steelworks in Middlesbrough. Working with red hot metal, she and 24 other women, help produce railway line beams and crane

pylons. Her job involves unsocial hours and take-home pay of £40 to £45 per week, before the dispute. During the strike, she explained that Middlesbrough women had taken an active lead: 'We have the same interest in the strike as men. We want 20 per cent without strings. We've been on flying pickets to Birmingham and London, and outside the ISTC Executive Council meeting to let Bill Sirs know we won't settle for anything less than the full claim'.

As the strike went on, it became clear that women weren't content to play their traditional supportive role. Merlene Tovey, an ISTC member from the Llanwern plant in Wales, recalls that 'at the beginning of the strike, women were mostly involved in making tea and sandwiches. Then I helped start a picket rota that fit in with picking up the kids from school.

'We found that if men were around, they wanted to put us to one side, and deal with the lorry drivers. This wasn't acceptable to us. We were just as able to picket! In the end, we made the men sit back and drink their coffee while we talked to the drivers. If we had just stuck to picketing with men we would not have got anywhere.'



Enid, from Stocksbridge works, agreed with this point: 'We decided that women should be organised separately from the men because the men weren't letting us play our full part'. With this determination from Stocksbridge women steelworkers, it was no accident that it was 50 women from Stocksbridge that set off for the Sheerness picket at a time when the press was trying to whip up a 'back to work' stunt amongst strikers' wives there. The Stocksbridge women were armed with placards and banners proclaiming 'South Yorkshire women hate scabs'.

But the involvement of husbands and wives of steelworkers was probably most developed in the small town of Caldicott on the Welsh /English border where many steelworkers' families live. Each week, strikers packed into the local Rugby Club, to discuss their next move. This was where Merlene Tovey first proposed the women's picket rota, and she also tried to involve strikers' wives. 'These women were stuck at home all day with the bills coming in. Many couldn't cope and a lot of husbands didn't discuss things with them. They were left in the dark with the only news from the newspapers and telly. All they heard was how their husbands should be at work. The lesson for next time is to find ways to get the women more involved. Inviting them to picket meetings was a start.'

'But our union also has to do this sort of thing. We had no women on the strike committee because this was elected from those with union posts — the secretaries and chairmen of the branches. No women were in these positions in Llanwern. It's a very male-

dominated union.'

Now that the strike is over Merlene Tovey wishes women had been involved earlier. 'We could have held more meetings, possibly on a different night to the men. We could have got more women involved and kept this going after the strike — maybe it's still not too late. If there is another strike, we'll be geared up. The strike has certainly given me a lot more confidence'.

Merlene Tovey would like to see the political awareness amongst women continue. 'The young women office trainees who came along with us began to ask more questions. Originally they thought they were just out for pay. But they've had an education on what it's all about. Half of them may lose their jobs. I would like to see them come along to our Labour Party meetings to get this discussion taken up'.

'Once the Government said the cash flow was being cut, it was clear it was a political strike, not just a difference between the British Steel Corporation and the unions. However, I do think the Labour Party has a lot to learn after the last Labour Government. It looks like a watered-down Tory Party! We can't put the same kind of party back even if we get rid of Margaret Thatcher. We have to consider what takes her place'.

'But we must also look at our union. I would like to meet up with other people in the ISTC who want to reform our union, and to see more women take up union positions. It would be great to discuss this with other women in the union from different parts of the country'.

## We must change our union

by Ray Davies (ISTC member, Llanwern strike committee)

I was delegated to attend the national conference of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation. I now find this conference has been cancelled. This is a tragedy, just at the time when steelworkers have gained fresh experience on the picket lines. The ISTC, with other steel unions, has sustained the full frontal attack of the Tories. The TUC must be made to stand by us. Our national conference could have discussed this. We could have requested that the TUC set guidelines for a counter-attack. This should include a massive national fund to back industrial action taken by unions who are picked on by the Tories. The TUC should also be prepared to supply pickets and solidarity action when these strikes take place.

One of the reasons Bill Sirs has cancelled the conference is because he fears the moves afoot to push through a vote of no confidence in him and the other executive members who sold us short. The feeling on the picket lines is that we were not so much set back by the British Steel Corporation and the Government, but demoralised by our own leaders and full-time officials. It's the people we pay to lead our union who have been among our biggest enemies. They undermined our confidence with their national dealings.

This is a lesson of the strike: we have to make changes in our union.

Our union constitution was designed for conditions of the past; it must now be swept aside. Our officials

should be subject to election and re-election if we don't like what they are doing. This is something we are campaigning for in the Labour Party, and it should be extended to our unions too. The Executive Council must be elected on the basis of the best person for the job, not necessarily on a regional basis. We can also learn from well-organised areas like Caldicot. They had mass meetings involving steel workers from different unions and the wives of strikers. Everyone was involved in making decisions about the running of the strike. If these mass meetings had happened throughout the strike, perhaps our executives would have been more in touch with what we wanted. Perhaps they would not have been able to get away with accepting an Enquiry which signed away our jobs.

Steelworkers from picket lines throughout the country feel the same way as we do. In Yorkshire, Warrington, Scotland, and Corby, they are as fed up as we are with our union leadership and structures. During the strike we made links with members of other strike committees through the unofficial National Strike Committee. We should now make every effort to keep up these links so that we can get things changed after the strike. ●

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The above contribution is taken from the 4 April issue of *Llanwern Steel Sheet*, a bulletin produced by Llanwern steelworkers. Started during the strike, *Steel Sheet* production will continue, to campaign for a fight on jobs and to democratise the steel unions. *Steel Sheet* supporters from the Engineering Union, the ISTC, and the Blastfurnacemens' Union in Llanwern and the Electricians' Union in Port Talbot meet regularly to discuss the content of *Steel Sheet* and to lay plans for activity in the steel unions. If you are a steelworker and interested in participating in *Steel Sheet* activities, write to: *Steel Sheet*, c/o 5 Sydney Street, Newport, Gwent, Wales.

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## The Warrington Brick Brigade

by Colin Herd (ISTC convenor, Warrington)



THE Warrington steelworks were threatened with total closure even before the strike began. Most workers were over 50 years of age and prepared to accept redundancy cheques. Despite this, Warrington was 100 per cent solid — and there was a hard core of pickets who would go anywhere, at anytime. Because of the operations carried out by the picket squads, James Anderton, police chief for Greater Manchester, labelled us the 'Warrington Brick Brigade'. We accepted this gladly because our operations were carried out on behalf of steelworkers, trade unionists and the working class as a whole.

We travelled the country to points where we were needed. We fought to close down Walkers in Blackburn, a firm claiming to be Europe's largest steel stockholder. We travelled overnight to London to occupy the ISTC headquarters to stop a threatened sell-out. We joined the picketing at Fords plant in Dagenham, in Birmingham and other targets.

The picket on Hadfield's private steel firm in Sheffield became a symbol to thousands of workers in the Northwest. It symbolised the united efforts of engineers, miners, transport workers and steelworkers against the

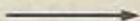
Tories and their backers in industry. It also symbolised the vicious role of the police in defending the bosses' interests. Many lessons were learned in the Hadfields operation that shouldn't be forgotten in the battles that still lie ahead.

Warrington strikers got involved in the Hadfields picket when a call went out for as many hands as possible to report for picketing to an unknown destination in South Yorkshire. Although everyone knew it could involve heavy picketing, fifty-four volunteers met at one o'clock in the morning of 14 February.

We arrived at a strike centre in the area, and were given details of the 5am picket. We were reminded about the numerous arrests at Hadfields in the previous three weeks when peaceful pickets had taken place.

Between 4.30am and 5am our coach was stopped on three occasions by the police and the driver was challenged about his destination. Fortunately, the driver had not been told. Nevertheless the police more or less ended up escorting our coach up to the top of Vulcan Road — one of the major roads running past Hadfields.

When we arrived, we couldn't



believe the amount of police force. Coach after coach of police vehicles lined the street — all of them empty. We wanted to go around the corner to join up with the rest of the pickets at the main entrance. The conversation with the police ended when a 19-year old member of the Warrington branch was hit across the cheek-bone with a police truncheon. This individual had never been on picket duty before in his life. Two hundred police officers then ploughed straight into the mass of Warrington pickets. Arrests and injuries — on both sides — followed.

Around the corner, Arthur Scargill and 400 Yorkshire miners led steelworkers into a similar confrontation with the police. With this united effort, there was a complete and overwhelming success and Hadfields closed early in the afternoon of February 14. The toll was heavy, however, and this confrontation became known as the St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

Of course this violence by the police never became clear to the majority of people in this country. Time and again throughout the strike we saw reporters and cameras from papers like the *Mirror* at these battles. Yet the next day, the photographs we know were taken, never appeared. At Sheerness we even witnessed a police inspector throw over an entire ITV camera unit set up on a tripod. But not a word of this came on either the six o'clock or the ten o'clock news.

Finally, we started to confront the reporters. 'It's not up to us,' they said. 'It's our editors you should be after'. But who are the editors? In Warrington, we gave two interviews to the *Warrington Guardian* hoping to build up pickets through the coverage, and



strengthen the backing of the wives of the strikers. They refused to print either. The editor is a well-known right wing Tory. We expected difficulties because of this, and we got it. But now we have a branch policy where this paper is banned from union matters. It will not be reporting at the negotiations due to take place on 18 July about the total closure of the Warrington works.

This is how we have to deal with the people who stand behind the daily press. But the working class needs a paper of its own. Only the socialist papers told the truth about our struggles. Now, hopefully everyone won't have to go through our experiences themselves before they see through the lies of the Tory press.

The experience of the strike made militants and socialists out of many workers who had never thought about politics. We can't let Sirs get away with the sell-out. The idea behind the unofficial national strike committee that met during the strike has to be continued in peace-time. Despite the so-called unity, it's disgusting to us that the Number 1 Scunthorpe and Number 11 Rotherham works have accepted Warrington's orders, which makes total closure of our works definite. This lesson also has to be built on. ●

## Learning from Corby

by Charlie Keeny (ISTC, Corby)

We at Corby have already experienced the situation that Llanwern and Port Talbot will find themselves in very shortly — the loss of livelihood and the means of supporting our families. We now face the degrading, dehumanising dole queue, where the same people who threw us out of work will now deride us as scroungers off the state.

In the two or so years that we waited for the sack, our officials constantly relayed the message from management: 'Don't press for any better conditions or wages now, or it means inevitable closure. Help us now and we will be able to prevent closure'.

So for a long time we did just that. We allowed cuts in our conditions and didn't press any claims at all for a meaningful increase in wages. We allowed members to leave and not be replaced, even though many of us knew that manning levels were already at a critical point. Production records were surpassed in the frantic attempt to 'become a viable proposition'. This was all we ever heard for two years: 'We can't afford to pay you more, but become a viable proposition and you can keep your jobs'.

Well, at the end of the two years they told us: 'Too bad, you didn't work hard enough'. They presented us with

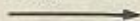


figures about our lack of viability that a four year old child could have seen through.

Economists from Warwick University told us that the British Steel Corporation's figures were nonsense. Corby could produce strip more cheaply than bringing it in, with only a small investment in new plant, much smaller than the amount they intended to buy our jobs with. We tried to make the Corporation see this. It was at this point that it finally dawned on us — they didn't want to know, they'd never wanted to know, the whole quest for viability had been a gigantic hoax at our expense. The BSC's plans had never changed, we had been fed this thread of hope in a cruel attempt to keep us quiet until they were ready to give us the chop.

If this sounds familiar, it should. It's the same argument the BSC are using over the national wage claim — 'Don't ask for more', 'Work harder for less or the closure will come quicker and harder'.

Don't fall for it, brothers and sisters, as we did at Corby, because unless you fight against it they will close you anyway. Forget about the constant threats of closure, fight for a



decent wage and carry on the fight against closures. If you don't fight from the very start, you'll soon find that the closures demanded are ever-growing and the timetables for shut-down even shorter.

It's imperative that the fight for wages and the fight for jobs are combined. If you think that the BSC's promises of more jobs to replace the cuts are genuine, then take a look at the facts. BSC's job finding service has found 5,000 jobs in six years. We need 5,800 at Corby alone, leaving aside the other 46,000 redundancies BSC has announced.

What we can tell the brothers and sisters at Port Talbot and Llanwern is that your future is in your hands, not the BSC's. They don't care about your future or the future of your children. They simply want to rid of you in an insane plan to comply with the Common Market and if they decimate whole communities, whole regions, too bad.

Don't let them tell you that they can't go on subsidising steel to a greater extent than other European countries. They don't, the facts prove that our steel is less subsidised than almost all in Europe. Less subsidised than France, for instance, where the steelworkers at Longwy have won their battle for survival and have succeeded in bringing massive investment that will provide more jobs, not less. They have won a battle against cuts that put lunatic economic policies first and people second.

Their lesson is one we can all benefit from. Only if you are prepared to fight and go on fighting do you have a chance of keeping your jobs and the jobs of your children. ●

## The war is not over

by Roger Tovey (NUB, Llanwern strike committee)

THE momentous 13 week struggle is now at rest — but if the battle is over, the war is not. One who ignores the lessons of the past is doomed to relive it. You, the pickets, did not lose. You won new confidence in your own ability, new energy, and tenacity. This new found defiant unity must never again be sacrificed on the altar of divisive leadership — it has already cost too much.

Let us go forward with new confidence in our future. Never again leave union business to the bureaucrats, but use your branches and lodges as your platform.

Four hundred Llanwern steelworkers from all the different unions met the day after the settlement was accepted by the national negotiating bodies. They voted to oppose the job cuts, with industrial action if necessary. Now is the time to lay plans for this fight, making links with those who will be hit by the cuts and whose solidarity can help us succeed — the miners, the dockers, railway workers. Steelworkers should participate in this campaign and take its plans back to trade union branches. We can show again the strength and unity we found on the picket lines — but this time for the most important fight of all, the defence of our jobs and those of our children. ●

## Organising the struggle

by Brian Molyneux (ISTC, S. Yorkshire divisional strike committee)



TO understand the outcome of the 13-week steelworkers' strike, and particularly how it was fought by Yorkshire steelworkers, it's necessary to go back 18 months before the strike. Then a group of steelworkers set out to win more democracy in the major steel union, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC). A number of meetings were organised with militants who shared this concern for democracy and a pamphlet called *Steelworker and Reform* was published. We made contacts with other steelworkers, but mainly what we learned was how badly organised the union would be in struggle, and how poorly represented our interests were by full-time officials, and some lay officials.

Of course, we didn't know then there would be a national strike. But we knew we would be in struggle some time in the future, even if it was only at one works involving a few thousand people. Steelworkers have been involved in many local struggles in the past, and the first thing that becomes clear in any dispute is just how incompetent full-time officials are. So from this local experience, we wanted to look at the weakness of the union at the national level — the union's Ex-

ecutive Council and the system of full-time officials employed by the union.

During these early meetings, we were preparing for a struggle on the jobs issue. We had all sorts of information that indicated this would be the issue, even before the British Steel Corporation started to close down the Shotton works. A group of us even went down to Bilston and tried to do what was possible there. But the ISTC official wasn't that interested.

We were just getting involved in the Bilston issue when the Corby closure was announced. And so we went down to Corby and made some links with workers there. But all these areas had the same problem: they were relying on a local leadership which had no stomach for the fight. It was more interested in gaining self-esteem from the struggle than in leading the rank and file in a fight to keep jobs. All this time we tried to link up with people really interested in fighting for jobs. In the ISTC there is no way of making contacts in the union, so this was difficult. We have only just started to hold union conferences in the ISTC! And they are mainly attended by old-time branch secretaries.





During these 18 months, our small group met weekly, involving mainly union officials from South Yorkshire. We were concerned with how to get our membership behind us. At branch meetings, there were arguments about closures. We suggested that the plant should come out in support of Bilston. But the Stocksbridge works actually took a large part of Bilston's orders, so it was even more difficult. And of course management fuelled the confusion by arguing that capital investment was vital to the life of the valley, but without Bilston's order, there was no possibility of investment. That had to be countered, and we had to explain that Bilston would be isolated without support.

We started to broaden out the meetings, by getting crafts involved. Crafts is very strong in Yorkshire, and highly organised. We called a meeting with Bernard Connolly, the Chairperson of the South Yorkshire Crafts Committee, and several other craft convenors in the area. A fight on closures was near, and we needed to organise something around the announcements BSC would no doubt soon be making. But with the difficulties encountered in mobilising the membership in defence of jobs, we began to feel that the wage issue was one way we could make our members conscious that there were other fights we needed to win.

That was when we formulated the demand for 20 per cent, and saw the need to link it to jobs. We didn't want any strings. We started to put resolutions through joint committees — this was easy because our group involved only senior joint committee officials. Many committees supported the 20

per cent demand well before the national strike was on the cards. We made it clear that we wanted a substantial increase in line with the cost of living. All these resolutions were adopted at the beginning of November.

At the time the two per cent wage offer from BSC appeared, the Stocksbridge steelworkers were already involved in dispute. I had been suspended by management, accused of attending a meetings at the Fullerton Arms pub, with other senior union officials in the division. In my defence, members went on strike starting 5 December — four weeks before the national strike date.

A further area of organisation prior to the strike involved the melting process. It was clear management organised this process on an area basis not locally. This meant that if one melting shop went on dispute, the shifts of the other plants was increased so that steel production was not affected. In response, the branches of melting shop members got an agreement that while one shop was in dispute, the rest wouldn't increase the shift levels or handle any other orders. All the melting shops started to meet monthly. This was very significant in terms of strength. No branches had ever got together before, on any kind of issue.

By Christmas, it was clear a national strike would be called. There were considerable steel stocks because everyone had been working overtime. A small group of us met to evaluate picketing points, but we didn't begin to look beyond our own region, outside of Sheffield, except to



the docks on our coastline. We eventually came up with the idea of a divisional committee, based on every joint committee in the area. Some of them were a bit under the ISTC officialdom's wing, but that gave the body a certain official status. We were very conscious not to go too fast, too soon. Eventually these people were won to a more militant approach to winning the strike.

At Stocksbridge, I asked for a mass meeting prior to the holiday break-up to prepare for the strike. The full-time officials were involved at that stage. But all they had managed to do was hire a pub in each area for two hours a day to serve as a strike headquarters. This was hopeless, as we needed a headquarters from which we could organise seriously — where people could come for information or for social security advice. We found an old, partly shut-down shop. No ISTC branch has its own money, but when I took office, I organised raffles so we had some resources. We also collected money through my dispute as well, so we were able to rent the shop and install a phone.

For the first two weeks of the strike, we concentrated on organising systems of every aspect of the strike. A mass meeting was called, and more and more people turned up for picket duty. We took everyone's names and addresses. The picketing was highly efficient. Every picket was given a number. If someone rang up to find the location of a picket, we only needed to look down a list. Each picket — and there were over 2,500 whose actions we were co-ordinating — had their own file. Each time they were telephoned a comment was made on

their file: whether the member was keen, whether it was a waste of time asking them, and so on. That way, whoever was organising the picket rotas could be psychologically prepared, and we didn't waste resources on useless phone calls.

The organisation at Stocksbridge was a big job. Eventually, one person was put in charge of each area: collections in London, and in other areas; finances from abroad; transport — including the seven buses and 52-seater coach that we hired daily; picketing; publicity or printing. But one difficulty was that everybody, including the local leaders, wanted to go off all over the country, or to Germany, or wherever. We needed the leaders because they had influence with other workers, and had political knowledge. For those members with less experience, flying pickets gave them a chance to meet others and to begin to speak at meetings. That way, the union gained new militants, the money was collected, and the leaders maintained a stable base for the operation.

We didn't have the cell structure for pickets that Rotherham adopted. It didn't cater to our needs and our method had many advantages: it was easier to get organised quickly, we were more mobile in reaching pickets by phone and directing them to a central point at a given time. In the cell structure, often people were hesitant to leave their own patch where they had been picketing for some time. They also continued to mix only with people from their branches. We wanted our members to mix with others, to get unity on the works when we returned. Looking back, one im-



provement we could have made was to try to broaden the numbers who took responsibility for various things during the strike. By the sixth week this was possible because the rank and file had six weeks of picketing experience, they were highly mobile and far less reluctant than at the beginning.



When the strike started, the ISTC at Stocksbridge reconstituted its joint committee into a strike committee. Crafts had their own strike committee, as did the Transport Workers' Union. But lots of workers from these unions were coming to the ISTC shop because we had resources, social security information, and we were in a superior position because of our funds. Although they were reluctant, the convenors from the crafts eventually joined our committee.

### Organising at a regional level

From the first day of the dispute, we formed a committee at a divisional level. It had 12 people on it. We took some great decisions! There were people on the committee who refused to bow down to Sirs — who picketed Hadfields private steel firm and other stockholders' firms although full-time

officials were telling them not to picket. For the first time in their lives, people weren't taking notice of what Sirs was saying. They just had one vision: to win the dispute.

This committee had members of the Executive Council (EC) on it, as well as members of the Central Negotiating Committee (CNC). We encouraged these members to get out to other areas, but tried to ensure when they came back they would be responsible to us.

We contacted Arthur Scargill, the Yorkshire miners' leader, before the strike started and asked for a meeting between him and the divisional strike committee. All the EC and CNC members went to meet him. Scargill showed us maps from the 1972 and 1974 miners' struggles, and explained how important East Anglia was; how to log information coming in and out; how to set up a central log book so that links with other areas could be maintained without overlap; how to plan for accommodation, and so on. The Committee members were very impressed. They came out of the meeting whistling. Then the press got hold of it and wanted a re-run just for the cameras. They loved it! Of course, Scargill couldn't tell the militants much, but this meeting was one of the factors in winning the whole of the committee, EC members and all, to an effective picketing policy which marked off South Yorkshire from then on. The EC members also went to France to speak with the dockers. They couldn't get over the solidarity they met. They spoke to mass meetings like at Fords in Dagenham, and they proudly brought back the money they collected!



By the second week of the dispute, we had a fairly solid independent body at a regional level. We were then telling Sirs what we wanted. A few weeks later, when Sirs made one of his famous mistakes, strikers were really angry. On the very same day, he issued two press statements: one saying all steel should be stopped; another that the dispute was just with BSC, not the private sector. It was totally confusing, and that was when cries for his resignation came. The thing which finally did it was when he gave a picketing dispensation to Hadfields, the private steel firm.

The call for his resignation came through the divisional committee in the sixth week of the dispute. No one even spoke against it. We thought that perhaps in other areas the rank and file might also have a similar view of Sirs, and at least they would get their executive to be critical of him. And it worked! According to Executive Council reports, Sirs more or less apologised for giving the Hadfields dispensation.

We thought it was important to take this up because it would register in people's minds in other areas — there was an alternative that we had initiated. This didn't exist nationally, of course, but at least it gave a vision of how people could be in a position to govern themselves. Sirs' credibility was at stake — members were prepared to be critical, and say it openly. This gave others more courage to do so, as well.

This series of blunders by Sirs helped us gain credibility. It allowed us to take the initiative towards Hadfields and the private sector, and to dispatch flying pickets towards stockholders and other key targets. We stopped all

dispensations in the first week, and adopted a policy of withdrawing safety.

It was very important for the morale of the strikers to show that the strike was continually moving forward. This was why Hadfields was so central. It became a symbol not only because of the role of Sirs, but also because the national press focussed on it, and because the factory union leadership played such a scabbing role. We had in mind a Sattley picket at Hadfields, because we recognised how important Sattley was in winning working class solidarity for the miners in 1972.

After Hadfields had gone back on Sirs' dispensation, we took matters in our own hands. We put out the call for a mass picket on 14 February. The involvement of the miners and the mass mobilisation of the steel workers closed down Hadfields after a long battle with the police. This became known as the St Valentine's Day Massacre. But the victory was unfortunately allowed to slip. The failure to close Sheerness and Sirs' failure to give an answer to the closure threat by the Hadfields management, meant Hadfields returned to work 10 days later.



The Central Co-ordinating Committee was another regional body that was set up on a cross-union basis. It had limitations, it was too far removed from the rank and file to get the mass support it needed. George Caborn, a full-time official for the Engineers' Union in Yorkshire and a leading Communist Party member in



the area, came to the strike offices near the beginning of the strike. 'I hear you are picketing Shardlows,' he said. 'My lads are honour-bound not to cross picket lines, but you are forcing them to do it.' We explained that while it was true pickets were on the gates, no one was forcing anyone to cross them. 'But Sirs says you are only supposed to picket BSC'. We replied how futile that particular policy was.

In fact picketing was already beginning to be effective in a number of engineering plants. Of course this was because we were stopping everything. So Caborn announced that if we wanted to picket, we should adopt a common policy. Many of the strikers who had past experience with Caborn insisted he was only trying to control the situation — he had only a few members in steel, the majority in engineering. He was determined to protect the majority, not the minority. But the proposal seemed reasonable, so we agreed that no raw steel would be allowed to move. This, we were assured, would lead to rapid lay-offs.

We set up the Central Co-ordinating Committee with two delegates from each union and met every morning at 7.30 in the AUEW House. No full-timers, including Caborn, were allowed in the meetings. But it just happened that George Caborn or Albert Knight, another Engineering Union officer and Communist Party member, would drift in and offer us coffee. Then they would start to raise little matters. Caborn would say, 'Oh, I have a lad out here who just wants a dispensation. He's got a problem with your pickets and has to get things moving or he'll have a revolution on his hands. Can you help

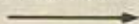
him out?' This sort of thing was happening all the time.

As time went on, it became clear that this committee was not much use. It was evident that Caborn and Knight were not prepared to ask their members to actually come out in support. After about six weeks, nothing resulted from our 'common agreement'. We hadn't reached an agreement so that people could work forever! So eventually we decided the whole thing was a non-starter.

The concept behind this committee was okay. We did think it should be kept ticking over with a small amount of funds so that after the strike we could keep a forum in which all unions could meet. Nothing has happened yet, but we should still try to get such a meeting off the ground.

The ISTC divisional committee was meeting — on a parallel — all this time. This body was guarding its autonomy and given that the Central Co-ordinating Committee was more or less defunct, an overall body was still needed. We had built up the trust of the membership, and had adopted what we considered were the right policies. We didn't want to expend all this respect on the Co-ordinating Committee. So we decided to expand the ISTC committee to involve other unions.

This decision gave the militants control over the committee which was reinforced by the election of militants like Bernard Connolly and Frank Beaver from crafts. Sirs wanted to gain control of the body. He wanted Keith Jones, the ISTC full-time official for South Yorkshire region, to move to London. This failed so an edict came



from the Executive Council the following week stating that all full-time officials should be fully involved in the strike. This was six weeks after it had begun, so this was fine. We had already exposed the officials in front of the membership so nothing came out of the edict but a bit of irritation.

## The Press

One problem we had to deal with constantly was the press. They were crawling all over the place like ants. They clogged everything up. We took a firm decision that no-one but our press officer could talk to the press. This caused some problems but was the only way to deal with them. One lesson we learned was how rapidly the press could alter its coverage. Until the third week, they were relatively sympathetic. When they realised we weren't going to be good, then the attitude of the press changed. It was probably not because they got some orders from the top: perhaps journalists just react to what they think public opinion is. There was a conspiracy of silence by the capitalist press towards the end. And the attitude of the strikers changed. At the beginning, the coverage on television encouraged more people to picket. By the end, journalists were being physically attacked — including the poor technicians who just held the camera. At Hadfields, the press was stoned.

We became involved in organising rallies from the third week, first on a Sheffield-wide level, then at each of the plants. This kept morale up really high. The flying pickets were meeting people from other areas, talking politics to members of revolutionary groups often for the first time, and

meeting people who would support them for no reward. All this developed strikers' political consciousness. The badge explosion was another example. We started off with a few badges. But they were so popular that eventually people were having their own made, and they became treated like medals!

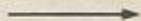
## The National Strike Committee

Eight weeks into the dispute, the crafts tried to conclude a separate settlement. We decided this had to be stopped. Bernard Connolly went around the country to squash it. We decided while he was travelling, we should make contacts with other people. At the same time the International Marxist Group was pushing for some general committee to organise the contacts around the country into some structure. So once we had put a stop to the crafts deal, and had made many contacts, the call was launched for a national unofficial strike committee. By that time, I was elected to the Central Negotiating Committee and had made even more contacts.

The idea of organising something as an alternative to Sirs nationally was vital. The possibilities were shown with the way we had closed down Fords at Dagenham and with some of the lobbies. But the strike committee didn't finally succeed. We needed something to unify us in one fell swoop — maybe a national rally. We should have at least organised a national bulletin, but there just didn't seem to be the resources.

## The Settlement

It was a difficult decision to decide to recommend a return to work in



Yorkshire. We had a heated discussion but decided that it was better to keep the unity we had achieved. If the national strike committee had jelled, we possibly could have stayed out. But with only one strong local organisation, we would have been isolated. Today there is now a large layer of militants in steel. So now we have to organise the structures outside of the official ones.

The walk-out on the second day back to work showed that action was possible without the go-ahead by Sirs. The fact the walk-out was a display of solidarity over victimisation is also important. This sort of support had never happened before and shows what is possible.

In most plants we now have joint shop stewards committees. All the unions have been told that such bodies are unconstitutional and certain people would like to see them destroyed for obvious reasons. We now have a heritage of organising the rank and file. Joint shop stewards committees were not structures dreamt up out of the top of someone's head. They are a response to what the membership sees is necessary, and is asking for.

We want to get steelworkers on other picket lines, and to support demonstrations like the 27 April march against the Special Patrol Group in London. We want to maintain the militancy which existed during the strike.

It will be difficult. We have to work for a stronger organisation at the rank and file level, but we mustn't be afraid of it.

Following the strike we have set up a joint shop stewards committee in every plant in South Yorkshire, except

in Rotherham.

Every action we take, we will publicise to the ranks. Every time we are asked to speak, or if we set up links with other steelworkers in Europe, as we are doing with West German workers, then we will explain in our weekly bulletin what we have done.

In that way we will be accountable for our actions.

We want a mass shop stewards meeting every three months. This will elect officials for the joint shop stewards committee. We have already agreed on the representation for different unions.

A 200-strong mass shop stewards meeting will be the controlling body, and the joint shop stewards will meet each week. Each department will decide what it wants to put in the newsheet.

We have to consider a national committee, and even international links. This might seem to be pie-in-the-sky, but we already have West German, French and Basque links. At some stage we need to take on Brussels, so we have ideas for an international bulletin.

This union is going to change. The first step has to be a campaign to get Bill Sirs to rescind the cancellation of this year's ISTC conference. We have already started passing resolutions to that effect.

At this time especially we need a conference to take stock of the sell-out, assess where the union is at, and prepare plans for the next battles. ●

**Note: All the contributions in this pamphlet by steelworkers are made in their personal capacity.**

# Socialist Challenge

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