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Communist Politics and Shop Stewards in
Engineering, 1935-46.

by

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ABSTRACT.

This thesis is about the activities of Communist militants within the engineering industry between 1935 and 1946, and attempts to show the importance of these militants to the history of industrial relations in this period in which shop stewards as we know them today first emerged as an important group. The work is primarily concerned with examining the relative importance of political and industrial factors in determining the relationships obtaining between shop stewards and their constituents during World War II.

The importance of Communist politics to Communist and non-Communist shop stewards is examined, but the main area of research is into the way in which different local industrial contexts influenced shop stewards' behaviour. The importance of methods of wage payment, local agreements, types of technology and rates of technological change, and a whole range of other industrial considerations was often greater in the minds of even some left-wing shop stewards than the latest left-wing discussions. Also, the way in which shop stewards took up (or failed to take up) the problems arising for their members out of a war in which munitions workers were almost as much in the front line as were servicemen and women themselves is touched upon.

The thesis is divided into two main sections. The first group of chapters deals in a general and introductory way with the topics mentioned above. The second and rather more important section builds on the first in that it deals with the problems in a deeper (though necessarily narrower) way. It comprises four local studies of major engineering districts during the period 1939-1946.

* * *

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

AEU	Analgamated Engineering Union
BTH:	British Thomson-Houston Co. Ltd.
CP:	Communist Party
CSEU:	Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions
CWC:	Clyde Workers Committee
DC:	District Committee
E&ATSSNC:	Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Stewards National Council
EC:	Executive Committee
EEF:	Engineering Employers Federation
ETU:	Electrical Trades Union
GEC:	General Electric Co. Ltd.
ILP: 7	Independent Labour Party
JPC:	Joint Production Committee
MWF:	Militant Workers' Federation
NBLoco:	North British Locomotive Co. Ltd.
NUGMW:	National Union of General and Municipal Workers.
ROF:	Royal Ordnance Factory
TGWU:	Transport and General Workers Union
TRA:	Coventry Toolroom Agreement, 1941 (NB: The National Toolroom Agreement is always referred to by its full title.)
WIL-RCP:	Workers' International League - Revolutionary Communist Party
YCL:	Young Communist League

* * *

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN FOOTNOTES

AEU DC: Minutes of the Coventry District Committee of the AEU.

CET: Coventry Evening Telegraph

COVENPS: Minutes of the Coventry Engineering Employers Association.

DW: Daily Worker

LM: Labour Monthly

LR: Labour Research

MDT: Midland Daily Telegraph

MEN: Manchester Evening News

MG: Manchester Guardian

MRC: Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick

M/S: Maitland-Sara Collection, University of Warwick

NP: New Propellor

SA: Socialist Appeal

WC: War Commentary

WIN: Workers International News

* * *

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* * *

Two General Notes

- 1) All strike figures quoted have been calculated from the Ministry of Labour Disputes Books, in the Public Record Office (LAB 34). Specific footnotes are not given.

- 2) All dates quoted after PRO reference numbers (e.g.: LAB 10/344 April 5th) are dates relating to standard weekly reports, and the names of the writer and recipient are therefore not given.

* * *

Introduction

In general, it is only comparatively recently that British labour historians have directed their attention towards the history of workplace representatives within the trade unions. This apparent lassitude certainly does not derive from the subject's insignificance. On the contrary, one of the most striking features of British trade unionism has been the frequency with which it has thrown up such representatives, perhaps the most significant of whom in terms of their importance in industrial relations have been the shop stewards in engineering.

In this area, we are particularly fortunate in that some foundations have been laid for a study of the shop stewards in their second major period of growth and influence during the Second World War. James Jefferys was the first historian to help in this direction, with his book The Story of the Engineers, published in 1945 for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the formation of the Amalgamated Engineering Union. Jefferys wrote an excellent book when we consider the difficulties involved in pioneering a path through a jungle of previously unworked sources. His book drew particular attention to the importance of the shop stewards in engineering from the First World War onwards. The next contributor, Branko Pribicevic, produced his book The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control, 1910-22 (Oxford) in 1959. Pribicevic gave us an account of the shop stewards' movement in the First World War, and focussed in particular on the political forces at work within it. More recently, James Hinton made a much more detailed and rigorous study in the same field in his The First Shop Stewards' Movement (1973). Hinton's work showed the importance of the craftsmen's tradition of control, and plotted the history of the stewards under the peculiar conditions of wartime. It described the unsuccessful attempts made by the craftsmen's leaders to drag the movement out of craftism's sectional concerns and towards an all-grades fight for peace, and ended by demonstrating the

importance of the whole experience to the engineers who went on to constitute a major section of the Communist Party's industrial cadre. Used in conjunction with Richard Hyman's The Workers' Union (Oxford, 1971), these works give quite a good picture of the engineering industry during the First World War. This was probably a major prerequisite for a study of engineering workers in the Second World War, when the shop stewards as we know them today first became a force in the factories.

This corpus of work had to exist for work on the Second World War to begin for two reasons. Firstly, so that it was possible to see the importance of the traditions of exclusiveness and craft control, and their breakdown, as the central motif of the skilled engineers' union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. Secondly, because without this work, it would have been rather more difficult to appreciate the importance of the shop stewards in the formation of the Communist Party, and the influence which this fact had in determining the CP's orientation towards the shop stewards in later years. But it was in any case impossible to work on the period of the Second World War until 1972, when Government records began to be available for research up to and including 1945.

Labour and social history is by now well established as an important area for research, and within this developing subject area, the field of social history during the World Wars is considered of some particular interest by a large number of historians. The same could not be said, on the other hand, of Communist history between 1939 and 1945. Why was it decided to concentrate on the Communists and the members of tiny groups to the left of them amongst the shop stewards rather than on, for example, members of the Labour Party?

It cannot be denied that members of the Labour Party were often important shop stewards, and that it would be interesting to study their history. But there were two closely related reasons for our concentration on the Communists and the extreme left. The first reason was that these groups all consciously directed themselves in an

organised way towards influencing shop stewards, and towards providing a political leadership for a putative shop stewards' movement. The Labour Party did not attempt to do this; its whole purpose and raison d'etre was parliamentary and not industrial. The second reason derives directly from the first. The Communist Party and their antagonists on the extreme left published newspapers which allow us to follow in some detail the activities of the various groups at a local and factory level. To attempt to do this for the Labour Party would be more difficult, because the sources do not appear to exist.

Using the Communist and 'ultra-left' press as a major set of source materials undoubtedly gives rise to its own set of acute problems, which have to be squarely faced at this introductory stage. The information derived from these papers has clearly to be used with extreme caution, because of the bitterly polemical context within which much of it is situated. Yet, frequently, we have to rely on only one source, and are thrown back on our sense of verisimilitude, internal consistency, and so on. Unsatisfactory as this is, it is the price that has to be paid for writing about industrial politics at the level of the individual factory.

There is another problem involved in using these sources which needs to be pointed out, and that is the difficulty of assessing claims by different groups to influence or 'control' in a given factory. In this case, it is possible to list certain criteria which are applied in determining whether such claims were justified. It should be stressed that none of these criteria is by itself considered sufficient to establish that a factory was a 'CP' or 'Trotskyist' factory. However, it is felt that adequate proof of a group's influence in a given factory has been furnished if several of the following eight criteria have been satisfied: that the convenor was a member of the group in question; that a relatively high level of contributions to the group's funds was regularly achieved; that a relatively high number of articles about the factory was printed by the group's

paper; that other groups referred to the group as politically dominant in the factory; that the local Conciliation Officer of the Ministry of Labour referred to the group in the same way; that the factory did relatively well in group literature selling or fund-raising competitions; that the group claimed a high membership and/or a factory branch in the factory; that the shop stewards' paper was clearly under the group's influence. Such an approximate set of criteria will no doubt be criticised individually, but taken together, it is felt that they are adequate tools for a difficult task.

In setting out to look into the history of the extreme left, we inherited a very small historiographical legacy. The only book to touch on the CPGB's history (if we discount more general histories of the Third International, often more misleading than helpful when considering the British Party) was Henry Pelling's The British Communist Party. A Historical Profile. (1958). The legacy diminished almost to vanishing point when the topic was limited to the CP shop stewards. A similar situation existed with regard to the extreme left wing groups: no serious work existed on the Trotskyist groups, the ILP or the Anarchist Federation in the war. Nevertheless, all these groups had to be looked at if their influence among shop stewards was to be assessed.

* * *

It will be useful at this stage to state some of the main assumptions on which this thesis is based. For the sake of convenience, these assumptions may be divided into two categories: assumptions about the relationships within trade unions, and those concerning the relations between the Communist Party and its industrial members.

To take the first category first. It is assumed that some degree of tension exists within a trade union between institutions based on the union's branch structure (Executive Committees, District

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Committees), and those based directly on workshop organisation (shop stewards' committees, 'combine' committees). Richard Hyman has noted one source of these tensions as being the relatively large ability of the workplace representatives to bring collective sanctions to bear on the employer. He also calls attention to a number of other causes (the 'professionalisation' of trade union officials, for example), but these concern us less.¹

This ability of the shop stewards to bring collective pressure to bear on the employer is not, however, something that can simply be taken for granted in all situations, since the shop stewards have also to relate to their members. Here again, it is assumed that there may be tensions between shop stewards and their members, but that there are much stricter limits to these in the case of the steward-member relationship than in the case of the member-official relationship. These limits are imposed by the workshop 'cohesions' which gave rise to the shop steward system in the first place, called 'primitive democracy' by Hyman.²

The nature of these power relations obviously differs between trade unions, largely because of the different tasks which unions have adopted. Unfortunately, in this thesis, we have been forced to examine them more thoroughly in the case of the AEU than in the cases of the general unions catering for engineering workers (the TGWU and the GMWU). This is because the requisite source materials have not been made available to me by the trade unions concerned, and not because these unions were considered unimportant.³

¹ R. Hyman: Industrial Relations. A Marxist Introduction (1975), pp. 158 ff.

² Ibid., p. 560.

³ I refer here to the unavailability of Minute books at both Executive and regional levels; some other, more fragmentary, sources have been used, and are referred to in the text and in footnotes.

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The second set of assumptions relates to the interaction of the leadership of the CPGB and Communist shop stewards. It is assumed that there was an interaction of some sort, and that CP shop stewards did not simply carry out the instructions of the Party leadership. In taking this point of view, it has been decided to reject that put forward by Henry Pelling, who appears never to question whether or not CP shop stewards and industrial members put the 'Party line' forward inside the factories. Thus, when the CP changed its view of the nature of the war in July 1941, Pelling claims:

"...the great bulk of the membership rapidly adapted themselves to the new situation, and set about encouraging higher productivity and discouraging strikes, where previously they had been doing the reverse."¹

It is thought by this writer that such a situation is inherently unlikely, because the industrial members had to somehow come to terms with a rising strike rate; it is not denied that the change of line was important, but it is assumed that the room available for complete somersaults was limited in the industrial context.

It has been thought important to state these preconceptions, because they relate directly to the two central themes of the thesis, the industrial and the political aspects of shop steward history. The purpose of the research has been to discover how these tensions interacted, evolved and worked themselves out in practice in our period, and to discover the main determinants involved in their resolution. In other words, such questions as: how did the relationships between shop stewards and their members change, and what caused these changes, had to be posed. Similarly, the different factors affecting the left-wing affiliations of politically active shop stewards, and the ways in which these in turn affected them as shop stewards, had to be examined.

¹H. Pelling: The British Communist Party. A Historical Profile. (1958), pp. 119-120.

At this point, the reader should be warned that there is in fact a strong concern with the technological and industrial determination of shop steward behaviour. This is because it became evident at quite an early stage in the research that there were substantial differences in the way that shop stewards behaved in different districts, and that these could often be traced to differing industrial structures, rates of technological change, "skill mixes", local agreements, and other strictly non-political considerations. The way that the Clydeside craftsmen expected their stewards to behave, the type of issues the latter would take up, was quite different to the way that, for example, Coventry aircraft workers expected their stewards to operate. Thus, a local approach which allowed such factors as technology and so on their appropriate weight, was adopted.

Yet, there is a sense in which this thesis is intended to be neither a history of the shop stewards in engineering, nor a history of extreme left-wing groups in this period. Primarily, it is concerned with the often fascinating overlap, interpenetration and interaction of the two areas.

* * * * *

The thesis is divided into two parts: the first attempts a general coverage of the topic for the 1930s, and seeks to provide background for the more detailed studies, whilst the second is a set of local studies directed towards a detailed examination of our themes for the war period itself.

The first chapter traces the history of the engineering industry from 1919 to 1945, to provide the context for later analyses. This is followed by an attempt to show the importance of skill within the engineering workforces of four important districts. In the next chapter, Communist theory on the shop stewards is introduced and the way which these theories corresponded to what was actually going on in the industry is considered. The following section takes this history into the war. The following group of chapters preceding the

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local studies deal with some general trends amongst the shop stewards during the war, and how Government labour policy affected them. The attitudes of trade union officials to their shop stewards is also described here.

In the second group of chapters, a detailed comparison of the relationships between shop stewards and their members in four major engineering districts (Coventry, Manchester, Clydeside, Tyneside) allows us to explore some of the questions raised in earlier chapters in more depth within a comparative framework. The four districts named were chosen both because of their importance in war production, and because of the contrasts which they offer in terms of industrial structure, left-wing politics and militancy. In many ways, this second section is regarded as the most important of the two by the writer, because it is able to explore themes in some depth where the sources are most useful.

Finally, a series of short biographies of many of the individuals named in the text is appended, as an aid to reading the local studies.

* * *

The Engineering Industry

1919 - 1945.

This chapter deals with the main developments in the engineering industry from the end of the First World War to the end of the Second. It is divided into three main sections. The first covers the period from the growth of the major arms firms in the late Nineteenth Century to the World Depression, ending in 1934. The second takes the account through the rearmament period to the end of the Second World War. The primary aim of these sections is to provide background on the changing importance of the different branches of the industry. The basic argument is that from 1921 onwards, the heavy and marine sectors centred in the North of England and in Scotland were in decline, whilst the motor, electrical and aircraft industries of the Midlands and South were expanding. The third section takes the analysis a stage further by describing the 'skill-mix' of the workforces in both of the main divisions of the industry, and by examining the relationship between these mixes, unemployment, and the level of trade union membership. It is suggested that these three things are related, and that skilled engineers had a relatively high degree of resistance to the erosion of trade union membership by unemployment.

The engineering industry established itself as the major British manufacturing industry during the second half of the Nineteenth Century. It was what people thought of when they described Britain as 'the workshop of the world'. British textile machinery, locomotives and marine engines formed the basis of the industry's dominance in world terms and were well able to take the opportunities created by free trade. British craftsmen acquired skills which allowed them to travel all over the world and to find work wherever there were engineering workshops. Indeed, it is impossible to penetrate the 'labour aristocratic' mentality of these skilled engineers without understanding the key role which they saw themselves

as playing within the greatest engineering industry in the world.

By 1881, there were nearly a million men employed in the metal trades as a whole, although the engineering industry itself was rather smaller than this.¹ Engineers were concerned not with making the metal, but only with cutting, shaping and assembling it into a variety of products. These products included ships, but shipbuilding is defined as being outside of the engineering industry for the purposes of our study. This is because although engineers were involved in shipbuilding, the majority of workers in that industry were craftsmen of the shipbuilding trades (boilermakers, platers, caulkers, riveters, etc.) with their own quite distinct traditions.

By the outbreak of the First World War, the workforce of the metal industries had climbed to just over the one and three quarter million mark.² Much of this increase was due to the expansion of the engineering trades, and especially to the mushroom growth of the arms firms: Vickers, Beardmore, Armstrong-Whitworth, John Brown and Cammell Laird. These firms built massive factories on the Clyde and Tyne and spawned a whole number of sub-contracting firms to provide them with specialised tools and components. At the beginning of 1915, the Board of Trade discovered that most sizeable engineering firms in London were either directly contracted to the Government to produce arms, or were sub-contractors to a large arms firm or the Arsenal. They also found that Armstrong Whitworth had at least 1,500 sub-contractors, mostly in the North East and Scotland.³ By this time, of course, war production

¹J.S. Hinton, op.cit., p. 24 (Table 1).

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 26-27.

was well under way, and the metal trades workforce had begun to expand even more rapidly: between 1915 and 1918, it grew by an average 12.3% to reach nearly two and a half millions in mid-1918.¹

The huge arms firms had dominated war production in terms of shipbuilding, marine engineering, and shell and gun manufacture. Their concentration on these products, requiring large-scale investment in heavy, specialised plant proved a positive liability in adapting to peace time conditions by diversification. The aircraft and aero-engine manufacturers were in a much better position to return to their pre-war business of motor manufacture, on the other hand. They had been the beneficiaries of large-scale Government orders, and had been able to expand aero-engine production from a minor backwater into a major contributor to war production. The change over to motor car work presented few technical problems and could be approached with new plant.²

Thus, the engineering industry between the wars may be divided into two sectors in terms of its economic position: the traditional sector, based in the North-East, Scotland (and to a lesser extent in Lancashire and Yorkshire), making marine engines, arms, locomotives and textile machinery; and the new sector, based in the Midlands and the South East, making electrical and radio goods, motor cars and aircraft. The relative buoyancy of the 'new' industries may be seen in table 1, which shows the number of factories and workers engaged in different branches of engineering in 1924 and 1935. The Census of Production

¹J.S. Hinton, op.cit., p. 24.

²Ibid., pp. 27-28.

Table 1: Average Number of Establishments and Workers in Some of the Main Branches of Engineering, 1924 and 1935.

	Ave. no. of Establishments	Ave. no. of workers employed
Mechanical Engineering 1924	3,197	448,202
1935	3,133	432,611
Electrical Engineering 1924	722	150,884
1935	854	247,948
Motor vehicles, Cycles 1924	1,708	192,708
1935	2,541	279,748
Aircraft 1924	20	11,735
1935	52	35,032
Railway carriages and wagons 1924	101	29,495
1935	138	20,651

(Source: Census of Production, 1935)

Table 2: Unemployment in Some of the Main Branches of Engineering, 1923-39.

(Percentages, adjusted to nearest unit.)

	'23	'24	'25	'26	'27	'28	'29	'30	'31	'32	'33	'34	'35	'36	'37	'38	'39
General eng., engineers iron and steel founding	21	17	13	15	12	10	10	14	27	29	27	13	14	10	6	7	7
Electrical eng.	7	6	6	3	6	5	5	7	14	17	17	10	7	5	3	5	4
Motor vehicles cycles and aircraft	10	9	7	8	3	8	7	12	19	22	13	11	9	7	5	7	4
Shipbuilding and repair	44	30	34	40	30	25	25	28	52	62	62	51	44	33	24	21	21

(Source: Department of Employment and Productivity: Historical Abstract of British Labour Statistics (1971), Table 164, pp. 314-5.)

also shows how the engineering industry's centre of gravity was shifting towards the Midlands and the South. In 1930, in the branches covered by the Census, 20% of engineering workers were employed in Greater London, 25% in Lancashire and Yorkshire and slightly under 20% in the Midlands (Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire). In 1935, 25% worked in Greater London, less than 20% in Yorkshire and Lancashire, and 22% in the Midlands.¹

The position of the more depressed branches of the industry will be dealt with first. Shipbuilding and marine engineering was the largest of these, and the consequences of depression were therefore grave in terms of the unemployment caused. Shipbuilding as such is not our concern, but the fate of marine engineering is so obviously tied up with that of shipbuilding, that the distinction may largely be ignored in this case.

Shipbuilding and marine engineering were inextricably linked. Almost all of the shipbuilding firms undertook marine engineering work in their 'inside' departments, although some marine engineering concerns did not undertake shipbuilding.

After an initial boom in 1920 caused by a temporary increase in demand for ships, the bottom fell out of shipbuilding until the beginning of the Second World War. Government orders for warships were extremely few and far between, and world merchant demand was only slightly more buoyant.² In consequence, many yards were completely closed down, whilst marine engineering works had to look

¹ Census of Production, 1930, p. 35.

² Committee on Industry and Trade: Survey of Metal Industries (1928), pp. 382-3.

for alternative work to remain open. Vickers huge yard and works at Barrow had to take on work building locomotives, steam, diesel and gas engines.¹ Yet large firms like Vickers were relatively well off, because they could at least rely on some Government arms orders placed for the sake of preventing expensive specialised plant from becoming derelict.²

It was this Government concern that arms manufacturing capacity should not be destroyed by time that saved the large arms firms from extinction in the 1920s, and led to quite large Government investment in their plant during the rearmament period, from about 1935 onwards. The Admiralty was particularly worried about the facilities for such heavy work as gun-mounting. Naval guns could weigh as much as 1,500 tons and take three years to mount, requiring the use of heavy lifting tackle, cranes and so on.³ In 1935, the Admiralty made a quarter of a million pounds available to Vickers to expand their gun mounting facilities at Elswick (Newcastle),⁴ and Beardmores received similar sums for a programme of re-equipment for gun-mounting work from 1936 onwards.⁵ Thus, the major Admiralty contractors had been brought back to operational efficiency by the outbreak of the Second World War.

¹J.D. Scott, Vickers: A History (1962), p. 140.

²J.D. Scott and R. Hughes: The Administration of War Production (1955), p. 161.

³J.D. Scott, op.cit., pp. 220-1.

⁴W. Hornby: Factories and Plant (1958), p. 59.

⁵J.D. Scott, op.cit., p. 222.

There were many shipbuilding and marine engineering firms who were not so fortunate as to receive Government support between the wars. These firms felt the world depression in shipping very severely and had therefore to dismiss large numbers of workers. Consequently, shipbuilding had by far the highest rate of unemployment of any of the metal industries in this period, and these high rates were also felt (though less acutely) in marine engineering. Unemployment rates are given in table 2. Locomotive building was another very depressed branch of the industry centred on the Northern areas. Like shipbuilding, locomotive manufacture was mainly dependent on its ability to export, since British railway companies made their own locomotives.¹ Immediately after the war, there had been an increase in demand as some countries renewed their rolling stock after the ravages of war, but the revival was short lived. In 1921, 47,379 tons of locomotives were exported, but by 1927, this had slumped to 26,936 tons.² One of the industry's problems was its refusal to relax its high technical standards in a situation in which developing countries simply could not afford their inevitably high prices.³ This branch of the industry was revived by War Office orders for tanks, but these were small until just before the outbreak of war.⁴

The total number of workers employed in the metal trades as a whole continued to expand slightly during the 1920s, because the decline

¹W. Hornby, op.cit., pp. 58-60.

²Committee on Industry and Trade, loc. cit., p. 172.

³Ibid.

⁴W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 27.

in the numbers employed in the traditional sectors of the industry was more than offset by the increase in the number of those employed in the new sectors.¹ Easily the largest of these new branches was the manufacture of motor cars and bicycles.

Daimler set up the first British motor factory in Coventry in 1896. A large number of small experimental firms were thrown up in the Midlands during the years before and immediately after the First World War to try to develop viable motor cars.² In 1919 and 1920 alone, no less than forty new car firms were set up.³ By 1938, only twenty-two remained.⁴ The limited adoption of flow production methods by Austin and Morris had led to the elimination of the smaller firms; the best of them were gobbled up by the larger ones, whilst smaller concerns simply went bankrupt.

During this period, British car production increased tremendously quickly, and captured a large portion of the world market outside of the U.S.A. During the 1920s, production increased more than five-fold; about 35,000 cars were produced in 1920, which had become 182,000 by 1929.⁵ By 1938, total output stood at 341,000 cars, with the six largest firms (Morris, Austin, Ford, Vauxhall, Rootes and Standard) producing 92% of the total.⁶

¹ Committee on Industry and Trade, loc.cit., pp. 132-3.

² G.C. Unwin: The Industrial Revolution in the Black Country, 1860-1927 (1929), p. 297.

³ D.G. Rhys: The Motor Industry: An Economic Survey (1972), p. 9.

⁴ G. Maxcy: "The Motor Industry," in P.L. Cook (ed.), The Effects of Mergers (1958), p. 365.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 359 and 364.

⁶ Ibid., p. 367.

It is slightly deceptive to describe the progress of the motor manufacturers after 1935 solely in terms of motor car production. The major motor manufacturers were all employed on Air Ministry schemes for the production of aero engines from 1936 onwards. The car firms were thought to be the most adaptable to this sort of production, and they were brought in to a 'shadow' scheme to provide extra capacity to supplement the small existing aero-engine industry. Factories were to be built at Government expense, but run by their 'parent' companies under commercial wages and conditions. Initially, contracts were signed on a 'cost-plus' basis whereby when adapting to new work, the firms were paid a fixed profit on top of their costs. In subsequent contracts, total prices were supposed to be fixed, but in practice contractors would argue about the price until the contract was completed. In this way, they allowed for the inflation of costs caused by wage increases in both their own and sub-contractors' factories. The MAP had been unable to stamp this practice out by 1943, despite the fact that this type of contract (and this type of haggling) was typical of Government munitions contracts in general.¹

The 'shadow' scheme was firmly established by 1938, when the Air Ministry turned to the expansion of the 'professional' side of the aircraft industry, represented by the old established firms. The manufacturing capacity of these firms was expanded by Government expenditure on new factories and extensions to existing establishments. By September 1945, the entire factory building programme had cost the Air Ministry £425 millions. Once again, the motor and aircraft industries

¹ Report of the Select Committee on National Expenditure (1943), pp. 18-19.

(which were virtually indistinguishable in wartime) had benefitted considerably from rearmament and war. Modern, well-equipped factories were acquired from the Government at relatively low prices, and, as Political and Economic Planning put it, "considerable liquid assets" had been accumulated.¹

As we have already suggested, the old aircraft firms benefitted from rearmament at least as much as the motor companies. As we can see from table 1, there were very few firms involved in the actual building and assembly of aircraft in 1925, but the number of factories used for this purpose had more than doubled by 1935. The industry was not only compact in terms of the number of companies involved, but also had a highly concentrated structure of control by the mid-1930s. By this date, the core of the industry was owned by one large concern: Hawker-Siddeley, which controlled Armstrong-Siddeley Motors, Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft, A.V. Roe, Hawker Aircraft, Gloster Aircraft and Air Service and Aircraft Technical Services.² Vickers was another important controlling company, owning its own large factory at Weybridge, and buying Supermarine in 1928.³ De Havilland, Napiers and Saunders-Roe (linked through the A.V. Roe connection to Hawker-Siddeley) also developed their own offshoots.⁴ This tight-knit bloc of firms was allied through the Society of British Aircraft Constructors known as

¹Political and Economic Planning: The Motor Industry, in Planning, July 2, 1948, p. 25.

²A. Plummer, New British Industries in the Twentieth Century (1937), p. 98.

³J.D. Scott, op.cit., pp. 209-10.

⁴A. Plummer, op.cit., p. 98.

'The Ring' by other engineering employers.¹

The apparent breakdown of disarmament talks at the end of 1933 led to a good deal of speculation in aircraft shares. Hawker five shilling shares rose by 150% between July 1933 and May 1934; De Havilland's £1 shares registered a 200% rise between August 1933 and June 1934; Napier's five shilling shares showed a 400% increase between May 1933 and May 1934. Rolls-Royce, Vickers and components firms also showed large rises because of their links with the industry.² This tendency was further encouraged by the Government's announcement in early 1936 that orders for new aircraft were to be double the existing size. The Stock Exchange's confidence was quite justified. Between 1935 and 1938, the aircraft firms registered the following profits:

<u>Table 3</u>	1935: £767,146
	1936: £1,091,651
	1937: £1,637,543
	1938: £2,310,004 ³

Simultaneously, the number of workers employed in the industry rose considerably:

¹J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., p. 201.

An expert on the RAF made the following comments about 'The Ring':
 "Between 1935 and 1937 firms outside The Ring consistently made losses, while those inside it made profits.... No standards of competence or efficiency were exacted by the Government from the firms comprising The Ring. The Minister's policy seems to have been to maintain the privileges of the Approved Firms, although national security has been and still is at stake."
 (Lieut.-Commander R. Fletcher: Air Defence of Britain (1938), p.4)

²LR, June, 1934, p. 126.

³Ibid., August 1939, p. 170.

<u>Table</u> 4	1930: 17,600
	1935: 29,100
	1936: 60,000
	1938: 120,000
(spring)	1939: 140,000 ¹

In other words, the workforce expanded eightfold between 1930 and the spring of 1939.

This expansion went very much further during the war years themselves, as the Air Ministry concentrated on expanding the existing aircraft firms and the components industry from 1938 onwards. By 1943, the industry (including components and materials) was employing one and a half million workers, and was therefore the largest single manufacturing industry.² In the pre-war years, most of the new factories had been built in country areas in the South, with adjacent aerodromes. After the German air raids in the summer of 1940, the industry had to become much more geographically dispersed.³ Similarly, the trend towards larger factories dominating the industry which had been discernible from the mid-1930s was reversed as small workshops, garages and even back yards and bedrooms were made to serve as temporary factories and sub-assembly areas. But the old aircraft firms grew even more in importance during the war, as other engineering firms were brought under their supervision by means of 'agency' agreements to manufacture both complete aircraft and components.

¹ LR, August 1939, p. 169.

² W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 251.

³ Ibid., cap. 9.

It remains only to consider one other expanding sector of engineering which was itself gradually incorporated into the aircraft industry during the war years: electrical engineering. The main parts of electrical engineering (ignition magnetos for cars and aircraft and permanent magnets for telephones) had been practically non-existent in Britain prior to the First World War.¹ The war blocked off German supplies of these important components, and by 1926 Britain was entirely self-sufficient in them.² Between 1924 and 1930, the volume of production increased by 33%.³ Based mainly in the Midlands, the South of England and Lancashire, employers expanded their workforce considerably:

<u>Table 5</u>	1911: 85,000
	1921 : 175,000
	1931: 211,000
	1934: 257,830
	1936: 291,690 ⁴

By the later 1930s, many of these workers (including an unusually high proportion of women: 20% in London in 1929) were working for a few giant concerns. At this point, four companies controlled over 30% of the invested capital.⁵

¹A. Plummer, op.cit., p. 40.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 46.

⁴Ibid., p. 57.

⁵Ibid., p. 47.

By the outbreak of war, many of these workers were becoming directly or indirectly involved in arms production. This was especially the case in the larger concerns; Metropolitan-Vickers had been entrusted with undertaking gun production, and supervising other private firms in Lancashire taking on similar work.¹

By September 1939, most of the main features of wartime industrial organisation had already been determined. The crucial position of aircraft production had been recognised, and the 'shadow' factories were built or about to be built. The old arms firms had been helped to restore their plant to operational efficiency to enable them to play a key role in the manufacture of heavy armaments. Large numbers of small and medium sized engineering firms were being drawn into the orbit of one of these major sectors by sub-contracting. However, there was one feature which was slightly underdeveloped at this point: the expansion of the state-owned and managed Royal Ordnance Factories.

The importance of the Royal Ordnance Factories in engineering production was much greater than it had been during the First World War. The existing engineering ROFs at Woolwich and Enfield Lock were supplemented by twenty new factories at the peak of war production, employing just under 100,000 workers, and costing £31 millions for plant and buildings alone.² The Weir Committee had already decided in 1935 that the ROFs should provide the basis of small arms and ammunition production, but only three of a group of ten new gun factories had even been approved by the outbreak of war.³ Therefore, a high proportion of the new ROFs had to be built and brought into production during late 1939 and 1940.

¹W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 171.

²Ibid., p. 121, p. 133.

³Ibid., p. 124.

Despite this slow start, the policy of expanding the role of the ROFs in arms production was highly successful. The new factories were well-equipped, achieved high levels of efficiency on the basis of extensively diluted labour forces, and were little troubled by strikes.

Notwithstanding these facts, there were some problems in terms of the managerial chain of command in the new ROFs which gave rise to a certain amount of friction between plant management and the Ministry of Supply on the one hand, and management and trade unions on the other. These derived from the unclear position of the factory supervisors. Each factory had a supervisor appointed by the Ministry of Supply, to which the former was responsible. It was this latter responsibility which tended to cause the trouble, because supervisors were continually referring labour matters to the Ministry rather than dealing with them at plant level. Their fear of creating precedents in their factories which could be used elsewhere often appeared as simple delaying tactics to trade unionists. Some small attempts were made to overcome this problem during the war, but they did not tackle the problem radically, and it remained down to 1945.¹

Although the basic framework for the development of the engineering industry during the war had been established by September 1939, massive changes went on within that framework during the following six years. These changes were most important in terms of the position of engineering within industry as a whole, and, within engineering, in the dilution of the existing workforce.

The metal and engineering industries grew to an unprecedented size during the Second World War. At the peak of the industry's

¹W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 134 ff.

expansion in the First World War, 2,418,000 workers had been employed;¹ at the corresponding point in the Second World War, 3,594,700 were employed on Government work alone.² Within this large workforce, the largest single bloc was formed by those working on Ministry of Aircraft Production contracts. There were 1,678,200 workers in this category at the peak of production.³

The aircraft industry had expanded to this size largely by means of sub-contracting large amounts of component work to small and medium-sized companies. In the productive sense, the industry was still dominated by the old 'ring' firms, who supervised the extension of their work under the 'shadow' and 'agency' schemes as well as to their sub-contractors. At the height of war production, no less than fourteen thousand engineering factories were employed on MAP contracts.⁴

The major aim of this extensive use of sub-contracting was the maximum use of the skilled labour outside of the major engineering factories.⁵ This was one way of extending the pool of skilled labour available to the aircraft industry, but it clearly had a very definite limit, at the point where all the suitable skilled labour in Britain was being used. By the beginning of 1942, this point had been reached.

¹J.S. Hinton, op.cit., p. 24.

²P. Inman: Labour in the Munitions Industries (1957), p. 3.

³Ibid.

⁴W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 80.

⁵P. Inman, op.cit., p. 24.

There was an acute and general shortage of skilled labour, which could only be overcome through the more efficient use of the skilled workers available, i.e., dilution.

There were a number of problems involved in diluting the labour force, ranging from managerial reluctance and inefficiency, through an insufficient supply of unskilled labour, to opposition from the skilled men themselves. But the central problem was the existing technological level of the given factory. The other factors enumerated tended to even out across different branches of engineering, but dilution could not be undertaken unless the machine tools and methods appropriate to mass-production were adopted, and it was clearly more difficult to do this in factories which had a high proportion of old plant.

Thus, in order to provide some background to the levels of dilution achieved in the different branches of engineering, it is important to first survey the methods of production commonly in use. In doing this, the industry has to be divided not only into its constituent branches, but also into machining and assembly sectors within each branch, so that some appropriate comparisons may be made between the different branches.

The machining side of the industry will be considered first. Here, automatic machinery (usually American or German in origin) and the use of flow-production to link up machines typify the mass-production methods used in motor and electrical production and adapted during the war to aero- and tank engines. Modern machinery and flow-production (which will be described in more detail in the next chapter) had been largely introduced by the motor manufacturers by the late 1930s. Thus, when W.F. Watson went to work in the turnery of a motor factory in the early 1930s, he found that:

"... The machinery was reasonably modern: at any rate, in good condition. The auto, turret, grinding and brass shops, the drifting plant and

the toolroom, were good." 1

Watson's experience seems to have been typical. The motor industry was the most active of all sectors of British engineering in importing American machine tools between the wars.² Austin, Morris and Ford had pioneered with the new machines and methods in the early 1920s (from 1911 in the case of Ford). Morris linked up transfer machines to form a continuous machining sequence at his Coventry factory as early as 1923, although he had later to abandon this.³

During the war, the greatest demand for automatic and special purpose American machine tools (considerably more advanced than their British equivalents, where equivalents existed) came from the aero-engine machining departments.⁴ By 1941, almost one-third of the Ministry of Aircraft Production's demand for machine tools was satisfied by American imports.⁵ The general tendency was towards the situation described by Vic Feather when he visited Ford's Dagenham plant (largely engaged in aero-engine work) in 1944:

"Different jobs within Ford's have been broken down to such an extent that workers... are not divided into occupational groups... Different jobs are so machined that a transfer from one job to another can be easily effected. The workers in the main are machine operators." 6

¹W.F. Watson: "The Working Mechanic's View", in C.T. Cramp: The Workers' View. A Symposium, (1933), p. 16.

²W. Hornby, p. 328.

³H.A. Turner, G. Clack, G. Roberts: Labour Relations in the Motor Industry (1967), p. 78.

⁴W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 311.

⁵Ibid., p. 315.

⁶TUC 602.57.4. Memo. by V. Feather, 21 February, 1944.

It would probably be wrong to ascribe a similar level of automation to British-owned firms on similar work, since Ford was the great pioneer of mass-production methods in Britain as well as the USA.¹ Nevertheless, Ford was setting an example which some British firms had gone a long way towards emulating.

In marine engineering, on the other hand, machining processes were antiquated throughout the inter-war years, and this situation persisted into the war. The official historian accurately described technology in these factories as 'persistently regressive'. The majority of machines in some works dated from the First World War or before, whilst one firm had machinery reaching seventy years old in 1942.² This type of machinery could not be run at acceptable speeds, and caused bottlenecks during the war despite special shift arrangements to ensure maximum use.³ All of these facts were unearthed by an Admiralty inquiry of 1942. It is doubtful whether the inquiry led to a great improvement; most of the money allocated to improvement went to shipyard development and the extension of welding facilities in the yards, rather than to the engine works.⁴

The contrast was equally sharp on the assembly side of the industry. Austin, Morris and Ford had all introduced conveyors into assembly work by the early 1930s (Ford: 1933; Austin, 1925; Morris: 1933).⁵ (Ford's,

¹In luxury motor manufacture, skilled men still constituted as much as 15% of the direct production workforce in some British car plants in the 1950s. (H.A. Turner et al., op.cit., p. 86.)

²W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 55.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., pp. 57-8.

⁵R.A. Leeson: Strike (1973), p. 126.
Z.E. Lambert and R.J. Wyatt: Lord Austin. The Man (1968), pp. 142-5.
P.W.S. Andrews: The Life of Lord Nuffield. A Study in Enterprise and Benevolence (Oxford, 1955), p. 197. See also the photograph facing p. 225.

as one might expect, set an example in this field by using conveyors on several assembly jobs when the Dagenham factory was opened in 1933.¹ Conveyors were used wherever possible in the important new group of 'shadow' factories built in the late 1930s to supplement existing aero-engine capacity.² During the war, many other factories of this type adopted these methods. At the Humber, Coventry, conveyors had been introduced on staff and scout car production by the end of the war; Austin introduced the assembly line to jerrican production in its South Wales factory; the new engineering ROFs used conveyors for a number of processes.³ Thus, by the end of the war, substantial advances had been made in this direction.

Marine and heavy engineering were far less amenable to these methods. The marine engine normally took months to erect, even in wartime. Even extensive use of sub-assembly was difficult, because an extremely large and complicated mechanism was involved. The only type of work undertaken by the arms firms on which something approaching continuous flow production could be undertaken was tank building. Vickers-Armstrong, who had previous experience of this type of work, were able to use a system at their Elswick works whereby tanks were taken through all the stages of construction by being moved through their adjacent assembly shops. It was the realisation that this sort of method could be adopted in tank production that led the War Office to begin to

¹Conveyor, January, 1937.

²W. Hornby, pp. 229-30.

³Minutes of a Works Conference held at the Humber Co., February 1, 1945. Z.E. Lambert and R.J. Wyatt, op.cit., p. 167 and The Times: British War Production. A Record, photograph on p. 57. E. Frow, 3 April, 1974.

give tank work to motor manufacturers in the latter years of the war.¹

Both in machining and assembly methods, the marine and heavy engineering firms were well behind the electrical and motor concerns which provided supplementary capacity for the aero-engine industry during the war. The airframe and aircraft assembly firms of 'the ring' fell, as quite a skilled branch, somewhere in between these two models. By the end of 1941, dilution had reached a point at which these companies could be regarded as broadly similar to the motor and electrical model. Prior to 1935 and the increase in metal aircraft dictated by the Government contracts, airframes had been largely made of wood. Therefore, most of the workers were skilled woodworkers, and woodworking continued to be important in the London area where the Mosquito was manufactured throughout the war period. In general, wood gave way to metal, and this meant employing large numbers of skilled sheet metal workers and other skilled engineers,² for what The Aeroplane described as 'light accurate work of varied character'.³

Dilution was much more difficult in this part of the industry than it was in the aero-engine sector. New machines could be introduced on some operations, but sheet metal work remained as the great bottleneck. This was exacerbated by the fierce opposition to dilution of the sheet metal workers, who successfully managed to defy Government attempts to induce them to accept female dilution throughout the entire war.⁴ The Ministry of Aircraft Production, through its Technical Officers

¹J.D. Scott, op.cit., pp. 284-5.

²W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 197.

³The Aeroplane, January 22, 1936.

⁴P. Inman, op.cit., pp. 60-62.

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attached to the aircraft firms began to bring this sector into line with the aero-engine firms during 1941. At Vickers' Castle Bromwich factory (building Spitfires), the NAP succeeded in bringing in and upgrading women, to bring the factory up to the average level of dilution obtained in the motor vehicle, cycle and aircraft firms in 1941¹. Thus, it seems that table 26, which lumps motor vehicles, cycles and aircraft together, does not conceal any large differences between the different sectors within the category.

To summarise the argument so far. The marine and heavy sectors, concentrated in the North of England and in Scotland were in a much more difficult position with respect to their product markets in the inter-war years than were the motor, electrical and aircraft sectors of the Midlands and the South. The Northern branches of the industry tended also to be technologically backward compared to their Southern counterparts.

At this point, we turn our attention to the implications of this division of the industry in terms of the skill, unemployment and trade union structure obtaining in the inter-war years. This section is arranged in the following way: first, some figures on trade union membership and unemployment are presented; next, the proportion of skilled workers in four major engineering districts is established; finally, it is argued that neither trade union membership nor shop floor organisation are simply and mechanically related to unemployment, but that the proportion of skilled men in the workforce is an important factor that needs to be considered.

The first problem to be considered will be that of the 'skill-mix' in the districts. It is possible to obtain quite a good idea of this from the 1931 Census by analysing the number of workers in the constituent occupations on the machining side of the industry (as distinct from assembly, where it is not possible to establish a similar relationship between different groups of workers). The key relationship for an analysis of skill is that between the number of workers in the hold-all category of 'metal machinist' and the number of tool-setters and toolmakers. In addition, to supplement and confirm these results, the ratio of female to male metal machinists is used.

The first relationship (between the number of machinists and the number of toolmakers and setters) is important because it shows how many skilled men were required to service the machinists. Mass production methods of machining became increasingly widespread in general and electrical engineering, and especially in motor manufacture, during the 1920s, as components rapidly became standardised. Special purpose machine tools were linked together by flow-lines for the production of components, replacing the all-purpose universal grinding and milling machines, and centre lathes. These special purpose machines were fitted with high speed steel tools of increasing strength and durability, so that they could perform the maximum amount of operations before breaking or wearing.¹ Thus, all that was required was a workforce of machine operators of rather less skill than the specialised journeymen machinists.² At the same time, skilled workers were required to set

¹ Jefferys, p. 244. Jefferys quotes the example of 'Widia' tipped tools at Leyland Motors, the introduction of which led to an increase of 60% in chassis production without any extra labour.

² The effects of this on the type of work that could be carried out by the semi-skilled, and the impact on trade unionism, are dealt with in an unsigned article in The Worker, April 5, 1929.

the machines and small tools up for the semi-skilled operators, just as they were for making the tools in the first place. These were the roles of the toolsetters and toolmakers respectively.

Looking at these relationships in table ⁶ it is apparent that the dilution of skill was most advanced in Coventry, and that Manchester was the next most advanced along the same road. Newcastle was some way behind, and although the categories of toolmaker and setter were not used by the Scottish Census, the male-female ratio allows the suspicion that Glasgow's skill-mix was of a similar order. These results are broadly confirmed by table ⁷, in which it is immediately apparent that the Coventry employers had been easily the most successful in introducing women into the workshops as machinists, and that there was very little to differentiate the other districts.

In the North-East and Scotland, the sort of organisation of machining described above did not exist to anything like the same extent as it did in the Southern mass production centres. The type of machinist to be found in the North was still the man who made (or at least part-machined) his own tools. Since almost every job was different, he would calculate the 'speeds and feeds' required to complete the work as quickly as possible without subjecting either the tools or the work to undue stress. He would then collect a tool from his own toolbox or make one for the job and grind it himself. Alternatively, of course, he could have recourse to the toolmakers or the stores. He would then see the job through all the various operations required, possibly with the help of a labourer if the work was heavy. When the term 'machinist' was applied to these men, it clearly meant skilled machinist (normally a turner or miller, since most of the other categories were specified in the Census), because skilled men were much less important for the replacement of small tools than they were in Coventry or even Manchester.

Although these figures relate to 1931, they are reasonably reliable as a general indication of skill at least for the subsequent seven years, since the engineering employers estimated the extent of dilution as well under five percent in the interim.¹ Dilution accelerated much more quickly during the war, but it seems likely that the changes were necessarily constrained by the existing local plant, and that these relationships continued to hold good in general terms at least.

Table 6

TABLE SHOWING THE PROPORTION OF SKILLED MACHINISTS AMONGST METAL MACHINISTS IN FOUR MAJOR DISTRICTS.

	GLASGOW	COVENTRY	MANCHESTER	NEWCASTLE
Toolmakers and Toolsetters	N/K*	1,360	640	104
Metal Machinists		7,601	6,059	2,302
Number of machinists per toolmaker and setter		5.6	9.4	22.1

(1931 Census) [England and Wales Occupation Tables (1931) pp. 236-7, 316-7, 364-5]

*Category not used in Scottish Census.

¹Engineering and Allied Trades National Federation and AEU; Proceedings at a Special Conference, December 6, 1938, p. 21.

Table 7

TABLE SHOWING THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN AMONGST 'METAL MACHINISTS' IN
FOUR MAJOR DISTRICTS, 1931.

	COVENTRY	MANCHESTER	NEWCASTLE	GLASGOW
Women	1,163	202	120	414
Men	6,438	5,857	2,812	8,604
Percentage	18%	3.4%	3.5%	4.8%

(1931 Census) [*As for previous table, and Census of Scotland (1932), p. 106*]

These figures give us a rough idea of the proportion of piece workers in the different areas. Broadly speaking, piece working was introduced as dilution increased, and that form of payment became more feasible as operations were broken down into readily identifiable parts. Thus, the proportion of piece workers in the industry as a whole increased with the proportion of semi-skilled between 1923 and 1940.¹ J.B. Jefferys estimated that a high proportion of fully skilled men were time workers in this period.² Detailed figures are not available to show directly the number of piece workers in each area, but it seems clear that the dilution of the traditional skills was a prerequisite of introducing piece work.

The proportion of skilled workers in each district will be returned to in order to help explain local variations in trade union organisation, the other main relationship which needs to be established. Trade union membership has to be related to the number of workers eligible

¹ J.B. Jefferys p. 210

² Ibid.

for the AEU, and then considered against the background of different skill distributions and levels of unemployment. There are some important problems to be considered when performing these operations if we are not to be misled as to the significance of the result. First of all, the number of AEU members has to be compared to the number of possible members, using the AEU Monthly Report and the 1931 Census as sources. The main problem in this connection is the fact that the Census boundaries never coincide with those of the AEU branches. Next, the resultant figure has to be considered against the background of the unemployment rate. Once again, there is the problem of geographical boundaries, but in this case there is an additional problem posed by the fact that unemployment figures by Labour Exchanges are not available. We have therefore to rely on M.P. Fogarty's statistics for 1932, since he did have access to Labour Exchange records. It is unlikely that very much error is thereby incurred, since the relationship between the different towns is unlikely to have changed in such a short period.

Table 7 shows the result of the first operation, the object of which is to find out what proportion of employed and unemployed engineers belonged to the AEU. It shows that around a fifth of Coventry and Manchester engineers, about a tenth of Glasgow engineers, and just over a half of those in Newcastle belonged to the AEU. Clearly, the figures which deserve the most critical attention are those at either extreme: Glasgow and Newcastle. Taking Glasgow first, it seems that the figure is likely to be reasonably accurate, for two reasons. Firstly, the average total size of branches was the lowest of all the districts, at 170 compared to 225 on average in the other districts.¹ Secondly, Glasgow

¹ Calculated from AEU Monthly Journal, January, 1931.

had the highest proportion of unemployed members in their branches, with 24% compared to Newcastle's 21%, and Coventry and Manchester's 14%.¹ Trade union membership was clearly at a low point in Glasgow, and this can probably be linked to the importance of exceptionally depressed sectors of the engineering industry such as locomotive engineering in the town.² The Newcastle figure is much more suspect than its Glasgow equivalent, even if only because the town had a broadly similar industrial structure to that of Glasgow.³ There is one

Table 8

TABLE SHOWING THE PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYED AND UNEMPLOYED ENGINEERING WORKERS ELIGIBLE FOR THE AEU WHO WERE MEMBERS IN JANUARY 1931.

	<u>Glasgow</u>	<u>Coventry</u>	<u>Manchester</u>	<u>Newcastle</u>
Number of AEU members	2,216	3,224	3,592	4,429
Total number of local workers eligible for AEU.	21,414	16,128	16,132	8,146
% AEU membership.	9.7	19.9	22.2	54.3

(Sources: AEU Monthly Journal and 1931 Census).

Notes on Table.

The table includes employed and unemployed workers in both cases, and therefore may reflect different habits with regard to the retention of membership among the unemployed. It may also reflect the whims of branch secretaries in recording such workers as members. Therefore, it does not show the strength of shop floor organisation in the different areas.

¹ Calculated from AEU Monthly Journal, January, 1931.

² Committee on Industry and Trade, loc.cit., pp. 180-182.

³ H.A. Mess: Industrial Tyneside (1928), caps. 3 and 4, pp. 39-65.

Certain categories of engineering worker have been pruned from the Census definition of metalworker, in order to reflect potential AEU membership as closely as possible. These are those who had alternative unions catering for them, or those who were known to be almost completely unorganised. They are: patternmakers, tinsmiths, coppersmiths, mechanical engineers.

Table 9
TABLE SHOWING THE MONTHLY AVERAGE UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST INSURED WORKERS

<u>DURING 1932.</u>	
Glasgow:	30.7%
Coventry:	15.1%
Manchester:	18.7%
Newcastle:	26.7%

(Source: M.P. Fogarty, Prospects of the Industrial Areas of Great Britain (1945), pp. 31-33).

possible cause of error in this case:

the town had an exceptionally low number of engineers, with less than half of the number ascribed to Coventry and Manchester. It seems likely that the boundaries have ~~interfered~~ ^{at} this point to decrease the number of engineers.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that Newcastle did have a good membership record when compared to the other areas, because the absolute total of AEU members was the highest by 19% over Manchester, its nearest rival. Why was this? Before answering the question, it should be recalled that it was not simply a high proportion of unemployed members, as we have already seen in the proportions of unemployed members quoted earlier. One likely explanation might be the identification of the skilled engineer with his union, which may have been strained beyond breaking point in the case of Glasgow.¹ It is also possible that the

¹ On this question of the different attitudes of skilled and semi-skilled workers to trade union membership, see J.D.M. Bell: Union Structure in A. Flanders and H.A. Clegg, (eds.) The System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain (1951), pp. 134-5.

District Committees and branch secretaries were especially keen in the area. In any event, it would be very difficult to evaluate the relative impact of these factors, and we must be content with establishing this fact, however tenuously.

The importance of the figures can be briefly indicated here, because of the light it throws on the subsequent analysis. They help us to understand the hold of the right wing in Newcastle because they were able to hold on to the membership very effectively in the face of high levels of unemployment, thus denying the Communist Party the opportunities they had elsewhere for organising workers into the trade unions. Conversely, it is possible to see how the CP was able to establish itself in Glasgow despite the small scale of industrial expansion there during the war.

There is a good deal of literary evidence to support the contention that differences in trade union membership might be at least partly understandable in terms of the different levels of skill. If we consider the areas of new and expanding industry in the Midlands and South, then we can see the importance of skill quite clearly. During 1931, the TUC carried out a survey of these areas to discover how trade union membership compared with the rest of the country. The secretary of the committee responsible for the survey wrote that:

"... so far as could be ascertained there was little sign of activity in the localities concerned in the survey of new and rapidly expanding industries." ¹

The example of Coventry was typical. Unions catering for the craftsmen were doing well; the sheet metal workers and coppersmiths were "well organised and approaching 100%. They are quite capable of looking after their organisation." The report on the National Union of Vehicle

¹TUC D.30,
Minutes of Organisation Committee, January 19, 1932.

Builders pointed to one of the reasons for poorer membership in their union:

"... a very good branch. Up till recently practically 100% and very powerful: recent depression and changes in methods (rationalisation) has somewhat weakened them, but they are still strong." 1

The overall remarks dealt with the semi-skilled and women:

"Craftsmen generally (not including the large number of specialised engineers in the motor industry) are fairly well organised. General workers poor to bad. Women very poor." 2

Clearly, the rapid rate of technological change in the motor industry was taking its toll of trade union organisation. Relatively high earnings might sometimes be obtained by exploiting 'loose' piece rates, but the report asserted that this could prove an obstruction to trade unionism, and was certainly not a result of it.³

The Northern engineering centres did not at least have to deal with rapid technological change,⁴ although unemployment there was much higher, and that in turn meant a greater likelihood of the victimisation of shop stewards. The Organising District Delegate of the AEU for

¹TUC D30.Reply of Coventry, January 28, 1931.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 55.

Clydeside reported in 1931 that:

"The situation has had an extremely detrimental effect on the shop organisation, quite a number of convenors and shop stewards, who have rendered excellent service in years past, have been amongst the number whose services have terminated." 1

This was not surprising, but the Organising District Delegates' report went on to show that shop steward activity was still far from being extinct. He briefly reported a meeting of a district shop stewards' organisation called the 'Joint Trades Shop Stewards' in Greenock, as well as a meeting of the 'Glasgow and West of Scotland Organising Trade Union Committee', attended by officials and stewards of the major unions.² Mass meetings were still being held, even in the depths of the Depression. At the North British Locomotive Co., the engineers met to discuss resistance to the company's attempt to change over from piece work to day rate on some sections because of the shortage of work.³

The AEU stewards kept up their quarterly meetings which they were allowed under rule. Indeed, the Depression conditions do not seem to have dampened their enthusiasm at all; the Glasgow Organiser reported that the November 1931 Quarterly meeting was "as usual" well attended, despite the fact that it had to be held on a week night instead of the usual Sunday night. The Organiser went on to say that "given the stimulus of more satisfactory conditions their efforts would be more fruitful".⁴ Some of the other skilled trades in engineering were equally active in the area, and one or two were probably better organised in the workshops. During 1930, the United Patternmakers expressed pleasure at a largely attended meeting of convenors on the Clyde.⁵ In most engineering trades,

¹ AEU Monthly Journal, March, 1931.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., January, 1931.

⁴ Ibid., November, 1931.

⁵ United Patternmakers Association Report, August, 1930.

a district meeting of convenors would have been a small one indeed! ⁷⁰
This evidence is a further reminder of the dangers involved in suggesting any simple and direct connection between trade union membership and shop organisation. Skilled workers in particular were doggedly persistent in maintaining some form of shop floor organisation, however rudimentary.¹

In conclusion, it is clear that the central division between the two main sectors of the industry posited in the first part of the chapter was also to be found when the proportion of skilled workers in the workforces of the different districts was examined. Skill was found to be an important factor in determining the extent of trade union membership and the level of shop floor union work, and this meant that the secular trend towards decline in the older branches of engineering was to some extent mitigated in trade union terms by the nature of the workforce.

* * *

¹The question of what shop stewards were able to do remains an important, and unanswered one which requires more detailed research. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that 'craft' concerns such as dilution took up more of the Northern stewards time, while piece work was a major issue for their counterparts in Coventry. Thus, we find the Clydeside Organising District Delegate of the AEU reporting in May 1936:

"A number of complaints have been considered by the Glasgow DC with reference to the employment of certain classes of labour, semi-skilled and unskilled, which indicated attempts at dilution, and from which it would appear that this, in the main, is the result of increased activity on the part of the increasing number of shop stewards, rather than a radical change of practice on (sic) some of the firms concerned".

(AEU Monthly Journal, November 1936.)

In Coventry, on the other hand, the AEU DC considered seven strikes during 1935 and 1936; four of these concerned piece working. (AEU DC, January 8, July 23, 1935; September 8, 24, October 6, 27, 1936) Similarly in Oxford, piece work was a factor in all of the strikes (nine) that made Pressed Sreel the most strike-prone factory in the motor industry in the inter-war period.

Appendix: Wages and Earnings in the major

Engineering districts before the war.

Two tables are appended to this chapter to show the level of wages obtaining in the major engineering districts before the war. Table ¹⁰ shows the earnings of skilled fitters in Coventry, and on the Clyde and Tyne. Table ¹¹ gives the wages of apprentices in these districts and Lancashire after the advances won in the apprentices' strikes of 1937.

In both tables, a considerable gap exists between the earnings and wages obtaining in Coventry compared to the other districts. A relatively low rate of unemployment and extensive piece working explain Coventry's position. The gap between Coventry and the other two districts shown in table ¹⁰ widens even further after only nine months of war, so that Coventry fitters were by then earning well over half as much again as fitters on the Clyde and Tyne.

Table 10Comparative Earnings of Skilled Fitters

	<u>Oct. 1936</u>		<u>Oct. 1938</u>		<u>July 1940</u>	
	Ave. earnings	Ave. hours	Ave. earnings	Ave. hours	Ave. earnings	Ave. hours
Coventry	91/9	48.5	107/1	46.7	193/11½	57.6
Clyde	71/8¾	49.6	86/-	51.5	116/10¾	57.7
Tyne	73/1¾	50.3	85/7¼	51.3	118/4	57.8

Notes

- 1) No comparable figures are available for Manchester. The Manchester rate for skilled fitters in October 1936 was 63/-. (M.L. Yates: Wages and Labour Conditions in British Engineering (1937)), and if allowance is made for piece work bonus at the national average of 33½%, shift allowances and overtime payments, then Manchester's earnings would be second only to Coventry's.
- 2) The standard week in engineering throughout the period was 47 hours.

Source: Engineering Employers' Federation: Average Hours and Earnings of Fitters... Time and Payments by Results workers combined.

Table //Apprentices' Wages, October, 1937

	Age 14	15	16	17	18	19	20
COVENTRY							
Payment by results							
Min.	9/-	11/-	13/-	16/-	19/-	23/-	26/-
Max.	13/-	15/-	18/6	22/-	27/-	30/-	34/-
Dayworkers							
Min.	10/-	12/-	14/-	16/-	19/-	23/-	26/-
Max.	13/-	17/-	21/6	26/-	31/-	34/-	38/-
Dayworkers in Toolrooms, Pattern and Drop Forging Shops.	-	-	-	-	35/-	39/-	44/-
MANCHESTER	13/-	14/-	16/6	18/6	24/-	27/6	32/-
NORTH EAST COAST							
Apprentices	-	-	12/6	14/6	17/6	21/6	26/6
Boys & Youths	9/-	10/6	17/-	20/-	23/6	27/6	32/6
NORTH WEST							
Fitters	-	-	11/6	14/-	16/6	20/6	25/-
Turners, etc.	-	-	12/6	15/-	17/6	21/6	26/-

Source: LAB 10/80. Table dated 28 October, 1937.

The Communist Party in
the Engineering Industry (1) 1927-1939.

This chapter is devoted to an examination of the nature and history of Communist organisation in the engineering industry between 1927 and 1959, focussing in particular on the events of 1936 and 1937. These years saw the growth of a national unofficial organisation in the aircraft industry, a large wave of strikes among engineering apprentices and trainees all over the country, and a prolonged debate within the CP on the direction which rank and file movements should take. They are covered in some detail because they allow us to examine the relationship between the internal debates and the actual shop-floor practice of Communist engineers. In this way, it is hoped to provide some basis for generalisation about the importance of theory to Communist industrial activity.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The opening section deals with two sets of theoretical debates: the first concerned the question of whether or not the policy of dual unionism should be implemented or not, and was carried on in the Coventry branch of the MM in 1928. The other, more important discussion, centred on the matter of what direction the nascent rank and file movements should take, and was carried on in the pages of the CP internal journal Discussion during 1936. The middle section gives an account of the birth and early development of the Aircraft Shop Stewards' National Council and its paper New Propellor, the apprentices' strikes of 1937, and the day-to-day role of Communists as trade union organisers in the 1950s. Finally, some general reflections on the importance of theoretical debates (and of theory in general) to CP activists in engineering are offered, based on the information presented in the previous two sections.

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Since an important aim of the subsequent pages is to relate CP theory to their shop floor practice, there is no need to become too deeply immersed in defining our terms. To a large extent they are defined for us by more competent theorists as we follow the contemporary debates. However, it may be helpful to begin by reminding the reader that discussions on the nature of rank and file movements had taken place prior to the founding of the CPGB.

Indeed, not only the first, but perhaps also the clearest definition of the ideal relationship between a rank and file movement and the trade union officials was that given by the Clyde Workers' Committee in 1915:

"We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them." ¹

Thus, the Committee aimed to work within the trade unions of which they were members, and not to build dual unions. On the other hand, they were willing to take direct action as soon as they felt that the officials were misrepresenting the workers. This conception of how a rank and file movement should operate was taken up and developed by J.T. Murphy in his pamphlet The Workers' Committee (Sheffield, 1917), which was accepted as official policy by the National Administrative Committee of the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement. ²

In broad terms, the CP's organisation in the trade unions, the Minority Movement, adopted a similar position between 1924 and 1928.

¹ Clyde Workers' Committee: 'Fellow Workers', quoted by J.S. Hinton in 'The Clyde Workers' Committee and the Dilution Struggle', in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.): Essays in Labour History (vol. 2), 1886-1923 (1971), p. 164, note 54.

² Ibid., p. 165, note 11

The Communist Party's organisation in the trade unions, the Minority Movement, could not, even if it had wanted to, adopt a theory such as that held by the CWC without modifications. This was because the context in which it had to operate was quite different to that of the years 1915-1918. After a brief post-war 'boom', mass unemployment set in, enabling the engineering employers to break the strength of the shop floor union organisation through the lockout of 1922. The employers' victory in the lockout meant that the Metalworkers' Minority Movement (MM) could never hope to organise action independently of the officials, because the shop stewards had been destroyed as a force in the factories. The entirely understandable failure of the MM to make much headway in the factories led, it has been argued by two recent historians of the movement, to a close and dependent relationship with the left trade union leaders such as Swales of the AEU.¹ Up until the General Strike, the MM lent uncritical support to these officials, only to regret it after the defeat of the strike. With the debacle came a fundamental reappraisal of the MM's strategy; many militants, both inside and outside the MM, felt disillusioned with trade union leaders of both left and right, and were therefore receptive to the Comintern suggestion, first made at the end of 1927, that 'independent', dual unions should be formed in direct opposition to the existing 'reformist' trade unions.

¹ This argument is put forward by J.S. Hinton and R. Hyman in their book Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party. (1975).

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What did the new line mean as far as shop floor work was concerned? First and foremost, it meant that more energy was to be devoted to industrial work, since it was only through a 'united front from below' that the willingness of the masses to fight could be organised and directed independently of the officials. The vehicle for organising the rank and file was to be the factory committee. The factory committee was not to be of the 'old style' (the shop stewards' committee), but a separate body, organising both union and non-union workers.¹ Non-union workers were to assume particular importance in the factory committees, because they had shown their appreciation of the role of the reformist bureaucracy by leaving or refusing to join unions.² Finally, there was the usual Comintern reservation that work should be carried on in the reformist unions; the new line should not be interpreted as meaning that this type of work should be entirely ignored.³ Particular emphasis was placed on defending militants who were expelled from the unions.

It was immediately evident to the older section of the MM membership, who had heard these arguments before between 1912 and 1920, that the policy could only lead to disaster in the British situation. It proved very difficult for the Party leadership to impose the new line at all (indeed, the majority of them had initially opposed it in Moscow)⁴ and a battle for its acceptance had to be waged within both the CP and the MM during 1928. Arthur Horner, the President of the MM, protested that the reformist unions were being ignored, and his misgivings reflected those of a considerable section of the MM membership.⁵

¹ J. Degras, The Communist International, 1919-43. Documents.
Vol. 2 (Oxford, 1960), p. 434.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., Vol. 3 (Oxford, 1965), pp. 93-4.

⁴ Ibid., Vol. 2, pp. 434-5.

⁵ Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 430 ff.; B. Pearce: Some Past Rank and File Movements (1959), p. 23.

The only extant minutes of an MM branch, those of Coventry, show that there was very little support for the new line in that town. During May 1928, the branch discussed the topic "Shall We Form Red Trade Unions". The large majority was opposed to the idea, with the sole exception of one unemployed member.¹

Nevertheless, the MM leadership eventually managed to persuade at least some of the MM of the need for the implementation of the new policies. These policies undoubtedly contributed to the decline and eventual demise of the MM in the next four years.

There is little point in dwelling on the reverses suffered by the MM in the last four years of its life; these have been documented by Roderick Martin in his Communism and the British Trade Unions (1969). It is sufficient to note that the Metalworkers MM was dissolved in 1932 after four years of declining influence.²

The next three years (1932-35) saw a gradual revival of Communist influence in the engineering industry. This was led by the new CP paper for engineering, The Engineers' Bulletin, first published in September 1934.³ Only six months later, the CP received a tremendous fillip from their involvement in the Hawker aircraft strike which led to the publication of a national paper for aircraft manufacturing. These developments, which will be dealt with in more detail below, put the question of the best course for a rank and file movement back on the agenda within the CP itself. For some, the new paper smacked of 'independent' trade unionism of a Third Period type, and was therefore suspect. Others thought that it offered considerable opportunities both for the CP and the trade unions. These tensions emerged in an internal debate in 1936.

The discussion was opened by 'PJ' in the CP journal Discussion, with an important article entitled

¹ R. Croucher: "The Coventry Minority Movement", in Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, Spring 1975.
² R. Martin, op.cit., p. 177.
³ To be found in the Tanner collection, Nuffield College Library, Oxford.

"Why We Don't Want Rank and File Movements" in January 1936.¹

'PJ' asserted that there were two possible uses for a rank and file movement: either to strengthen the existing trade union machinery, or to act independently of it. If the first possibility was what was being sought after, then it was a waste of time, because it simply duplicated the existing structure.

The second alternative was also rejected:

"(the movement) is harmful because it represents a diversion of energy which should be used by the militant and progressive forces to win the union machine and because it tends to develop serious splitting activities which bring a section of workers into conflict with the trade union." 2

Another argument used by 'PJ' was especially emotive, because he linked the failure of Third Period trade union tactics (he obviously considered a rank and file movement to apertain to that period) with Hitler's rise in Germany. The RGO- the German Red Trade Union opposition - had divided the working class and let Hitler in.³ 'PJ' thought that to be a shop steward or branch official was quite sufficient; he ridiculed the idea of a rank and file movement in the AEU:

"Would anyone propose building a rank and file movement in the AEU, where there are already branches, area committees and District Committees and official union support and recognition for shop stewards and shop stewards' committees?" 4

¹Discussion, January 1936, (M/S)

²Ibid., p. 9.

³Ibid., p. 10.

⁴Ibid.

Many of his readers must have gasped with astonishment when they read this last statement, and wondered where 'PJ' had been hiding in the previous few months. A rank and file movement was not only proposed, it was well under way in the AEU.

Arthur Downton took up his pen to reply to 'PJ'. The remarkable feature of the exchange is the area of agreement between the two protagonists. Downton's article began:

"It is with some hesitation that I take up the pen to reply to so valiant a fighter for the working class as PJ. Who can deny that the general line of his arguments is correct?"¹

Downton gently reminded 'PJ' of the existence of the aircraft shop stewards and the New Propellor, stating that the latter was not, unlike official union journals, gagged in any way. Positions had to be campaigned for, and democracy extended in the unions. How else could this be done?² Finally, Downton pointed out that rank and file movements existed to provide 'alternative and/or additional leadership'. He referred to the positive role that the CP shop stewards had played in the Hawker strike by keeping the officials out.³ This last point is obviously where Downton came most clearly into conflict with 'PJ' but it is also where his argument ends. He did not expand on his point and say why alternative leadership might be necessary. Alternative leadership was obviously seen by 'PJ' as part of 'splitting activities', and Downton would have had to confront the argument head on to provide a satisfactory reply to his adversary's contention that simply working within the union was a waste of time and energy. As it was, Downton had only argued that the rank and file movements provided a more efficient way of campaigning inside the trade union than just gaining trade union posts.

¹A. Downton: 'On Rank and File Movements', Discussion, January 1936, p.11.

²Ibid., p. 12.

³Ibid., p. 13.

The issue was clearly considered an important one by Party members outside engineering, because the next two issues of Discussion carried articles along very similar lines, but dealing with the Railwaymen's Vigilance Movement.¹ In the fifth issue of the journal, the debate returned to the engineering industry with an article by George Fredericks entitled "The Metalworkers and the Government's Arms Proposals". Fredericks completely dodged the main issue of whether rank and file movements would have to take independent initiatives, but came down on Downton's side of the argument, largely on the basis of the success already achieved by the New Propellor.² Some issues later, a further contribution was made by Alec Brown, who took the 'PJ' line because he thought that it was essential to adhere closely to trade union legality both in the interests of unity and because in this way workers would gain a fuller understanding of their existing trade union rights. These two benefits would help workers to fight fascism more effectively.³

The opposition to the rank and file movements had spoken the first word, and they also had the last. Soon after an article on rank and file movements in relation to the Welsh miners by Lew Thomas, arguing against them in that context, Discussion ceased publication.⁴ It is clear that a considerable consensus existed amongst the protagonists in the debate, in that even Downton believed that the main objective was to campaign within the existing unions. Downton and Fredericks

¹ 'Sandrey' (pseud.): 'These Rank and File Movements'. G. Renshaw: 'Reply to Sandrey'. Anon: 'The Railway Vigilance Movement-Rejoinder'. All in Discussion, March 1936.

² Discussion, June 1936, p. 24.

³ Alec Brown: 'Rank and File Movements, Trade Unions and the United Front', Discussion, p. 28.

⁴ Lew Thomas: 'Rank and File Movements', Discussion, July 1936.

defended the aircraft shop stewards, but they drew back from advocating independent action. When 'PJ's article was published, they seemed to accept his terms of reference and to agree that 'splitting' was undesirable. Indeed, they found themselves merely arguing in favour of the continued existence of the movements.¹

There was also a more general tendency in the CP during the 'Popular Front' period to move away from the discussion of trade union questions as a topic worthy of discussion. Perhaps this was partly due to a feeling that these questions had been settled when Discussion was wound up. Another partial explanation may be the emphasis laid on international questions during this period, with the Abyssinian War and the Spanish Civil War being seen as dress rehearsals for a Second World War. Whatever the reason trade union affairs were never discussed so openly again. Discussion of trade union work must have shifted away from Party publications and into meeting halls, pubs and workshops. The English language editions of Communist International and International Press Correspondence became almost totally devoid of anything of interest to the trade union militant. Even the Party Organiser became far less useful in this aspect of Party work.² The trend can be

¹J.R. Campbell spelt out the difference between the rank and file movements of the 1920s and those of the 1930s when speaking at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International:

"(The Minority Movement had) an apparatus outside of the trade union movement and appeared as an alternative apparatus to that of the unions... it appeared as a body outside the trade unions, dictating to the unions what they had to do... The new rank and file movement, on the other hand, (is) growing as part of the unions themselves". (J. Degras, op.cit., vol. 3, p. 352.)

²Party Organiser shows the trend most clearly. Its early editions, following the January Resolution of 1932, were packed with information and guidance on trade union matters. Many editions of the journal were almost entirely devoted to trade union matters. In the eighth edition (December 1932), there were four articles directly relating to factory work after an introduction entitled "Every Factory a Fortress". By 1938 and 1939, it is difficult to find any articles at all dealing with detailed industrial questions. Even the cover of the journal changed. The original one, showing a locomotive, a ship and a factory was dropped in favour of a plain jacket.

seen most clearly at CP Congresses. At the 1938 Congress, no report was given on trade union and industrial work, and the report of the Central Committee to the 1939 Congress (which was never held) complained plaintively of the fact that there had been no real mass movements amongst the mass of workers in the previous year, and of the neglect of trade union work by Party members in the factories and localities.

During the summer of 1937, the Aircraft Shop Stewards' National Council and the New Propellor experienced serious disappointment for the first time, when it became apparent that a separate aircraft agreement would not be negotiated in the near future. The New Propellor had always stressed the demand for a separate agreement, and the demand was one of the two reasons given by the ASSNC themselves for their continued existence after the end of the Hawker strike. The first sizeable national meeting of the ASSNC, with thirty-nine elected representatives from sixteen firms, endorsed this idea, and decided to call shop and factory meetings to explain the ASSNC's objectives in detail.¹

From March 1936 to June 1937, the New Propellor devoted much of its editorial space to this demand, whilst the Council worked consistently towards building up support for it in the factories. The method of agitation was always two-pronged: the editorials, backed up by ASSNC pressure in the branches and on the AEU National Committee, tried to force the AEU Executive to adopt the demand, whilst pressure was also built up on the Executive by organising unofficial national strike action to the same end.

The ASSNC was remarkably successful in building up support around the issue within the aircraft industry itself, but the campaign was,

¹NP, March 1936.

always strictly limited to this sector of engineering. This was a serious weakness because the AEU Executive could portray the demand as an essentially selfish and divisive one which ignored the interests of the majority of union members. There is no doubt that the Executive could base itself on a real feeling amongst the rank and file in this respect, but the ASSNC did not answer the obvious objection. This was partly because it could not; there were no other rank and file organisations in other branches of engineering until the publication of The Conveyor in January 1937. Nevertheless, some effort in this direction might have been made through the columns of the New Propeller. Clearly, the paper was attracting a wide readership, and many of these readers must have held positions in their unions. These shop stewards and branch officials would have benefitted greatly by gleaning important arguments. In this way, they could have been armed for effective intervention in branches, District Committees and shop stewards' quarterly meetings. The remarkable fact is that these were never rehearsed in the columns of the paper. Would the proposed agreement help workers in the rest of the engineering industry to secure better wages and conditions, and how would it? The questions were never posed, and the campaign's supporters were left to answer such awkward (but predictable) questions as best they could.

The campaign for the agreement was, then, a limited and sectoral one, but it soon became important for a large body of workers within the aircraft industry. The March 1936 ASSNC meeting decided to get the campaign under way by asking all shop stewards' committees to submit individual claims for the New Propeller demands.¹ At the May meeting,

¹NP, April, 1936.

forty-six representatives from fifteen factories met to discuss the next step. Many delegates were of the opinion that only a national strike would be successful. Some even thought that the Handley-Page strike, (for the skilled rate on a certain machine), which was being supported by the paper, should be extended into a national stoppage for the full programme. It was decided that mass meetings would be held in all factories, to obtain a mandate for national strike action.¹ Next month, the results of these meetings were announced: a number of factories had agreed to strike, but a few had not yet had time to organise meetings. None had actually voted against striking.²

At this point (June 1936), the National Committee of the AEU met and adopted the separate aircraft demand, following the lead of the Executive of the National Society of Brass and Metal Mechanics. However, the Committee also rejected a motion for a national ballot for strike action.³ The demand was now official policy, but there was no prospect of the EC moving towards a national stoppage to secure it.

The ASSNC decided to carry out an aircraft ballot themselves, through affiliated shop stewards' committees. At the August 1936 meeting of the Council, the result was announced: 6,258 were in favour, and 2,527 were against, in nineteen factories. The votes cast showed a large majority for a strike, then, but the delegates decided that the poll was too low and the results too uneven for them to lead

¹NP, June 1936.

²Ibid., July 1936.

³Ibid.

a national strike. Many aircraft workers had not voted, and in some factories the opposition had been too sizeable. They therefore decided to postpone striking until a 'broader unity' was achieved. More time, they thought, would bring a higher circulation for the paper and a wider consensus in their favour.¹

During the winter of 1936-7, the New Propellor continued to push for the separate aircraft agreement, although the Executive of the AEU progressed no further in their informal negotiations for one. The February 1937 issue of the paper bore the headline: "Stop Mucking Around", and again suggested national strike action as a way of accelerating the proceedings.² But the AEU Executive publicly argued against this tactic for the first time in a press statement of March 9, 1937. In the statement, the EC 'deplored' the strike threat, pointed out that there was an established national grievance procedure, and reminded the shop stewards that they were formally subject to the discipline of the District Committees. Finally, the EC said that it:

"... dissociates itself from any action in consequence of the meetings of the unofficial shop stewards council...." ³

The EC was now clearly scared of the power of the ASSNC, and trying to bring it into line.

At first, it seemed unlikely that the EC would be able to tame the Council. The May 1937 issue of the New Propellor was headed "Now For Aircraft Agreement", and was the second special issue of the paper. Inside was a report of the April meeting of the Council, which

¹NP, September 1936.

²Ibid., February 1937.

³The Times, March 9, 1937.

had decided, on the basis of reports from mass meetings held in aircraft factories all over the country, that a national strike should start on May 25th. The delegates seemed quite confident that they could carry the rank and file behind them: mass meetings had backed them in almost every case.¹ The Coventry District Committee of the AEU noted that the strike had been prepared for, and that Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft's Baginton and Smith St. factories (representing the vast majority of aircraft workers in the town) had agreed to strike, although the Whitley factory had decided to 'remain constitutional'.²

However, the strike was averted at the eleventh hour. A special meeting of the National Council held on May 23rd, two days before the strike was due to start, heard that the employers had agreed to meet the trade union officials concerned on May 26th. This was the first time that the employers had agreed to formal talks with the unions on the separate aircraft agreement, and therefore represented a real step forward. Nevertheless, the employers had still not conceded the principle; they had only agreed to discuss it. This was sufficient for the ASSNC, however, who explained in the next edition of their paper:

"(it was decided that) nothing should be done to impede the meeting on May 26th, and it was therefore decided to adjourn the meeting and to recommend to aircraft workers that no strike action should be taken at this stage".³

(emphasis original)

The repercussions of the decision to defer to the Executive's negotiations

¹NP, May 1937.

²AEU DC, May 11, 1937.

³NP, May 1937.

can be seen in the columns of the New Propellor itself. In the May edition, the point of view had to be argued for the first time that a breakaway union for aircraft workers was not the answer to their problems.¹ An article in the July 1937 edition headed "What Next - Change of Line" thought that a change of emphasis was required in the way the ASSNC operated. It put the point of view that pressure should be put on the EC to take the aircraft negotiations seriously, but that in the meantime, the ASSNC should throw its weight behind the national negotiations for the entire engineering industry.² This last article definitely broke with the tradition of the paper up to that point, which had always concentrated on the sectional demand for the aircraft industry, leaving the rest of engineering to its sister paper, Conveyor, launched in January 1937.

The problem of how best to deploy the forces of the ASSNC, and, more generally, of the aircraft industry, in the battle for higher wages and better conditions in the engineering industry as a whole, was a knotty one. It might be argued that the whole idea of the ASSNC as a body organised around the separate aircraft agreement was fundamentally a mistake, because it split off the best organised and most powerful section of the industry, leaving weaker sections to fend for themselves. The New Propellor had never really confronted this question, and one by-product of the 1937 debacle was a rather more self-questioning approach.

More importantly, however, the need to argue against dual unionism and the tendency to drop the demand for an aircraft agreement were

¹NP, May 1937.

²Ibid., July 1937.

unmistakeable signs of the feeling amongst at least some aircraft workers that they had missed the boat. As time went on, and it became apparent that the employers had no intention of concluding an aircraft agreement, it seems to have come home to the ASSNC as a whole, and the demand was quietly dropped.

The realisation gradually dawned on the ASSNC and the aircraft workers themselves that they had lost. The feeling had been there in the factories, and workers had been prepared to strike, but the Council had ultimately deferred to Executive negotiations by officials whom they distrusted. They could not influence the negotiations as they dragged on in the conference room; they had already decided to allow them to take their course, and the continual use of strike threats could only undermine the Council's credibility with the employers, the AEU Executive and the workers themselves. The moment had passed for decisive action, and the demand for a separate aircraft agreement had become a dead letter.

The following year, 1938, saw a guerilla war break out in the aircraft industry. With the national campaign for an aircraft agreement lost, the factories applied separately for the wages and conditions demanded by the New Propellor. This year had, not surprisingly, the highest number of strikes over piece work and other wage grievances of any year in the decade 1935-45. These strikes ended, as most strikes do, in compromises which were more or less favourable to the workers, with none of them being won outright. This was not an unusual pattern with individual factory strikes, but the sheer size of the strike wave indicated a combativity which might have been harnessed to a national campaign. Perhaps such a campaign would have brought bigger and more general advances through the whole

weight of the industry being thrown behind the demands, thereby developing a greater momentum than was possible in individual strikes. The members of the Council must have sensed what might have been, whilst rejoicing in the advances that were undoubtedly being made.

It was the advances that were actually being made that impressed themselves most forcefully on contemporary trade unionists, of course. The workers and stewards inside the factories were interested in what was being done rather than by what might have happened. We can see their enthusiasm for the New Propellor reflected in the paper's increasing circulation. By August 1937, forty-nine factories were taking the paper, ordering between them fourteen thousand copies.¹ Nevertheless, the aircraft workers' movement had suffered a very real setback, which was none the less real for the fact that stewards could not afford to waste time crying over spilt milk.

* * *

That aircraft stewards were not inclined to dwell on the failure of their campaign is perhaps less surprising than the fact that the CPers amongst them were not inclined to draw conclusions from their experience. At least, if they did so (as they must have done) they did not make them public even within the Party. Neither the New Propellor, Discussion, nor any other CP publication, dwelt on the question. In part, this was because it only gradually became apparent

¹NP, August 1937.

that the employers would never concede the demand.

Nevertheless, as this became evident with the passing months of futile EC negotiations, there must have been another reason for the lack of discussion on what had been a hotly fought issue. It must have been thought that the matter was closed; the consensus was clearly in favour of those who wanted to keep within the limits of 'trade union legality'. They had outnumbered the opposition and had written the last word. As the Popular Front spirit became increasingly prevalent and the CP's involvement in the trade unions became less and less a matter for discussion, it became clear that the Downtons of the CP had no wish to resharpen their pens.

The May 1937 debacle might have provided a weapon in the hands of Downton, but an almost contemporaneous set of events, the apprentices' strikes, might equally well have served as a vindication of majority opinion. In these strikes, the apprentices and the adult workers on occasion acted as a powerful back-up force for the AEU EC, which had long been seeking the right to negotiate for apprentices. To a large extent, then, the Communists and officials were in agreement as to the basic task in hand: to organise the youths into trade unions by helping to push their wage demand. This partly reflected a different outlook on the part of the officials, who had been caught so far behind the times by the Hawker strike of 1935 that they had actually opposed a strike for unionisation, largely because it was being run by Communists. Whatever the reason, the President of the AEU saw fit to thank the Clyde lads for their support in his address to the 1938 National Committee:

"I believe that had that demonstration not taken place, we would have been exactly where we were

in connection with this matter. This is an achievement which I regard as an epic in the history of trade unionism...." ¹

The strike had been conducted with the tacit support of the AEU Executive, but at the same time had not been brought under their control. Through their imaginative tactics, the lads had been able to help the Executive to obtain considerable improvements in their position. It might be argued with some plausibility that this showed that in this case at least there had been no need for a permanent rank and file movement because the strikers main aims had been secured. At the very least, such a major upheaval might have been expected to stimulate some comment; yet none was forthcoming.

* * *

The apprentices' strikes were central to the development of trade union organisation in the engineering industry during the late 1930s. They marked a watershed in the mood of industrial relations between the dark years of the Depression and the growing strength and confidence of trade unionists on the factory floor in the months preceding the outbreak of war. By the very act of striking, the apprentices showed that the employers threatened use of the 'no-strike' clause in indentures was impracticable if challenged by large-scale collective action. Employers would never again have quite the same hold over apprentices.

¹J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., p. 245.

However, there were even more wide-ranging consequences to these strikes. Previous stoppages in the 1930s had almost always been limited to the sectional and workshop levels, rarely becoming general even within the individual factory. The apprentices struck work in one district after another in a national movement, using their shared sectoral grievance to transcend the traditional inter-factory barriers. Such a movement, often employing highly imaginative tactics, could not leave the adult workers untouched. Levies, collections, deputations and even sympathetic strikes were organised in support of the younger members of the workshop community. It was with some justification, then, that the New Propellor's special issue covering the apprentices' first strikes carried the banner headline: "YOUTH MAKE HISTORY".¹

Table 12

TABLE Showing the Number of Apprentices Employed in Federated Engineering

Establishments, 1928-1932.

1928:	74,415
1929:	78,161
1930:	71,990
1931:	56,641
1932:	52,741

(Source: Engineering and Allied Trades National Federation: Forty Hours Week. Analysis by the Federation of the Case Presented by the Trade Unions. (April 1934), p. 7.

¹NP, October 1937, Young Aircraft Workers' Number.

The apprentices' grievances were manifold, ranging from their being treated as children, through losing time served by changing employer and being forced to make tea for the journeymen, to being cuffed and sworn at by chargehands and foremen.¹ It is hardly surprising, then, that the 1931 strikes were only the first in a long line of similar stoppages stretching through the war and right up to the present day.

The lads' most important grievance related to wages. Indeed, Challenge went so far as to claim that apprentices were worse off in 1937 than they had been fifty years previously, because increases in the cost of living had not been matched by wage advances.² Employers had always argued that they offered more than just a wage to apprentices, since they were under an obligation to train them and to accept the broken tools and scrapped work which went with that obligation. Therefore (since the apprentices had no trade union representation), lads were paid at the 'small rate' until they had served their time. In many districts, even when they had come out of their ^{time}, they still had to work at a 'loosing rate' for one year, below the full journeyman's district rate. By the late 1930s, the

¹Resentment at their treatment as children came out on many occasions. This was often reflected in their leaflets. For example, one leaflet from Aberdeen was headed: "We Are Nobody's Baby". (Challenge, May 27, 1937).

²Challenge, April 15, 1937.

disparity between apprentices' wages and those of the journeymen was very large. As we can see from tables 9 and 10, even after the advances won through the strikes, fifth year apprentices' rates rarely reached 50% of the adult rates, and were often much less. Moreover, the apprentices were usually denied special wage supplements like 'dirty money' for working in ships' holds which had contained cargoes like oil or phosphates.¹

From the mid-1930s, journeymen's wages left those of apprentices behind, as national negotiations yielded increases in which the apprentices did not share. The 1936 national pay claim brought the skilled adults an increase of three shillings per week, and the Executive Committee of the AEU presented the Engineering Employers' Federation with a case for some increase to apprentices. The EEF agreed to talks on a strictly informal basis, but these led nowhere, despite the later claims of the engineering employers that apprentices' wages were the subject of national negotiations.²

The other main grievance was the lack of adequate training. This was related to the decline of the whole apprenticeship system in the Depression, when employers attempted to run apprenticeship down as the main form of training for future skilled workers.³ Employers preferred to take on trainees rather than apprentices, teaching them a limited range of skills whilst paying them a small rate plus piecework. The great advantage of this for employers was that the trainees did not have to be moved round the shops learning

¹ Challenge, April 29, 1937. Dirty money was not paid in Middlesborough (ibid.)

² J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., pp. 244-5.

³ See Table 12

different jobs and gaining experience, but could be used on a few repetition jobs. They tried a similar technique with apprentices themselves, denying them both a variety of work and the right to attend technical classes in the employer's time.

The training grievance was important to the lads, and, ironically, brought the employers considerable problems of their own making. As far as the boys were concerned, a poor training was highly unsatisfactory. As Challenge put it:

"The Clyde boys are going to hit hard and obtain the chance to become brilliant mechanics, a chance which their employers deny them by skimping their training and by conditions which make it impossible to develop." ¹

A poor training affected not only the boys' collective craft self-respect, it also promised to hit their pockets when they became journeymen. They would be unable to work in other factories on a variety of work, and would therefore lose the opportunity of moving to where wages were highest. Yet the employers' anti-apprentice policy brought them their own difficulties by the mid-1930s. There was by then a shortage of skilled men created by the relatively low number of apprenticeships given in the early 30s, so that the skilled adults had a better chance than they might have had to push up their own wages because of the favourable labour market. Also, as far as young workers were concerned, far fewer of them were bound by indentures at all, so that the 'no-strike' clause could not be used against them. Considered as a whole, the employers' policy had turned out to be entirely counter-productive.

¹Challenge, April 8, 1937.

Young workers in engineering saw trade unionism as the only possible vehicle for improving their situation. Subject not only to the grievances outlined above, but also to a whole number of petty indignities tolerated only because there was no means of redress, they wanted the same protection as their adult workmates. Thus, the central demand brought forward by the young workers was for full trade union representation. With this achieved, they reasoned, the other problems would be gradually eliminated.

The strikes may be grouped into two waves.¹ One, which was limited to the Clyde, broke out in April and forced the employers to revive the hazy and ill-defined 'informal talks' which had ostensibly been going on before the stoppage. The second started in Salford in September, continuing in October, when it was realised that the national negotiations were still not bringing any tangible results. This wave spread to most of the main engineering centres in Lancashire and Yorkshire, Coventry, Birmingham and London, but almost entirely by-passed the Clyde and the Tyne. Local employers' association made settlements as need dictated, and national negotiations were revived once again. In December, the AEU won through these protracted talks and the apprentices' action the right to negotiate for apprentices on a national and local basis (although the right to shop steward representation was not conceded).²

The first wave of strikes, on the Clyde and throughout the West of Scotland and Edinburgh, was led by the Communist apprentices, members of the Young Communist League and the CP itself.³ ~~Communist~~

¹ A total 173,552 working days were lost through apprentice action in engineering in 1937.

² J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., pp. 244-5.

³ Stuart Watson, a keen member of the YCL, was chairman of the Clyde Apprentices' Committee. Jimmy Reid, later to lead the famous battles at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, was also on the committee. So, too, on the other hand, was John Boyd, now anti-Communist General Secretary of the AEU.

The strike was characterized by
 organisational methods appeared at every stage: adventurous picketing, the production of a strike bulletin, the setting up of sub-committees of the strike committee to deal with all aspects of the strike (finance, the bulletin, communications), and, most important of all, the strategy of drawing all the Clyde workers into the dispute. Challenge, the Daily Worker and the New Propellor all ran frequent articles and special issues to cover the youth's movement.

During February and March 1937, the left-wing apprentices began their agitation for an advance in wages and improved training facilities. A committee was elected from most of the yards and engineering shops on the Clyde to present the demands to the employers, who refused to entertain them, causing a strike to break out on 24th March.¹ At first the strike was only a partial one, with only a few hundred lads out, so the problem was the extension of the stoppage.² This problem was overcome by the technique of the 'flying picket': the apprentices moved up and down the adjacent Clyde yards in the mornings, trying to get more lads out. For example, having enlisted the active support of the young workers at Fairfield's, Govan, the picket moved along to Stephen's yard, and hammered on the huge steel entrance doors. The Stephen's lads soon started hammering back in reply, and they opened the doors to come streaming out to join the picket with a great cheer.³ By the fifth of April, there were about 3,700 apprentices and trainees involved, and on the following day they were joined by the apprentices at John Brown's, the largest yard on the Clyde.⁴ By April 8th, the Greenock yards were involved, and the local officials approached the

¹Challenge, April 8, 1937.

²LAB 10/80. Report of Progress of Movement of Apprentices, March 24, 1937.

³Challenge, April 8, 1937.

⁴LAB 10/76. April 5, 6, 1937.

employers for a local conference on the matter. The employers replied that there would have to be a general resumption of work before any talks could be contemplated, and that in any case, there was a national application under consideration.¹ The Conciliation Officer reported that the officials were "flabbergasted" at the employers' claim, and stated that they did not believe that there had been any intention on their part to negotiate nationally before the strike had occurred.² The apprentices, then, had already achieved something by forcing the employers to return to negotiations.

However, the young strikers were not willing to let the matter rest there. Their demands had still not been met, and they continued to develop their organisation to ensure that they were. By the first week in April, they had elaborated their earlier structure so that the central strike committee was elected by a general committee of 160 shop and yard delegates. The central executive met daily, and issued a strike bulletin, distributed to all the lads by a cycle corps of about 150 boys.³ By the beginning of the following week, the committee had formulated a set of demands which was designed to unify and extend the strike. They demanded a uniform scale for all trades, recognition of the right of apprentices to be represented by the trade unions, and (at the request of the Communist-dominated AEU District Committee), the setting of a definite quota for apprentice recruitment by each employer.⁴

¹LAB 10/76. April 8, 9, 1937.

²Ibid., April 15, 1937.

³Challenge, April 8, 1937.

⁴LAB 10/76, April 7, 1937.

The programme was a clever and well thought-out one. It clarified the apprentices' attitude to trade union membership, something that had been rather vague before (it was not one of the original demands). More importantly, though, it unified all the different types of young workers, divided by many trade and skill lines through the demand for a uniform scale of wages. Finally, it enlisted the support of the adult workers by demanding a definite quota for apprentices. Skilled journeymen had always resented their role as unpaid instructors, and were further encouraged in their sympathy for the lads by the prospect of some bounds being fixed to the amount of time they would have to spend on instruction.

By the second week in April, there were well over eleven thousand apprentices out in the West of Scotland,¹ and this extension of the boundaries of the strike, together with the new programme of demands, laid the foundations for effective solidarity action on the part of the adult workers. The District Committee of the AEU and the Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Unions came under some considerable pressure from their shop stewards to initiate strike action in support of the apprentices. A meeting of shop stewards from all unions on April 11th set up a committee to help the lads in every way possible, deciding to recommend an overtime embargo and a one day strike to the District Committees.² Meanwhile, the strike itself continued to spread, with the Daily Worker claiming that thirteen thousand youths were out on April 12th.³ Three days later, the Communist shop stewards were

¹LAB 10/80. April 9, 12, 1937. Challenge, April 15, 1937.

²DW, April 12, 1937.

³Ibid., April 13, 1937.

again active in bringing out one of their strongest factories, Howden's, when a man was asked to touch apprentices' work.¹

The District Committees approved the motion put to them by the shop stewards, and announced an overtime embargo and a one day strike throughout the district, to take place on April 17th.² The day before the strike was due, chalked slogans appeared on the walls of many shipyards and engineering shops along the Clyde. Among them were: "Don't Let Us Down!", "Don't Scab Today!", and, with a touch of apprentice humour: "Don't Work Today, Daddy!".³

By April 16th, there was some suspicion that the officials were dragging their feet on the district strike, because strike instructions were received very late by some shop stewards' committees, so that at John Brown's the stewards had to put a proposal to the men themselves on the morning of the 17th. The men passed the picketing lads, held their meeting, and walked out again, to the tumultuous cheering of the pickets.⁴ Overall, the strike was quite solid, with about 150,000 workers out in all.⁵

The one day strike was very successful in itself, but it was not followed up. It may be seen, in retrospect, as the high-water mark of the campaign. The overtime ban was unfortunately less well observed

¹DW, April 16, 1937.

²LAB 10/76, April 14, 1937.

³DW, April 17, 1937.

⁴Ibid.

⁵LAB 10/76. April 17, 1937.

than the strike. Plain time workers in the shipyards always looked to summer overtime work to make up their wages, and the still patchy coverage which the shop stewards had in some yards and shops meant that the ban was far from watertight. On the lower reaches of the river, it was hardly being observed at all, whilst the Boilermakers Society had never tried to apply it.¹

At the very end of April, there was an apparent strengthening of the strike, when the unions agreed to pay dispute benefit to those lads who were members of a union before the strike began (about 10%), but this turned out to be a concession with a catch.² The following day, the local officials decided to call a meeting of the boys to which they would put a motion for a return to work on the basis of an immediate national approach to the employers for the Clyde demands (now generally known as the Apprentices' Charter, as it had been christened by the YCL and Challenge). The Conciliation Officer thought it unlikely that the boys would accept the recommendation:

"It is very doubtful if the boys will return to work on the somewhat vague guarantees which are proposed. After all, they began this strike without the trade unions and there is a mood amongst them to carry it on without the trade unions until their full demands are obtained." ³

The representatives of the apprentices were ready for the officials' initiative, and the meeting was a stormy one. The officials threatened to withdraw the offer of financial assistance unless the lads agreed to their proposal. The apprentices' committee proposed that a return

¹LAB 10/76, April 23, 1937.

²Ibid., April 29, 1937.

³Ibid., April 30, 1937.

should only be agreed upon if no individual firms were negotiated with, if a national approach was made immediately, and that the Charter should be the basis for negotiation. The meeting agreed to return to work on these terms.¹

The summer of 1937 saw a lull in strike activity which was paralleled by the refusal of the employers to concede anything in negotiation. Frustration built up amongst the apprentices nationally in this period, whilst the YCL and CP agitated and prepared for a second explosion of militancy.² Those young militants who had worked for a revival of the apprentices' movement in response to the continued refusal of the employers to budge from their obdurate refusal to make any concessions were rewarded when some apprentices stopped work at a small shop in Salford during the second week in September. The lads were asking for an increase of three shillings per week, and from these small beginnings the stoppage spread rapidly. By the 14th September, lads were out at Gardner's Peel Green, A.V. Roe, Crossley Motors and Mather and Platt. By the following day, there were about

¹DW, May 4, 1937.

²Cf. Challenge, May 6, 1937: "... it is our opinion that the union leaders' advice was unwise. Instead of advising a return, they should have called for an extension of the strike all over the country for the Charter, and this would have been the best method of forcing the employers to give in."
 The YCL was also active on the ground in the summer months. At the beginning of June, the Clyde apprentices adopted a green, red and blue badge: green for the Catholics, blue for the Protestants, red for the Communists. At the beginning of July, they demanded an end to secret negotiations, and in the middle of that month, they launched a Clyde apprentices' paper. (Challenge, June 3, July 8, 15).

a thousand more lads out, from Fairey Aviation (Stockport), Beyer, Peacock's Locomotive works and other factories. That day, Wednesday 15th, a committee was set up along the Clyde lines, with two delegates from every striking shop, and a delegation was elected to visit the Manchester and Salford Trades Council.¹ Here they were heard with great sympathy, and the delegates unanimously instructed the Secretary, W.J. Munro, to seek financial aid from all affiliated branches.²

The strikers were led, as they had been on the Clyde, by the YCL and the CP. These were the dominant lads on the strike committee, but in the Manchester case, there was rather less astute and thorough organisation. As the Manchester Guardian commented:

"The strike does not yet show any of the smooth organisation nor any of the clarity about objects that distinguished the Glasgow youths' strike." 3

The strike committee's regular bulletins, their distribution by cyclists, the 'flying picket', were missing in Manchester, facts which are difficult to explain, since there had been plenty of time for preparation, and the YCL had been growing in the area. Perhaps the key was the attitude of the AEU District Committees and the relationship with the adult workers which the DC led. On the Clyde, the DC was dominated by the Communists, and the shop stewards were able (because of their rather better coverage) to persuade the DCs to call a sympathy

¹Manchester Guardian, September 15, 1937.

²Ibid., September 16, 1937. Challenge, September 16, 1937.

³Manchester Guardian, September 16, 1937.

strike, and then to organise it. In Manchester, these factors were not present: the lads went straight to the Trades Council, and the shop stewards did not seem to be able to organise to the same extent as their Scottish counterparts.

The Manchester officials seemed to have the dispute well in hand. Although some more apprentices struck on the Friday, those at Switchgear and Cowans agreed to return when the management agreed to meet the trade union officials. By this time, the strike committee itself was arguing for a "ten day armistice", under which they would agree to a return to work pending the outcome of local negotiations between the employers and the officials. By Wednesday 22nd, the strikers at Ferguson, Pailin, A.V. Roe, Mather and Platt and Ferranti's Hollinwood had agreed to return on this basis.¹ The day before the "armistice" was due to end, the employers conceded a two shilling increase, and although this was received with mixed feelings by the apprentices, there were no further strikes.²

The Manchester strikes sparked off similar action in the rest of the country in support of similar demands. Coventry was one of the towns affected, and is interesting from the point of view of the number of firms affected, the strength of the shop stewards' support, and the overall dominance of the officials. The initiative was taken by the apprentices at Armstrong Whitworth's Baginton factory, where a large body of lads worked together on detail fitting, and where the CP was strong amongst the shop stewards.³ On 27th September, the AWA

¹Manchester Guardian, September 23, 1937.

²Ibid., October 2, DW, October 2, 3, 1937.

³AEU DC, July 13, 1937.

apprentices struck for an increase of three shillings and trade union recognition. On the following day, apprentices at AWA's Whitley factory stopped work.¹ That Wednesday, there were mass meetings at all the AWA factories and they decided to black all apprentices' work, to levy themselves two shillings per head, and to have an hour and a half's down tools on Thursday in support of the strikers.² Meanwhile, the strike spread, with the Armstrong Siddeley lads coming out. The District Committee announced its support for the strike, and that Sunday a demonstration and meeting was held in Broadgate at which Billy Stokes, the AEU Divisional Organiser spoke.³ On the Monday, the apprentices spread the strike still further by adopting the Clyde lads' technique, and marching from the Standard at Canley through the town to Herbert's and Webster and Bennett's factories in Edgwick, gathering support along the way.⁴ At the same time, the district's shop stewards met and decided to levy the entire membership and to ban all overtime.⁵

Soon after the shop stewards had applied this pressure, the employers conceded negotiations, in which they offered increases ranging from one shilling to three shillings, and allowed in principle the right of trade unions to represent apprentices.⁶ The DC called

¹ AEU DC, September 28, 1937.

² NP, October 1937.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Interview with Eric Harrison, 5 November, 1974. See also NP, October 1937.

⁵ NP, October 1937.

⁶ AEU DC, October 10, 1937.

a meeting of apprentices at which Billy Stokes argued in favour of acceptance of the offer, which was accepted by the meeting despite the opposition of Ernie Roberts and a District Committeeman, Horton.¹

Whilst the Coventry apprentices were on strike, the first serious moves were being made to set up a national federation of apprentices' committees. In the first week in October, the Clyde and Manchester lads met and decided to take the initiative in setting up such a body. Accordingly, they circularised the other districts, attracting fifty-six delegates to a conference held during the second week of October. The conference heard that the employers were still not conducting meaningful national negotiations, and decided on immediate strike action on a national scale to force them to take the demands seriously.² In the event, the strike threat proved quite sufficient to bring the employers back to the negotiating table, with the result that the AEU secured an agreement by the end of December.³ The agreement gave the union the right to negotiate for young workers, although shop steward representation was not granted. In addition, the wages of young male workers were to vary in a fixed proportion to those received by the adults.⁴

¹NP, October 1937.

²Challenge, October 14, 1937.

³Ibid., October 21, 1937. J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., p. 245.

⁴Ibid.

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So far, the history of the CP's involvement in engineering trade unionism in this period has been considered in terms of their work in broad movements and large strikes. Yet the CP laid the foundation of their wartime strength in the industry by patient spadework, through bringing large numbers of workers into the trade unions.

The industrial recovery of the late 1930s gave many CPers (some of whom had worked in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement) the opportunity of moving into the aircraft industry. There, they were able to implant themselves in the trade union organisation as it developed, moulding and shaping it at its origin, whilst it was still plastic.

It is possible to examine this process in some detail in the Minutes of the Coventry District Committee of the AMU and the Minutes of the NUVB Branch Committee. In many ways, Coventry is a good town to study, because it offered excellent opportunities for trade union organisation throughout the rearmament and war periods, with the building of the shadow factories for arms production.

The Minutes contain lists of shop stewards recognised in all the factories in the district, and it is possible to use these to establish who the most important individuals involved in organising were. Often, one man was appointed shop steward by the District Committee (or Branch Committee in the case of the NUVB), and in a short space of time a batch of shop stewards was elected at that factory. The records of twenty-seven District and Branch Committeemen whose period of office spanned the years 1935-46 were examined in this way.

Most of these twenty-seven men were convenors at one time or another during the period. In fact, only eight had not, and it was therefore impossible to differentiate between men of differing political affiliations by this criterion.

However, it was possible to find a difference between the 'left'

and the opposition (established through the Minutes and personal interviews) when the criterion of undertaking the initial organisation of a factory was applied. Eleven of the twenty-seven had made the breakthrough in at least one factory, and only two of these were definitely opposed to the CP on the District Committee.

The general picture to emerge from this survey is that the left earned their places on the District Committee through a wider range of organising activity than their political opponents. Whether this would hold good for other towns and other unions is difficult to know without a good deal more information than we have at present.

However, it seems likely that the TGWU built up trade union organisation on the same type of political basis. Jack Jones (a close associate of the CP at this time) was District Secretary, and Jock Gibson (CP convenor at the Daimler) was Secretary of the CSEU District Committee; these two influential men held training meetings at TGWU headquarters for shop stewards. These meetings were by invitation, and it was therefore possible to informally ensure that a body of stewards of left-wing leanings was created¹. The way in which the CP established itself in the TGWU was different in Coventry, but the net result was similar, because the CP very soon became strong among TGWU stewards.

* * *

¹ Interview with Jack Williams, 6:2:73.

Having dealt with both the theoretical debates going on within the CP in 1928 and in 1936, and with some of the developments in engineering trade unionism between 1928 and 1937, we are in a position to examine the relationship between the CP's theory and its trade union practice. Our examination cannot, at this stage, say anything about the activities of the CP shop stewards at a local or factory level, because it has not been possible to follow their work sufficiently closely in this period. Some general statements can, however, be made on the basis of the information already presented.

At least one historian of the Communist Party, Brian Pearce, has seen the political relationship between the Communist International, the CPGB leadership and Communist trade unionists in terms of an unmediated 'command structure'. Thus, changes in line determined by the CI were accepted and implemented by the CPGB leadership, who communicated them to their trade unionists, who accepted and implemented them in their turn. Pearce explains the increasingly accommodating attitude of CP trade unionists to the official trade union machinery from the mid-1930s onwards as a consequence of the 'Popular Front':

".....the Stalinists headed these movements only to behead them at a crucial stage, because in accordance with Stalin's disastrous diplomacy they assumed the task of seeking alliances with 'progressive capitalists' and holding back the working-class struggle within strict and strangling limits."¹

That there was, in the most general sense, such a relationship, would be hard to deny; indeed, we have already seen it in operation whilst looking at the Discussion articles (especially Alec Brown's), which all linked the need to create a Popular Front with their shared view of a rank and file movement kept within fairly strict bounds in terms of what it could do and for how long. The relationship between the consensus reached in this debate and the last-minuted refusal of the ASSNC to call a national aircraft strike in support of its campaign for a separate aircraft agreement is clear; the atmosphere within the CP was not conducive to such action.

¹ B. Pearce: Some Past Rank and File Movements (Reprinted Cardiff, 1973), p. 22.

Yet Mr. Pearce's argument is over-simplified, in that the relationships were not as direct as he suggests. Serious arguments and disagreements occurred at all levels, and Pearce (although he sometimes refers to these) tends to underestimate their importance and to mislead us as to their origin. Mr. Pearce tends to suggest that opposition to the Third Period trade union tactics did not occur until Horner spoke out, and that those who criticised were denounced as "Trotskyist yellow-bellies"¹. In fact, as we have seen in the Coventry MM's debates, many CPers were speaking out during 1928, and if the charge of "Trotskyism" had been levelled, then it was so wildly inaccurate as to throw the accuser into disrepute. Those Communists who objected to the new line did so because of their experience as shop stewards, which suggested to them that dual unions would fail.

Similarly in 1936, whilst the Discussion polemic was carried on within the limits imposed by 'Popular Front' orthodoxy, it also reflected at least some disquiet in the ranks of the Party over the consequences of the new tactics. This last debate reflected (albeit in a distorted form) a deeper tension within the CP: that between the 'Party line' and the day to day experience of shop steward activity. It was noticeable in the discussion how Downton and the shop steward George Fredericks referred to the Hawker strike and the New Propellor, using this experience as their touchstone and assuming its key importance, a feature which was absent from the arguments of their antagonists.

For the aircraft shop stewards themselves, there never seemed to have been any question of the need for the ASSNC and the New Propellor as permanent weapons. They corresponded to a specific need felt by aircraft shop stewards; they were born out of the need for widespread support for the Hawker strikers if they were to succeed against a large aircraft company, and they continued to exist because other aircraft stewards anticipated a similar need themselves in an industry in which the employers were very closely linked. In other words, aircraft shop stewards used these organisational tools because

¹ Pearce, op.cit., p. 17.

they related well to their needs, and to this extent they acted independently of CP theory.

In any case, it would be quite wrong to suggest that the ASSNC and its paper were simply the tools of the Communist Party; the claimed size of the Council and the suggested level of the paper's circulation both suggest that a considerable number of non-Party shop stewards and workers were involved. Although the aim of a rank and file movement from the CP's point of view was to create a means for communicating its politics to a section of the working class, it is apparent that this process was not just in one direction, and that a section of the working class also influenced the Party. It was this influence which prompted the often repeated contemporary statement that the paper was 'close to the workshop', and which prevented any hint of the Discussion debates from filtering through to the columns of the New Propellor itself.

In summary, whilst it is evident that Communist theory and the 'Party line' did strongly influence the direction of Communist trade union work, shop stewards of all political shades also had a trade union role to play which could itself affect the direction and content of Communist trade union work. At this point, the tension may not appear to have been of great importance, but nevertheless it existed, becoming much more pronounced in the war years.

* * * * *

The Shop Stewards in Wartime

Before looking closely at the local histories of the shop stewards in our four main engineering districts, we need to stand back and observe the movement as a whole in order to try and see some of the broad outlines. Some of the statements will have to be modified in the light of the local studies, but the exercise is valuable if we are to see the wood as well as the trees. We begin by noting the growth of trade union membership and the development of shop steward representation during the war. This section is followed by one which describes a number of small incidents and facts which are felt to be indicative of the growing confidence of the shop stewards' movement. This new assertiveness found its expression in a whole number of ways, but our third section picks out one especially important one: the tendency for stewards to become unofficial social workers, advisors and confidants as well as negotiators.

The development of the shop stewards' movement both in terms of its collective and individual confidence and the scope of its activities flowed at least in part from the strength of the mass of engineering workers. This is the subject of the fourth section of the chapter, which describes the precise pattern of strike activity during the war. Finally, two particularly strike-prone groups with their own specific grievances are dealt with. These groups, apprentices and women, are dealt with separately and in some detail, partly because of the intrinsic interest attaching to them, and partly because they were both largely non-unionised sectors of the workforce. Their history is, therefore, rather different to that of the mass of engineering workers and deserves particular attention.

During the Second World War engineering trade unionism reached the highest membership it had ever achieved. The main engineering

union, the AEU, had over 900,000 members by 1944.¹ Especially significant was the tremendous growth of membership amongst semi-skilled and women workers. The AEU sections catering for this type of member (V, Va and V,T.R.A.) increased from 145,577 in September 1939 to 376,144 in January 1945. During 1943 alone, the AEU also recruited 132,010 women to its women's section opened at the beginning of that year.² All the other unions in the industry recorded growth rates of a similar order, the largest gains being made by the T&GWU and the NUGMW.³

Partly because the rate of growth was so high and trade union life so hectic during the war, we have even less precise indication of the rate of growth of the shop stewards' movement in this period than we had for the late 1930s. Officials simply could not keep pace with the increasing number of stewards and their need for credentials and facilities. There are some indications, however. It is possible to measure the growth of the shop stewards in one locality, namely Coventry. The number of AEU shop stewards recognised by the District Committee is given in table ¹³. It would be quite unrealistic to pretend that it is possible to match this against the number of insured workers to give an accurate indication of shop steward coverage, because it is impossible to measure shop steward turnover. As a very rough guide, however, dividing the number of insured workers in the engineering sector (estimated at 100,000)⁴ by the number of shop stewards recognised

¹J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., p. 260.

²Ibid.

³S.T. LeVanhak: "Trade Union Membership among Women and Girls in the United Kingdom, 1920-1965" (Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of London, 1971).

⁴Coventry Trades Council: Coventry, Industrial Analysis. An Analysis of the Labour Force Statistics. (An unpublished document written in the immediate post-war years by an author with access to Labour Exchange and Ministry of Labour records. Copy in my possession - RC).

from the beginning of 1941 (1940 and previous years have been omitted because of the likelihood of a high rate of turnover) at 745, then we reach a density figure of the order of one steward to every one hundred and twenty-five workers. It is certain, however, that the actual shop steward coverage was in the region of twice as good as this, because our figures take no account of the T&GWU, NUVB, ETU and other smaller unions' shop stewards.

These density speculations must necessarily be approached with some caution, but there can be no doubt that in Coventry at least, shop steward growth had been given a tremendous boost by wartime 'boom' conditions. Shop steward recognition, as we can see from the AEU records, was running at a level varying between about two and a half and four times as high as it had been in 1938-1939. Since this was considerably greater than the rate of increase in the working population of the town,¹ there must have been a distinct improvement in shop steward coverage during the war years.

Table 13

Table Showing the number of shop stewards recognised by the Coventry District Committee of the AEU, 1941-1945. (For figures for earlier years, see p. ⁶²₂₀₃)

1941:	426
1942:	319
1943:	441
1944:	336
1945:	236

(Source: Coventry AEU DC Minutes).

¹ According to the document cited in (4) above, the town's working population expanded as follows: 1938: 120,000 ; 1943: 142,000 ; 1948: 170,000

Shop stewards not only became more numerous in those areas where they had long operated. They were also appointed in districts where the engineering industry had previously been small or non-existent before the war. The growth of the industry all over the country brought production engineering to many new areas, and workshop organisation quickly followed. This geographical extension of the shop stewards' movement was to have important consequences for the motor industry employers in the post-war period, when they incorrectly thought it possible to improve plant industrial relations by building new plant outside of Coventry. By the end of the war, groups of workers who had been through a training as a shop steward existed in practically every part of Britain.

South Wales is a case in point. Prior to 1939, the engineering industry there had largely been limited to small workshops and maintenance work for the steel, tinplate and coal concerns. The wartime demand for armaments production, and the considerable profits available ensured that this did not remain the case. The gigantic coal company Powell-Duffryn (known as 'P-D, Poverty and Death' in South Wales) spread their tentacles into engineering when they set up a factory at Tredowen, and several smaller firms followed suit.

The Tredowen factory was run along well-established P-D lines. The foremen ruled. Until well into 1941, there was little that workers could do to break the back of their power, which relied on the persistence of a high rate of unemployment because of the collapse of the French export market for coal. During this period, a large number of young workers were taken on, but not as apprentices. They could only become apprentices if the foreman thought them 'good enough'. Nationally negotiated wages and conditions did not apply there, nor at any of the

other local factories, because the employers had not joined the Engineering Employers Federation. There was therefore no recognised procedure for grievances, and no shop stewards.¹

Despite this last fact, unofficial 'shop stewards' were elected at Powell-Duffryn, and these men gradually prepared, through guerilla skirmishes, for a pitched battle with the company. The issue was initially victimisation, when an apprentice was sacked for 'indiscipline' at the end of October 1942. The factory struck work, and the shop stewards contacted their counterparts in other South Wales factories. Together, they formulated a demand that the local engineering employers should recognise the existing district rate (as they were supposed to do under the Essential Works Order). The employers were determined to resist the demand, because the existing district rate was a skilled, maintenance engineers' rate, which was set at a higher level than that normally paid to production workers. The local stewards were equally determined, however, and fixed a date for a strike of engineering workers throughout South Wales.²

Powell-Duffryn tried at this point to convene a Works Conference, but the Divisional Organiser, Armstrong, refused to meet in a formally constituted conference because P-D were not federated. The company, along with the other South Wales engineering firms, had therefore to federate and to agree to be bound by procedure.³ The district strike was averted by the intervention of the E&ATSSNC, who printed and distributed a leaflet entitled Welsh Wages which called for no extension

¹ LAB 10/212. Letter from Powell-Duffryn shop stewards to the Ministry of Labour, 6 July, 1942.

² Ministry of Labour memo. (n.d.), LAB 10/212.

³ Ibid.

to the strike, and for the employers to recognise the district rate. The Welsh employers were eventually compelled (largely through Government pressure) to establish a district rate. In the longer term, the point was not so much the rate, however, as the establishment of the principle that the employers had to recognise the national procedure and, with it, shop stewards.¹

The shop stewards made considerable progress outside of the major engineering areas by organising two types of factory which tended to be located in country areas and small towns. These were the Royal Ordnance Factories and the dispersal factories established by the major contractors in 1940 and 1941. The ROFs, and especially the filling factories, tended to be sited in the country for safety reasons, whilst the dispersal factories had been established as such to avoid concentration of production in major centres like Coventry. For a long time, the Ministry of Supply tried to fend off trade unionism in the ROFs by setting up Whitley machinery in all the new factories which sprung up at the beginning of the war, refusing meanwhile to recognise shop stewards.² Gradually, however, the Whitley shop, department and factory committees were pushed out as bona fide shop stewards asserted themselves. In February 1943, the Ministries met the AEU to discuss full shop steward recognition. By this time, some shop stewards' committees were already functioning quite effectively on an unofficial basis, and at least one, ROF Cardonald, already had a formal shop steward agreement. In 1946, the Ministry of

¹Ministry of Labour memo., 10 November, 1942, LAB 10/212.

²P. Inman, op.cit., p. 416.

Supply formally recognised shop stewards in the engineering ROFs.¹

One of the problems which the Ministry of Supply encountered in maintaining its policy of using Whitleyism against the engineering trade unions in the ROFs was the fact that Woolwich had a long-standing tradition of active shop stewards, and the new factories all had nucleus staffs from Woolwich before they recruited labour.² A similar problem afflicted private employers concerned to keep workers from their main factories (often unionised) out of their dispersal factories. These men often formed the nucleus of nascent trade unionism as well as of the labour force. The Senior Technical Officer of the Ministry of Labour, filed a report in mid-1941 in which he wrote:

"N.B. The old aircraft firms when manning their new dispersal units will not take their own transferee men from their old works. Apart from a nucleus staff they prefer to build up a new labour force on the basis of 50% women." 3

Unfortunately for the old aircraft firms, the nucleus staff which was absolutely indispensable was comprised almost entirely of skilled men, who were invariably trade unionists. Thus, they found similar problems occurring at the new factories to those they had hoped to leave behind at the old. At the Bristol Aircraft Co.'s dispersal factory at Accrington, the workers demanded a system of payment similar to the group bonus worked in Bristol, in 1943.⁴ Nor did the other companies find the new workforces much more pliable: the Humber Co. had dispersal plants at Pontefract and Tipton, Staffordshire. At the

¹P. Inman, op.cit., pp. 416-7.

²Ibid., p. 66.

³Report by Senior Technical Officer, S.J. Egerton-Banks: "Aircraft Factories and Manpower" (9 June, 1941) LAB 8/374.

⁴LAB 10/380. 22 October, 1943.

former, a number of difficulties arose requiring the intervention of the Conciliation Office in January 1943, whilst the latter took sympathy action with the Coventry workers during the big strike of 1946 (see p. ²⁴⁴).¹

Similarly, anti-trade union employers in the traditional engineering areas were also gradually forced to recognise trade unions, and, with them, shop stewards. Ford's, who tried very hard to avoid concluding a formal agreement with the unions, did so in 1944 through the mediation of the TUC. Their Manchester and London factories were thereby finally gained for trade unionism. Morris Motors at Cowley and Singers, Clydebank had already been slowly forced into recognition during the first three years of war.²

Morris and Singer were large and well-known engineering employers, yet it was the unionisation of Ford's that was experienced as the great victory. When Ford's fell to the besieging armies of trade unionism, it had a significance which went beyond the large enough fact that tens of thousands of workers had won full workshop representation; it was considered by many to be a symbolic and irreversible victory over the great 'big-stick' and paternalist employers of the 1930s. There were now very few large factories left where the bad old days of untrammelled managerial rule were not considered over by all concerned. Not even Henry Ford could bring them back.

* * *

¹LAB 10/387. 16 January, 1943.

²Talk given by Arthur Affleck at Ruskin College History Workshop, June 1975. LAB 10/363, 16 May, 1942.

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The growth of shop stewards both in terms of numbers, and in terms of the depth and scope of their influence in the factories during the war years cannot be seen in isolation from developments amongst the mass of engineering workers. Their growing strength developed out of a workshop community that was becoming increasingly socially cohesive. Shop stewards had originally sprung from the collective consciousness of the engineering craftsmen, and, although the nature of workshop society was becoming less and less like that of the pre-1914 years, the need for workshop representation was still as keenly felt as ever by engineering workers. Shop stewards neglected or ignored their members at their peril; they were frequently reminded that they were the servants of the shop floor workers. But most shop stewards could not forget that fact for very long, for the simple reason that they, too, had to work. Unlike full-time officials, almost all shop stewards and convenors were in daily and hourly contact with their members. In order to fully understand their role, then, it is important that some effort should be made to understand the way in which workers in the factories referred to their traditions, delineated areas of control, and affirmed their solidarity.

One of the effects of the new atmosphere in the factories was the revival of old customs. During August 1940, for example, when the Royal family visited a Coventry munitions factory, they:

".... travelled from section to section of the works (and) were greeted by long and prolonged cheers to the accompaniment of hammer blows on metal, and other signs of loyal enthusiasm." ¹

This, of course, was the old habit of 'ringing in' described by the journeyman engineer, Thomas Wright, in the mid-Nineteenth Century.²

¹ Coventry Standard, 10 August, 1940.

² T. Wright: Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes (1867), pp. 99-100. 'Ringing in' is also mentioned by A. Williams in his Life in a Railway Factory (1915), pp. 256-7.

The old custom was still remembered and had been revived for the special occasion. Its appearance reminds us that, although a large number of new customs were evolved during the war period, these were not by any means imposed on a tabula rasa. On the contrary, many of the 'new' customs were extensions of, or variations on, workshop practice which had an historical pedigree stretching back for over a century.

The changed atmosphere in the factories arose partly out of the conviction that workers involved in making considerable sacrifices for the war effort should be compensated, as far as possible, by improved wages and conditions. This was a conviction held not only by workers, but also by Bevin, Ministry of Labour Officials and even some managers. It was also partly the result of the fact that working class life became increasingly factory-centred during the war, with long working hours and a steadily increasing proportion of the population becoming involved in factory work. Encouraged by both their ideas and facts of wartime life, engineering workers concerned themselves more and more with the quality of their working lives.

Many of the ways which workers found to make life in factories tolerable were encouraged by Government officials and sometimes by managers. Singing, both at work and in formally organised troupes, became a regular feature, and companies were encouraged to install loudspeaker equipment to relay radio broadcasts. Sports clubs also became common, with factory teams forming works leagues with fixtures on Sundays. Film shows were often given by the Entertainments National Service Association, as well as by other organisations when they were allowed to use the newly-built canteens.¹

¹H.M.D. Parker, op.cit., pp. 392-423.

These practices did not really annoy managers. On the contrary, many of the more enlightened ones could see them as a method of increasing production. On the other hand, many habits developed in the factories which definitely did not meet with managerial approval. Indeed, some of them, brought up in the Taylor school, were outraged. Yet there was little they could do to stop them. Stopwatches were not a great deal of use under the circumstances.

Admittedly, some of the 'slackness' arose in the first place because of poor rate fixing. Some piece workers were able to make their money sufficiently easily to have time to develop their working social lives. At the Standard Motor Co.'s main Coventry factory, for example, the management tried for almost two years to get the workers in the Bristol shop to agree to a piece work reduction, since the high rates were giving rise to a 'fantastic' state of affairs with regard to discipline in the shop.¹ Piece work was not the only problem, however. Even where their wages were relatively low, workers did not want to work for the whole of the long working hours of the war. Drinking at work, black marketeering, starting work after the bell and finishing before, card schools, crosswords, gambling, listening to the radio, "getting stuck into some war work" by knitting socks, were all noted in a Government survey of three Clydeside factories in 1942.²

Sometimes, shortages of work caused workers to have large amounts of free time on their hands. Electricians stewards at the Walker Naval Yard complained in 1943 that their members were having to play darts and cards and read books to occupy themselves.³ Some of the

¹Minutes of a Works Conference held at the Standard Motor Co., Coventry, 15 June, 1942.

²INF 1/673 'Workers' Complaints About Production in Certain Factories.' (1942).

³LAB 8/476. Appendix: 'Samples of Statements'.

practices mentioned in the Clydeside factories were clearly not, on the other hand, simply products of the shortage of work.

On occasion, managements would make a stand and try to push back the 'frontiers of control', but most examples of this sort of rearguard action after 1940 relate to what they thought of as quite flagrant breaches of the accepted norms of workshop behaviour. In 1940, when the political situation had been unusually favourable, some firms had prosecuted men like the Scotsman who was fined £20 for operating a 'crown and anchor sheet and dice' in a Coventry factory, but they later became much more hesitant in this direction.¹ In mid-1943, the Scottish Conciliation Officer reported that employers were becoming increasingly reluctant to rely on prosecution under the defence regulations, because of the consequences of failure.²

There were times, however, when managers found themselves on quite firm ground, and felt the need to 'stop the rot'. When this happened, shop stewards would often pick up the gauntlet, and would try to defend the accused, thereby encroaching on the employer's long-cherished prerogatives. Thus, when a large number of men were sacked from Morris Motors in Coventry for drinking at the Sports Club during working hours in 1943, the shop stewards argued that the men were working on a hot job, and it was customary to allow them to take some liquid refreshment during the summer.³ A whole range of incidents

¹Coventry Standard, 7 December, 1940.

²LAB 10/364. 5 June, 1943.

³Minutes of a Works Conference held at Morris Engines, Coventry, 6 July, 1943.

related to hostility directed at the immediate representatives of management on the shop floor, ratefixers and foremen. In April 1944, an operator at Beardmore Parkhead struck a ratefixer whilst arguing over a piece work time. Initially, both men were sacked, but the stewards had this reduced to suspension in both cases, pending a full investigation. At the investigation, they argued that the operator should be paid for the time lost, since the ratefixer was not losing money.¹ On another occasion, violence was directed against a police spy. This incident occurred at John Brown's shipyard in 1940, where a man described by the Conciliation Officer as a detective was 'spying' on a boy. The boy, who was a rivet heater, took a red-hot rivet from the brazier and threw it at the detective. He was dismissed, but only after the stewards had called a stoppage throughout the yard and engine works.²

Both collectively and individually, shop stewards grew more certain of themselves. At Nuffield Mechanizations and Aero in Coventry in May 1940, shop stewards, when refused permission to move around the works on union business applied to the company for telephones for their use in every shop.³ At another Coventry factory sixteen months later, the shop stewards passed a motion censuring the firm's senior officials, calling for the removal of the works manager, and demanding shop steward representation on the management. The Managing Director threatened to sack the two shop stewards he thought responsible, but was dissuaded by the Conciliation Officer.⁴

¹LAB 10/363. 22 August, 1942.

²LAB 10/360. 20 April, 1940.

³COVEMPS, May 1940.

⁴LAB 10/351. 25 October, 1941.

Individual stewards of an abrasive disposition were now prepared to go much further than they could ever have dared in the pre-war years. On Clydeside, one convenor stunned the managing director of his firm by informing him one day that they were of equal status.¹ At the Humber, Coventry, 'Major' Worrod earned his nickname by strutting round the shop with a bowler hat on, holding a swagger stick under one arm, and adopting a 'military air' towards foremen.² It was hard for the Humber management to restrain this man's flamboyance. On the other hand, there were things that no management could afford to tolerate, as some shop stewards found out rather too late. Such flamboyance could still prove hazardous. Some shop stewards transferred from the ROF Linwood to Rolls-Royce Hillington in 1944 alarmed their new supervisors by their ostentatious lack of respect for authority.³ An opportunity soon came the firm's way for getting rid of one of them when he refused to do his normal job. The steward succeeded in leading a sectional strike in his own support, claiming victimisation, but found the ground cut from beneath his feet when the other stewards supported the management's action and called on the strikers to return. They did so, leaving the steward outside the factory gates.⁴

The 'total war' meant that shop stewards had to deal with a plethora of problems which afflicted their members, both inside and outside of the workshop. Many of these did not impinge on managerial prerogatives at all. Transport from home to work and back again, the transference of workers from factory to factory and district to

¹LAB 10/364. 9 January, 1943.

²Interview with Bill Wellings, 19 May, 1973.

³LAB 10/445. 17 March, 1944.

⁴Ibid., 24 March, 1944.

district was one range of problem. Workers in isolated areas often had difficulty getting home, especially in Royal Ordnance Factories which tended to be located in isolated areas.¹ Stewards therefore often had to try to persuade 'bus companies to co-ordinate their schedules with shift starting and finishing times. With transferred workers, those leaving had to be informed of the allowances available to them and those arriving to be shown 'the ropes' in the factory and the town. Pay as You Earn Income Tax was another innovation of the war years which often called for a knowledgeable steward.² When workers were off sick, or their relatives were killed or injured in action, then the stewards would often take collections for them or pay them out of the shop stewards' fund.³ These were just some of the new jobs which shop stewards took on in this period.

One of the most impressive features of the new functions was the fact that they did not stop at the factory gates. Here, the expansion of their horizons was an entirely new departure for the shop stewards' movement in a broader historical sense. During the First World War, even the Clyde Workers' Committee does not appear to have involved itself in the 1915 Rent Strike, for example.⁴ But perhaps the best way to capture the preoccupations of the new type of steward who was emerging is to quote directly from one of them. Jock Gibson, a Communist convenor at the Daimler factory in Coventry spoke about

¹P. Inman, op.cit., p. 217.

²J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., p. 261.

³Interview with Bill Wellings, 19 May, 1973.

⁴J.S. Hinton, op.cit., p. 127.

his experience as follows:

"... the shop stewards then were taking part in the fire-watching, they were organising fire-watch rotas with the people, they were seeing that the employers were doing as much as the workers were doing. They were also checking that no-one got any more petrol than any one else... and a tremendous number of women were coming into the industry and there was the whole question of whether the hostels were right for the people who were coming in. The shop stewards in whatever factory, you know, Standards boys would probably have the hostels close to them. They would get people coming in from Scotland, Ireland, Wales or whatever, North East Coast, London actresses, students, you name them, we had them coming into the city. The villains, the rogues, the vagabonds, the prostitutes, the whole bloody lot. They were all sent in and you'd got to find them some place." ¹

The shop steward, then, became considerably more than just a representative of the trade union, or even just a workshop figure. He became an adviser and unofficial social worker as well.

One of the new functions, safety, can be dealt with in more detail and in more quantifiable terms. Taking the crude gross number of non-fatal accidents in 1938, the Chief Inspector of Factories estimated that there was an increase for all industries of the following proportions in the war years:

<u>Table</u> ^H	1939:	plus 7%
	1940:	" 20%
	1941:	" 17%
	1942:	" 16%
	1943:	minus 1.9%
	1944:	" 9.1% (2)

Unfortunately, there are no global figures for accidents in engineering as a whole during the war years, but the Chief Inspector did quote the accident rate for the most accident prone operations in engineering,

¹ Transcript of interview between Peter Caldwell and Jock Gibson on 22nd February, 1972. I am grateful to Peter Caldwell for lending me a copy of this transcript.

² Chief Inspector of Factories: Annual Report, 1944, p. 5.

which show a broadly similar trend:

Table 15

	Milling machines	Power presses
1942:	1706	1044
1943:	1535	1096 1

Clearly, the accident problem was beginning to be overcome by 1943. Bearing in mind that the last two sets of figures have not taken into account the tremendous expansion of the industry, it is obvious that by 1943, there were real improvements in safety in absolute terms. Part of the improvement can be put down to the increased activity of the Factory Inspectorate, and part can be attributed to the increasing familiarity of the new entrants to the industry with machinery, but the Chief Inspector himself was careful to point out that the shop stewards had played their part. In his report for 1942, he cited the example of a Scottish steel foundry with an active accident committee, whose shop steward members arranged for the local Inspector to visit the plant to speak to their members on safety.

Moreover, Joint Production Committee representatives were mainly concerned with raising welfare and safety questions. Ministry of Aircraft Production surveys showed that over a quarter of total discussion time on these committees was taken up with these two matters, and that they were the main preoccupation of the workers' side.²

¹Chief Inspector of Factories: Annual Report, 1945, p. 11.

²AVIA 15/2539. A.V. Roe to MAP, 10 April, 1942; Midland Regional Controller to MAP, 30 June, 1944.
AVIA 9/57. Report on JPCs, 7 January, 1943.

However, dissent on JPCs was probably as far as arguments on safety questions went. Shop floor arguments must have taken place on safety matters, but these never reached the level at which strike action became necessary. No strikes on safety (as distinct from working conditions such as heat in paintshops, cold in shipyards, etc.) were found in the Ministry of Labour Disputes Books.

Apart from safety, the shop stewards had to concern themselves with many other aspects of workers' comfort and well-being in the factories, some of which could cause disputes. One of the most important of these was the matter of the provision of canteens. The Ministry of Labour had made it quite clear that it expected employers to provide adequate canteens, and workers came to expect such facilities as a right. There were two strikes on this matter in the four districts studied, causing the loss of eight hundred working days. Canteen and food provision was the cause of other forms of shop steward action, as well as strikes. Manual workers were entitled to supplementary supplies, which were delivered to the factories by the local Food Control Officer and distributed by the management. At Vickers, Barrow, the shop stewards decided that they should take over the administration of the supplementary food, and approached the Food Control Officer, demanding that they be given the job. He agreed, and the stewards purchased food from the local Co-op and distributed it themselves.¹

Shift working was another bone of contention that stewards had to take up both with companies and within the workforce itself. At Vickers Barrow, the stewards led a strike against proposed new shift

¹SA, June 1941.

working arrangements in 1941 that caused the loss of sixteen thousand working days.¹ The proliferation of shift working could cause difficulties between workers as well as between management and worker. One dispute at John Brown's engine department on the Clyde concerned the refusal of the day shift to alternate with the night shift, causing a four-night strike by the aggrieved night-shift men, and the intervention of the Glasgow District Committee to disentangle the problem.² This was unusual, however, as stewards usually tried to maintain a shift rota to see fair play in this respect.

Given the tremendous demand for labour, and the increasing strength of the shop stewards' movement, it would have been surprising if the strike rate had not increased during the war years. Both Tables ¹⁶ and ¹⁷ showing the trends in engineering and shipbuilding generally, and strikes in our four major engineering areas respectively, confirm that this was in fact the case.

Since strikes will occupy a prominent position in the local studies, only a few general and introductory remarks need be made at this point. These remarks are grouped in the following order: initially, the nature of the strikes will be dealt with, followed by their causation. Finally, some political determinants of strike causation and development will be suggested.

As Table ¹⁸ shows, the typical wartime strike was short, usually lasting less than one week. This was largely because the issue involved was normally a domestic wage question without any particularly wide

¹This strike lasted from 16th to 21st June, 1941 (LAB 34/56).

²The strike was from 21st to 24th June, 1943 (LAB 34/58).

TABLE: 16 Principal Causes of Stoppages of Work, 1941-44, in Engineering, Shipbuilding and Iron and Steel and other Metal Industries.

	Percentage of Stoppages beginning in the Year.			
	1941	1942	1943	1944
Wage increase questions	35.4	33.8	28.8	20.8
Wage decrease questions	3.6	5.5	8.3	7.0
Other wage questions (including piece work).	24.1	25.6	23.4	30.7
<u>TOTAL: All wage questions</u>	(63.1)	(64.9)	(60.5)	(58.5)
Hours of labour	1.9	1.7	1.6	1.3
Employment of particular classes or persons.	19.1	16.4	16.7	17.7
Other working arrangements, rules and discipline	11.2	13.2	16.5	16.4
Trade Unionism	4.0	2.3	3.3	4.4
Sympathetic action	0.7	0.6	0.6	1.5
Other questions	-	0.9	0.8	0.2
<u>TOTAL:</u>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

(Source: Inman, p. 398).

TABLE: 17 Stoppages of Work in the Metal, Engineering and Shipbuilding Industries, 1935-45.

Year	Number of strikes	Number of workers directly involved.	Number of working days lost. (thousands).
1935	73	17	93
1936	148	47	206
1937	220	107	778
1938	138	44	243
1939	181	56	332
1940	229	40	163
1941	472	154	556
1942	476	141	526
1943	612	170	635
1944	610	194	1,048
1945	591	123	528

(Source: Inman, p. 393)

TABLE: Proportion of Strikes Lasting Under One Week, 1941-45.

Year	Number of strikes lasting under one week.	Percentage of total
1941	1,082	86.5
1942	1,147	88.0
1943	1,621	90.8
1944	1,993	90.8
1945	1,980	86.3

(Source: Inman, p. 394).

Table Breakdown of Strikes in the Coventry, Manchester, Tyne and Clyde Districts. (excludes apprentices' strikes).

	Wkg. Conds.	P/WK	Wages	Discipline + transfers	Closed shop + non-unionists	Demarcation	Other	Dilution	TOTAL
(41)									
COV	400(2)	850(2)	465(3)	630(1)	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	2,345(8)
MCR	-	-	-	-	-	528(1)	-	-	528(1)
TYNE	-	-	42(1)	-	-	-	-	-	42(1)
CLYDE	30(1)	122(2)	10,341(15)	4,586(6)	200(2)	-	15,000(1)	-	31,799(27)
(42)									
COV	90(1)	4,480(11)	2,241(6)	-	-	650(1)	-	-	7,462(19)
MCR	-	3,133(7)	172(1)	15(1)	-	-	332(2)	-	3,652(11)
TYNE	520(1)	-	-	-	293(2)	-	-	-	813(3)
CLYDE	338(2)	180(2)	27,810(20)	1,886(6)	2,534(3)	-	351(2)	-	33,099(35)
(43)									
COV	-	8,901(9)	1,145(3)	1,800(2)	800(1)	-	635(2)	-	13,281(17)
MCR	-	1,150(2)	7,171(4)	1,550(4)	100(2)	-	140(1)	-	10,111(13)
TYNE	-	-	25(1)	-	8,684(1)	-	-	-	8,709(2)
CLYDE	1,925(3)	4,077(6)	100,792(12)	7,015(7)	-	-	640(1)	-	114,449(29)
(44)									
COV	64(2)	11,595(8)	2,547(7)	3,580(9)	-	-	510(2)	-	18,296(28)
MCR	-	16,670(2)	765(2)	1,612(2)	130(1)	-	200(1)	-	19,377(8)

... cont....

Breakdown of Strikes in the Coventry, Manchester, Tyne and Clyde Districts (continued)

	Wkg. Conds.	P/Wk	Wages	Discipline + transfers	Closed shop + non-unionists	Demarcation	Other	Dilution	TOTAL
TYNE	Nil	Nil	35(1)	Nil	Nil	Nil	1,850(1)	Nil	1,885(2)
CLYDE	73(1)	49(1)	27,517(7)	1,960(2)	2,170(1)	-	78(2)	-	31,847(14)
(45)									
COV	-	38,770(4)	1,690(2)	320(2)	-	-	600(2)	-	41,380(10)
MCR	-	180(2)	540(1)	450(2)	2,045(3)	-	-	-	3,215(8)
TYNE	-	-	-	1,530(3)	-	-	-	-	1,530(3)
CLYDE	-	418(2)	290(3)	16,315(3)	2,203(5)	-	600(1)	-	19,826(14)

implications for workers outside of those directly concerned. As
Table ¹⁶ shows, wage issues accounted for around 60% of strikes in
engineering and shipbuilding between 1941 and 1944.

Demands for wage increases, particularly by piece workers, was clearly the most important cause of strikes. In the case of piece workers (who were steadily increasing in number), the working of the particular system involved, or the yield on a particular job or jobs often constituted the causes. Alternatively, the cause might be a straight demand for an increase on the basic rates of time or piece workers, or a demand by time workers to have their wages related to piece workers' earnings.

The next most important cause of strikes in the engineering and shipbuilding industries as a whole (largely because of the inclusion of shipbuilding, which had a largely skilled workforce) was that of 'employment of particular classes or persons'. This category may also have included strikes over the continued employment of non-unionists, and would certainly have included strikes for the sacking of certain foremen. These strikes accounted for somewhere between sixteen and twenty percent of strikes in the period. The next most important category was that of 'other working arrangements, rules and discipline', accounting for between eleven and seventeen percent of stoppages. The last significant category was that of 'Trade Unionism',

with between two and five percent of strikes.¹

In this last bloc of categories of causes, it is important to remember that some strikes (for example, over the victimisation of a shop steward) could be put in any pigeon-hole. As a team of authors recently wrote in an important study of the motor industry, classifying strikes is necessarily 'an exercise in arbitrariness'. This is particularly true of strikes outside of the wages category, and reminds us of the limitations of this sort of analysis.²

¹Some mention should also be made here of sabotage. Sabotage was rare, so it is difficult to generalise from the few examples which we have except to say that motives, methods and severity of the effects varied greatly from case to case. The Ministry of Information collated data on sabotage for 1941 only, and then appears to have given up, probably in despair at the low rate of return for their efforts. The Ministry scoured the local papers and numerous other sources meticulously, and discovered eight clear cases of sabotage between October 1940 and October 1941. These cases involved twelve people, all of whom appear to have been quite young men: the oldest was only thirty-one, and five were under twenty-one. A few examples will show the type of case involved. In October 1940, a fitter was fined £100 for deliberately scamping work on an aircraft in order to obtain his release from that firm to get a better paid job. Next month, a young engineer was bound over for two years for an unspecified act of sabotage, committed because he wanted to obtain his release to join the Army. In January 1941, a youth of seventeen "messed up" the fuse box at a Bristol factory because he wanted the night off; fifty workers lost power on their machines as a result. He was sentenced to three months. The very individualistic nature of these cases seems to confirm the suspicion that they were about as rare as the Ministry of Information's survey suggested. (INF 1/336. 12 October, 19 November, 1940; 4 February, 1941).

²H.A. Turner et. al., op.cit., p. 63.

The trend towards a higher number of strikes over discipline questions was only a part of the more general tendency for the number of working days lost through strikes to increase during the war. The growing strength of the shop stewards' movement and their desire to extend their control was one major underlying cause of this tendency. There were other underlying causes: the slowness of the implementation of the Procedure for the Avoidance of Disputes, an irritation with 'diluted' and inefficient managements, and an increasing war-weariness amongst the working population. The overloading of the disputes procedure was perhaps the most important of these causes: the large strike at Rolls-Royce Hillington^{in 1943} was over a matter which had been in the procedure for fourteen months without resolution, and workers could grow tired of waiting rather than forget the issue at stake.¹ Expectations had been aroused and negotiations were proving fruitless, and it therefore proved impossible for the stewards to dissuade them from taking strike action. Inefficient management was another important cause; in a situation in which production was supposed to be of paramount importance, workers could often become frustrated when their managements seemed to be inefficient and failing to keep their side of the bargain. Beaverbrook himself complained of this as being an important factor.² In addition, war weariness undoubtedly built up from early 1943, as the cumulative strain of the blackout (often accompanied by poor factory ventilation), poor transport, rationing and all the other problems of wartime life began to tell. Perhaps this was why most strikes in the aircraft industry occurred during the winter months.³

¹P. Inman, op.cit., p. 364.

²Beaverbrook wrote an article on this for the Manchester Guardian, 27 June, 1942.

³This paragraph relies on LAB 10/281. H. Emmerson: 'Causes of Industrial Unrest', 3 November, 1943.

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TABLE: Average Weekly Earnings of Adult Males: Motor Vehicles, Cycles and Aircraft Compared to the Average of all Metal, Engineering and Ship-building Industries.

	Metal, eng., s'bldg.	Motor vehicles, cycles, aircraft.
Oct. 1938	75s.	-
July 1940	102s. 5d.	114s. 11d.
July 1941	112s. 2d.	127s. 5d.
Jan. 1942	119s. 2d.	137s. 8d.
July 1942	128s. 1d.	147s. 5d.
Jan. 1943	131s. 6d.	148s. 7d.
July 1943	138s. 3d.	155s. 10d.
Jan. 1944	141s. 10d.	166s. 1d.
July 1944	139s. 1d.	159s. 11d.
Jan. 1945	131s. 2d.	148s. 6d.
July 1945	133s.	143s. 4d.

(Sources: British Labour Statistics. Historical Abstract. (Table 40). Ministry of Labour Gazette)

TABLE: Average Hourly Earnings in the Metal, Engineering and Shipbuilding Industries, Compared to Manufacturing Industry as a whole.

A) Men over 21.

(in pence)

	Metal, eng., s'bldg.	All manufacturing inds.
Oct. 1938	18.8d	17.8d
July 1943	30.7d	29.1d
Jan. 1944	31.9d	30.2d
July 1944	32.5d	30.8d
Jan. 1945	32.0d	30.3d
July 1945	32.4d	30.8d

B) Women over 18.

(in pence)

	Metal, eng., s'bldg.	All manufacturing inds.
Oct. 1938	9.0d	9.0d
July 1943	17.9d	16.2d
Jan. 1944	18.6d	16.9d
July 1944	18.9d	17.3d
Jan. 1945	19.5d	17.5d
July 1945	19.1d	17.4d

(Source: British Labour Statistics, Historical Abstract, Table 46).

TABLE: Cost of Living Index. All Items.

Sept. 1, 1939	155
Aug. 31, 1940	187
Sept. 1, 1941	199
Sept. 1, 1942	200
Sept. 1, 1943	198
Sept. 1, 1944	202
Sept. 1, 1945	203

(Source: British Labour Statistics, Historical Abstract, Table 89).

These, then, were the major underlying causes. They were not always reflected in the immediate causes of disputes, of which an analysis is given for our major engineering areas in Table 19. Overall, it should be pointed out that the number of working days lost was considerably below the number lost during the First World War. The opposition of the political element in the shop stewards' movement to strikes after the entry of Russia into the War, and the Government's experience of handling strikes during the First World War were two major reasons for this.

But there was another reason for the lower strike rate of the Second World War: rising real earnings. This applied to many sections of the working class, and especially to engineering workers. A Ministry of Labour internal document estimated that the average increase in wage rates between September 1939 and November 1943 was 34% (excluding agriculture), as against an increase in the official cost of living index of 30%. The corresponding figures for the First World War were that wage rates had increased by 55% compared to 85% in the cost of living index.¹ The earnings of metal, engineering and ship-building workers were rather higher than average, and, within this group, the aircraft industry was the highest paid (see tables 20 and 21). On the other hand, it is undoubtedly true, as was pointed out by many contemporary trade unionists, that much of the increase was due to longer hours.

Statistics covering the number of hours worked in industry were not collected by the Ministry of Labour between July 1940 and January 1943 inclusive, and hours must have been extremely high during

¹LAB 10/281. H. Emmerson: "Causes of Industrial Unrest", p. 2.

1940; Nevertheless, hourly earnings in the metal engineering and shipbuilding group of industries were considerably higher than average both before and after July 1943. These averages are given in table 21. Moreover, the grouping of the metal industries together undoubtedly obscures the particularly high level of hourly earnings in the motor vehicle, cycles and aircraft group. There was, of course, rather less for them to spend their earnings on, but they were at least earning the money, and in full employment.¹ They enjoyed an absolute increase in their earnings, and regular work; these were very real gains for men and women who had been through the experience of the Depression years.

* * *

The problems faced by workers in the engineering industry described so far were more or less shared by all of them, although the response might differ between different districts and even between factories in the same district. But there were also large groups of workers who had what might be called sectoral problems which transcended factories and districts. The main groups with such problems were apprentices and women; how did the shop stewards' movement relate to them?

Women will be dealt with below, in a separate section. Here, the major grievances held by the apprentices will be sketched.

¹These issues are discussed at length by J.L. Nicholson: "Employment and National Income During the War," in Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Statistics, 7, (1945), and D. Seers: Changes in the Cost of Living and the Distribution of Income Since 1938. (Oxford, 1949).

Young workers in general and apprentices in particular had a large number of grievances, but discontent may normally be put down to two major causes: inadequate training and low wages. These had been the underlying causes of the 1937 eruptions, and they remained key questions throughout the war. One of the largest apprentices' strikes outside of the upheavals of 1937, 1941 and 1944 involved shipyard fitters at Yarrows yard on the Clyde in February 1941. The managing director wrote to the Ministry of Labour explaining that the strike had started because a lad had been sacked for refusing to carry material from the dockside into the stokehold, since this was labouring work and was preventing him from being long enough on a fitting job to learn anything.¹

The main grievance giving rise to strike action was not training, however, but wages. Apprentices' wage rates were scandalously low. During the 1937 strikes, Challenge had claimed that apprentices had enjoyed higher wages fifty years earlier!² The piecemeal local advances of 1937 still left a huge gap between the apprentices' earnings and the full journeyman's rate, a gap which was felt all the more acutely because of the rapid inflation of the first year of war. Rates varied according to district, but the Ministry of Labour's 'average' fifth year apprentice was earning 31s. 3d. per week at the beginning of 1941, compared to the adult plain time rate of £3.11s.6d. after the 3/6d award of January 1941.³ Some apprentices were on piece work, and would earn more, but the fact that they were on payment

¹LAB 10/138. Managing Director of Yarrows to Ministry of Labour, 25 February, 1941.

²Challenge, 15 April, 1937.

³P. Inman, op.cit., p. 334, J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., p. 255.

by results at all leads us full circle back to the training question. It is difficult to see how an apprentice could learn very much on piece work, which would have to be reasonably uniform work for him to earn much bonus. After the 1941 strike, the fifth year rate was raised to 46/- and a definite percentage of the adult advances laid down for each year of apprenticeship.¹ Thus, first year apprentices were awarded 10½d per week, whilst fifth years were given 1/7d., so that even the fifth years received less than half of the adult increase.² This proportion was improved in the national negotiations of July 1942 and April 1943. In these latter negotiations, increases were also obtained for fourteen and fifteen year olds, who had been excluded from the earlier agreements.³

The 1941 gains were regarded as insufficient by the lads themselves. Apprentices' delegates from all over Britain met in Manchester on May 11th 1941 and agreed that the deficiencies of the settlement were that it did not include boys under sixteen, that it did not keep pace with the cost of living, that there was no apprentice representation on price-fixing committees, and that the increases had not yet been paid in some areas.⁴ The next conference (which never met, possibly because of the CP's change in line on the war) was set for August 10th 1941. There can be little doubt that these delegates (Socialist Appeal reported that the vast majority of them were members of the YCL)⁵ had the backing of the apprentices themselves

¹ P. Inman, op.cit., p. 334.

² LAB 10/138. 'Second and Final Report by a Court of Enquiry Concerning Stoppages of Work by Apprentices etc...'

³ J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., p. 256.

⁴ SA, June 1941.

⁵ Ibid.

when they decided to press further demands on the employers. Perhaps the best way of illustrating this is to quote at length from a Liverpool apprentice's letter to a friend in Canada intercepted by the censor just after the 1941 strike had been settled:

"The apprentices all over the Clyde, Belfast and Edinburgh were out on strike for higher wages. They are bringing in girls who are getting big wages and trainees (boys who serve six months training and then come in and get the man's pay while we have to work - serve - five years at the small rate.) To make a long story short we got a rise but not to suit me yet. As you know first year have a standard pay and when you enter your second year you get a little more etc. etc. for each year until your time is out, well now they are going by your ages - so that a boy who works beside me and has less time served than me is getting 32/6d a week simply because this boy is eighteen and I am only seventeen. A boy of twenty whether he is just starting or not will get 46/- so don't be saying Canada is the only one who does things wrong." 1

The low level of apprentices' wages in absolute terms stimulated comparisons with the trainees and girls and women coming into the factories. Apprentices felt that they were worth more than either of these other two groups of young workers, by virtue of their training. Yet they received less. This is the background to their militancy in the 1941 and 1944 strikes.

Even these grievances, though substantial enough, were not the only motive forces behind the apprentices' discontent. Long hours was another problem for them, especially during 1940. The restrictions on hours for juveniles had been supposedly governed by the Young Persons (Employment) Act of 1938, under which nobody between the ages

¹LAB 10/138. Extract from Ministry of Information From Postal Censorship, Terminal Mails (Private Branch) [LIV/20671] 41; 16 April, 1941.

of sixteen and eighteen was allowed to work more than forty-eight hours per week, plus six hours overtime in any one week and fifty hours in a year. The restrictions were more stringent for younger people.¹ In the rush for production of 1940, the 1938 Act was swept aside and hours worked which were reminiscent of the Industrial Revolution. In Coventry, as late as 1942 the average hours were from seven or seven-thirty in the morning to six-thirty or seven in the evening. Saturday mornings were invariably worked, roughly half of the young workers worked alternate Saturday afternoons, and 'a considerable number' worked every Saturday afternoon. A few boys worked alternate Sundays.² In nearby Rugby, a survey was carried out of three hundred young workers between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. This revealed that one hundred and eighty-five were working over fifty hours per week.³ That year, a more general national survey showed that many of these young people working long hours were employed in the engineering industry, although no industrial breakdown was attempted by the researchers.⁴ One detailed local survey of excessive hours was carried out where the workers' jobs and employers were stated. This was in East Ham, and showed that of sixty-five extreme cases, thirty-eight occurred in engineering. Incidentally, the worst offender, with six cases, was the Woolwich Arsenal.⁵

¹LAB 19/46. Memo. on Legislation (n.d.).

²Ibid. ? to W. Taylor, J.V. 180/5/1942.

³Ibid. 'Evidence Resulting from the Follow-up of over-long Working Hours.' Rugby document attached.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. County Boro. of East Ham Education Committee. 'Ages 16-18: Cases in which Hours of Work Appear to Exceed 50 Hours per Week'.

Very few prosecutions were undertaken in this connection.

The Emergency Powers Act had suspended most of the corpus of legislation to deal with excessive hours, the Factory Inspectorate was too busy to tackle all but the worst cases, and magistrates were reluctant to find against employers under the circumstances. In Coventry, the Education Authority was especially interested in the problem, and one hundred and seventy cases were referred to the Factory Inspectorate up to 1942, who definitely established illegality in nineteen cases. How many of these were taken to court is unknown.¹ These figures were broadly confirmed by similar statistics for some other areas.²

The general realisation in industry that long hours were counter-productive, coupled with the introduction of women on a large scale reduced the burden of long hours on the young. Nevertheless, while these hours lasted, they must have contributed to the general sense of grievance of apprentices and other young engineering workers. Tiredness was bad enough, but to come out with a small pay packet after working so many hours must have been even worse. This is the background to the apprentices' largest and most extensive wartime strike, that of 1941.

These grievances fuelled the discontent of the apprentices, which came out in the strikes of 1937, 1941 and 1944. These strikes are dealt with elsewhere in the thesis, but two general points should be made here about the apprentices' strikes. Firstly, it is interesting to note that the 1937 strike taught apprentices the lesson that they could strike, despite their indentures. Table ²³ shows that they were

¹ LAB 19/46. F. Taylor to Mr. John, 26 October, 1942.

² Ibid.

Table 4. Apprentices' Strikes, 1935-1945 (Engineering only)

	Aggregate number of working days lost.	No. of apprentices involved	Wages	Discipline	Victimisation	T.U. Membership	Other
	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
1935	Nil						
'36	120	24	1	-	-	-	-
'37	200,000 (estimate; not all strikes recorded)	40,000 (est.)	1		3	-	-
'38	Nil						
'39	20,470	2,461	3	1	-	2	-
'40	1,125	221	4	1	1	-	-
'41	174,150	23,536	5	2	2	-	1
'42	3,026	859	9	3	-	-	-
'43	983	389	5	2	-	-	-
'44	35,449	12,161	-	4	-	-	2
'45	2,075	418	3	1	-	-	-

NB "Mixed" strikes, including other groups of workers, are not included. Strikes of rivet-heaters are not included.

(Source: Ministry of Labour Disputes Books.)

striking as a separate group (as opposed to becoming involved in more general strikes) from 1939 onwards, after an initial period of quiescence in 1938. There was, then, a small but significant tendency to strike on day to day issues. Secondly, it is noticeable that the issue that caused most strikes was wages. Apprentices were becoming less amenable to accepting 'the small rate' in return for training; they were increasingly being used on production work, for which they would often demand the full rate.

These facts alone ensured that the shop stewards had to take more and more of an interest in apprentices' problems. In July 1942, shop stewards became formally empowered to take up matters concerning junior workers by a modification to the national agreement of 1941.¹ The stewards, encouraged by the AEU Regional Officers appointed by the AEU (partly for this purpose) in 1943, began to take the matter seriously (in a continuous sense) for the first time ever.² Youth representatives were elected to some shop stewards' committees (see p. 236 for the Standard Motor Co., Coventry). Junior male workers' committees were set up in the districts in 1942, and two years later, girls were included in their constitutions. In July 1944, the first national youth conference was held, at which problems were discussed and recommendations made to the AEU Executive.³

This increasing incorporation of the apprentices and young workers into the AEU structure was a reflection of the union's concern with

¹P. Inman, op.cit., p. 334.

²J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., p. 262.

³Ibid., p. 263.

their problems, but it was not always seen as entirely beneficial by all of the young workers themselves. In 1944, during the apprentices' strike on the Tyneside, the apprentices set up their own committee. This committee was opposed by the Young Workers Committee, which was determined to end the strike, and eventually succeeded in doing so. The Young Workers Committees and the rest of the bodies set up within the union undoubtedly represented a step forward for the young workers in the long run, since they offered a better opportunity of influencing AEU policy. On the other hand, they could in the short run appear (as in 1944), as little more than a strike-breakers organisation.

Thus, despite the fact that some shop stewards' committees were listening to the boys' representatives and were involved in taking up their grievances, the lads largely remained outside of the shop steward and union structure. As we shall see, the indications are that very few of them joined the AEU, and their strikes were entirely conducted without the sort of supportive strike action they had received from the Clydeside workers in 1937. The AEU's local committees and national conferences did not substantially alter this picture.

In conclusion, the growth of the shop stewards' movement during the War was a result not only of the full employment of the war years but also of the growing sense of community which grew out of this security of employment and the sense of fighting for a common cause. The stewards had to defend and attack along the workshop 'frontiers of control' as these were gradually pushed forward in the workers' favour. In the process, they acquired a whole new range of functions both inside and outside of the factory. The slowness of a clogged up Procedure for the Avoidance of Disputes and a sense of war-weariness

combined with the general feeling of confidence in their ability to win disputes led to a steadily rising strike rate. The stewards had to adjust to this situation; precisely how they did so will be dealt with in some detail later. Finally, the stewards had to relate to the categories of workers who had special problems: young workers and women. The former have been dealt with, but women, as a more important group in terms of their size and distinctive identity deserve separate and more detailed treatment.

* * *

No discussion of the social upheavals going on inside the factories during the Second World War would be complete without considering the important changes brought about by the sizeable influx of women. Large numbers of women voluntarily started work in the munitions industries during 1940 and 1941, and this process was speeded up by the conscription of women for war work in December 1941. By the middle of 1943, twice as high a proportion of the total female population between the ages of fifteen and sixty was working in munitions as had been in 1918.¹ By 1943, men outnumbered women by less than two to one in the metal industries (see table ²⁴). About three-quarters of these women had worked before, although only about one quarter had previous experience in the engineering industries. For a large group, domestic service and office work had provided their only pre-War work experience.

¹A. Calder, op.cit., p. 382.

In general, these women, despite their lack of experience in the industry, fitted in well in the day-to-day social life of the factories. This has been remarked on by both of the engineering workers, J.T. Murphy and Mark Benney, who wrote contemporary accounts.¹ Despite the fact that both of these commentators were men, there seems little reason to doubt their judgement that, after some initial misgivings about training the women, even the skilled men came to accept them.

Table Showing the Proportion of Women to Men in the Metal Industries

	1939-45.						
	Thousands						
	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
Men, 14-64	2379	2628	2862	2989	3025	2916	2643
Women, 14-59		433	570	892	1383	1635	1257

(Source: Inman, pp. 481-2).

The women themselves seemed to enjoy working with men. A survey carried out in September 1943 asked a cross-section of working women whether they worked in close contact with men. 61% replied that they did, and a large proportion of the remainder had worked with men previously. Of the 61%, 44% thought that men and women 'got on alright', and only 4% thought they did not get on well.²

¹J.T. Murphy, op.cit., p. 52. M. Benney, op.cit., pp. 105-6.

²G. Thomas: Women at Work (Wartime Social Survey, June 1944), p. 28.

A survey carried out by Mass Observation during late 1942 showed that women working in war factories were also well satisfied with their jobs. 75% of women either 'really liked' their jobs (39%) or were 'satisfied without being very enthusiastic' (36%). 11% were 'unenthusiastic, ranging through to definitely hostile', whilst only 4% 'condemned their jobs emphatically'. Mass Observation implied that these results showed a difference between male and female attitudes, though they did not measure the former in the same way.¹ Women's overall satisfaction with their wartime work is less surprising if we consider the jobs which the women in engineering had worked at previous to the war. The 1943 survey carried out for the Ministry of Reconstruction quoted above found that only 22% of them had worked in engineering before, that 51% of them came from another job, and that 24% came from the home. Of those coming from another job, the most common categories of pre-war work were 'distributive work (including waitresses)' or 'labourers and domestic servants'. Over half of the women in engineering had therefore come from the home or from relatively poorly paid and non-industrial jobs. The only category of women war workers for whom this was not true was the supervisory group of women, who were mainly drawn from professional and clerical workers rather than from the ranks of women who had previous engineering experience.² Mass Observation found this last fact to be a major cause of grievance among the mass of women workers.³ During the first half of the war,

¹Mass Observation: People in Production (1942), p. 117.

²G. Thomas, op.cit., p. 11.

³Mass Observation, op.cit., p. 117ff.

it is difficult to find many examples of working women responding to any of their undoubtedly very real problems in a collective fashion. The provision of day nurseries for munition workers' children is a case in point.

Government interest in nurseries began not with any initiative from working women themselves, but with a letter from Lady Allen of Hurtwood, the Right Honourable the Marchioness of Reading, to the Ministry of Labour at the end of March 1940.¹ Lady Allen enquired about the number of nurseries available, and questioned whether it was sufficient. The Ministry of Labour completed a survey of one problematic town, Chorley in Lancashire, made a rough estimate of the position in Coventry, and wrote to Malcolm Macdonald, the Minister of Health, in the fortnight after Bevin's appointment as Minister.²

The situation at Chorley was unsatisfactory to the women questioned. Six hundred and twelve women were interviewed, of whom two hundred and forty-one had children under school age. Of these, arrangements for the care of the children were called 'unsatisfactory' by one hundred and six women. Most of these women were leaving their children with older women in the family, next-door neighbours or paid

¹LAB 26/57. Lady Allen to the Minister of Labour, 20 March, 1940. Lady Allen was not by any means a typical 'Lady Bountiful'. She was a member of the ILP and a lifelong campaigner for the rights of women and children, being prominent in the battle for the 1948 Children Act. (Cf. M. Allen and M. Nicholson: Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady. Lady Allen of Hurtwood. (1976).)

²Ibid. 'District Analysis, Form 2'. Memo. to Malcolm Macdonald, 25 May, 1940, p. 2.

child-minders. A similar situation was thought to obtain in Coventry.¹ Thus, although Governmental opinion appeared to be that the problem was a localised one, quite large numbers of women were affected by it, for whom it constituted a continual worry.

Yet the women themselves appear to have done practically nothing at all about it. It was Bevin and the Marchioness of Reading who took the initiative in overcoming the problem for the women. In June 1940, Bevin made a speech to the Conference of Women's Voluntary Organisations in which he stated that he was sending letters to local authorities proposing plans for nursery facilities, and encouraging them to take the matter up. Nurseries attached to the factories were not, on the other hand, being encouraged, because of the possibility of enemy air attack.² In December 1941, the Labour Party's Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations raised its voice to suggest to Bevin that the onus was being put on working women to find their own form of child care, and that the Ministry of Labour was perpetuating the situation.³ This was apparently the first and last time that any body with the remotest claim to representing working women took the matter up. In June 1942, Bevin was still mainly concerned with

¹ LAB 26/57. 'District Analysis, Form 2'. Angus Calder reproduces one of the excuses often used at the time for the inadequate nursery provision when he questions whether the women would have used them had they existed (p. 449). The fantastic growth of the nursery provision in the latter years of the war itself shows how marginal this consideration was. Where they were set up they were extensively used.

² Ibid., Extract from Minister's speech, 18 June, 1940.

³ Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations to Bevin, 18 December, 1941.

keeping the Marchioness of Reading up to date. Bevin had in any case both a desire and a need to expand the provision of nurseries, as the pressure on war production increased. Thus, by mid-1942, six months after the conscription of women was first announced, nurseries were being opened at the rate of three per day to supplement the existing five hundred and forty.¹ Once again, our source is a letter to the Marchioness of Reading.

At first sight, then, from the writings of male engineers, from the Mass Observation surveys carried out in 1942, and from looking at the Ministry of Labour's involvement in nursery care, it might seem that women were a singularly quiescent part of the workforce. If this was more or less true up to the end of 1942, it becomes less adequate as a total description of women's collective activity after that point in time. Women, it is true, remained largely outside of the trade unions, even in engineering. They continued to have a high rate of absenteeism. Many commentators were struck by the women's apparent passivity and pliability as workers. Yet a closer examination of the situation in the industry reveals a rather more complex and contradictory situation than these bare facts might seem to suggest.

On an individual level, the women were generally quite capable of responding effectively to supervisory badgering and threats. One girl, for example, laughed at the manager of an engineering firm when he told her that she would be sent to prison if her 'indiscipline' continued.² But it is in the collective sense that women's activity

¹Minister to Lady Allen, ? June, 1942.

²A. Calder, op.cit., p. 463.

was most interesting in the second half of the war, when they erupted into large-scale strikes over wages. A Ministry of Labour memorandum of 1943 complained that:

"Disputes relating exclusively to the wages of women and girls are proportionately more prone to result in strike action than where men are concerned. This no doubt reflects the lower degree of organisation amongst women or less experience of trade unionism and factory discipline." 1

One Coventry ex-shop steward interviewed recalled his amazement and embarrassment when a foreman asked what his women members were doing putting their coats on:

"I was in the office, and these girls were putting their coats on - they were going home, so the foreman asked me what was going on. But I didn't even know, because they hadn't told me mate, they were pissing off home. They thought this was what trade unionists did, if you didn't get what you wanted, you stopped work". 2

Obviously, this was what the Ministry of Labour was referring to when it lamented women's lack of 'factory discipline'. From mid-1943 to the spring of 1944, there were three major strikes involving women: the Rolls-Royce Hillington disputes of August and November 1943, and the Barr and Stroud strike of February 1944. All of these stoppages involved a majority of women, and they were also the most important stoppages of the war prior to the apprentices' strike of 1944. Indeed, the Scottish Conciliation Officer thought that the Barr and Stroud strike might spread to the rest of Britain.³ In addition, the women

¹LAB 10/281. H.A. Emmerson: 'Causes of Industrial Unrest', 3 November, 1943.

²Interview with Bill Wellings, 18 June, 1973.

³LAB 10/445. 14 January, 1944.

involved in the Barrow dispute of 1943, the Swan Hunter dispute of the same year, and a number of smaller stoppages in Coventry were picked out by numerous commentators as being especially militant in prosecuting their strikes.¹

Clearly, there is a considerable gap here between the Mass Observation findings and the behaviour of women workers over the next eighteen months or so. Women, and especially married women, had always had a high rate of absenteeism, but their highly individualised response was supplemented by a more collective one in the latter years of the war. The trend should not be exaggerated; it was limited to more or less isolated explosions of militancy which rarely occurred twice in the same place. Nevertheless, it is important to look into the causes of this unrest.

Firstly, and in fairness to Mass Observation, the women who had entered industry prior to their survey had done so voluntarily. MO themselves thought that it was likely that young women conscripted into the war industries would respond in a more rebellious manner than their sisters who were already working of their own free will.²

¹SA, March, 1943.

Ibid., October, mid-October, November, mid-November 1943. There is also some evidence to suggest considerable militancy among women aircraft workers in the London area. The London Conciliation Officer reported difficulties at two factories in January 1942; at one, the problem was caused by a 'very bad choice' of women stewards, whilst at the other the dismissal of 34 women, including the senior woman steward, was giving rise to difficulties. By the summer of 1942, he was reporting the beginnings of agitation throughout the London area over women's rates of pay. (LAB 10/358, 10 January, 25 July, 1942).

²Mass Observation: People In Production, pp. 118, 138.

This analysis was confirmed by the 1943 survey of women's attitudes, which found that two-thirds of the women over thirty-five said that they had entered war industry out of 'Duty to the Country', compared to one sixth of women under thirty-five. There was a slightly higher proportion of conscripts among the younger women, who had been the first to be conscripted, but by September 1943, women up to the age of forty-four had been registered for employment.¹ It seems likely that there was also another factor at work, and that women who had reached adolescence in the post-First World War years had rather different attitudes to their country than the older women.² Wages were the main motive given by younger women for entering industry, and, in this respect, they had ample cause for complaint. They were paid considerably less than men for training in the Government Training Centres: during training, they received 22/6d. less than men over twenty, and, after passing their proficiency tests, they earned 28/6d. less than their male counterparts.³

Once inside the factories, women found that the wages gap persisted and in some cases widened even further. Women's earnings in relation to those of men are given in table 25. In table 25, we can see that women's earnings as a proportion of men's improved considerably during the war period, but that they remained at less than two-thirds of the male level. This was despite the official Temporary Relaxation Agreement concluded at the beginning of the war, which provided that women replacing men should receive the full male rate.

¹H.M.D. Parker, op.cit., p. 491.

²G. Thomas, op.cit., p. 12.

³Ibid., p. 100.

TABLE: Showing Women's Average Earnings and Working Hours Compared to those of men in the Metal, Engineering and

<u>Shipbuilding Group of Industries.</u>											
OCTOBER 1938				JULY 1943				JULY 1945			
Ave. Earnings	M.	F.	Ave. No. Hours	Ave. Earnings	M.	F.	Ave. No. Hours	Ave. Earnings	M.	F.	Ave. No. Hours
75/-	33/4d.	48/-	44.2	138/3	69/10	54.1	46.9	133/-	69/1	49.2	43.3
			Hourly Earnings				Hourly Earnings				Hourly Earnings
			M. F.				M. F.				M. F.
			1/7d 9d				2/7 1/6				2/8 1/8

Female Earnings as a Percentage of Male:

October 1938:	47.4%
July 1943:	58.1%
July 1945:	62.5%

(Source: Ministry of Labour Gazette)

Earnings and the application of the Relaxation Agreement were major women's grievances, then. But the Mass Observation survey showed that the main cause for complaint amongst women was not the wages problem, but working arrangements, which was literally twice as important to them as any other single issue.¹ Lavatory and washing facilities, hours of work, canteen facilities, day nurseries for their children, were the main issues that concerned them. The most important problem of this type was the matter of release from work to go shopping. Wartime hours of work meant that women were unable to shop, and many managements (especially in Coventry) were unwilling to allow them any time off for this purpose.²

All these grievances contributed to discontent, but there were additional reasons for the women's particular brand of militancy. Often (as at Barr and Stroud's and in the Coventry factories) only a minority of them were trade union members. They tended, therefore, to slip well behind the better-organised male-dominated sections, to 'explode' into unpredictable strikes, to ignore the advice of trade union officials and sometimes even of shop stewards, and then to return to work as unpredictably as they had left it. This pattern of women's militancy will be investigated and documented more thoroughly in the local studies. Here, only the general national background in terms of trade union membership need be outlined. The broad outline of the number of women employed and the percentage of these who were members of their respective unions throughout our period

¹Mass Observation: People in Production, p. 109.

²Ibid., p. 183.

is given for the engineering industry in table 27. During 1943 alone, following the decision of the AEU to admit women, 132,010 women joined that union, although the total women's membership fell off during 1944, as table 26 shows.¹

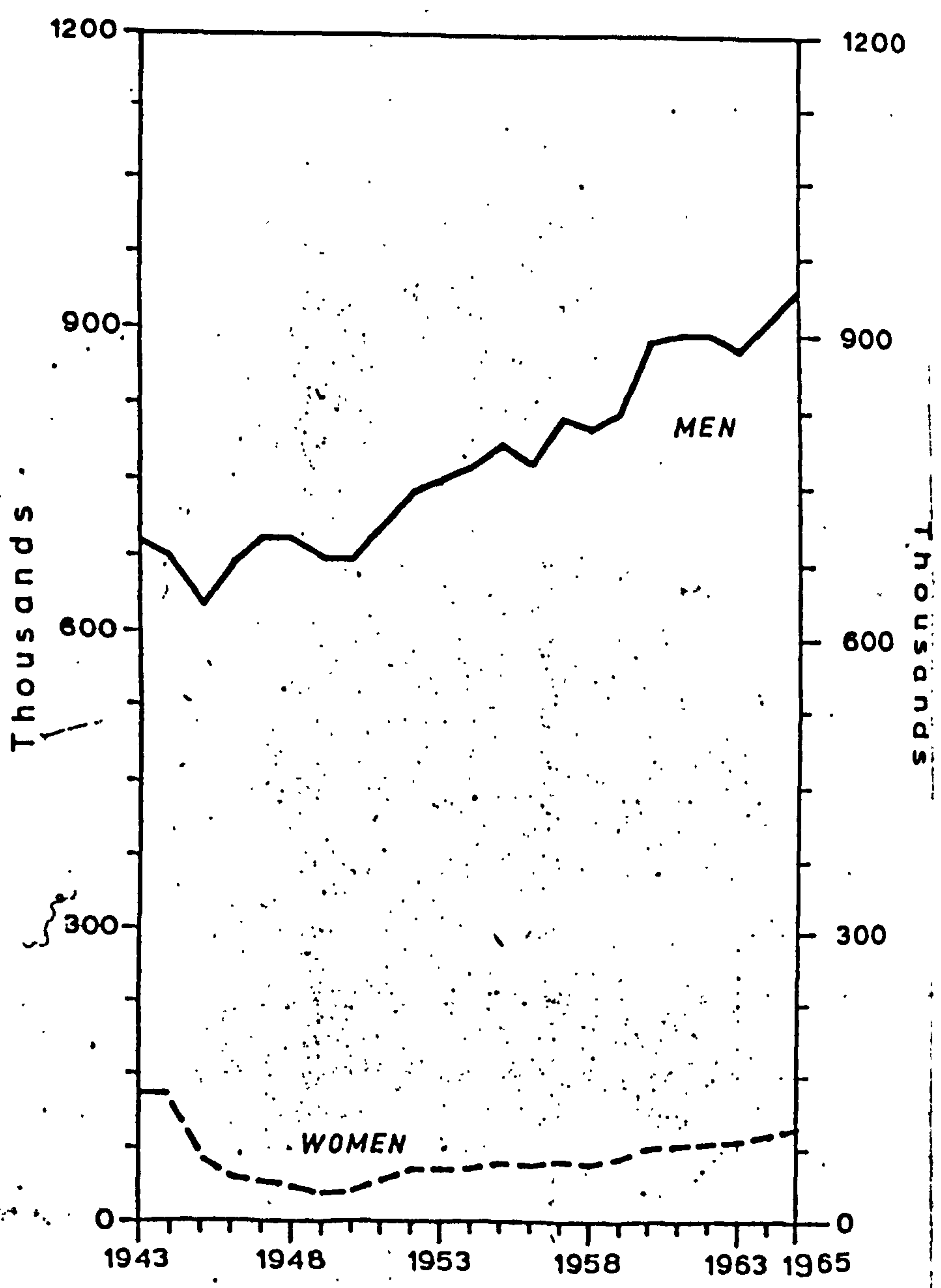
The former table seriously underestimates the density of women's trade union membership in the engineering industries because it omits the general unions. The main problem here is that it is impossible to establish, even in the most general terms, what proportion of the female membership of these unions was employed in the engineering industry. It is certain that many of these women members did work in this sector, however. All that can be done is to quote the global female membership totals of these unions. By 1942, the T&GWU and the NUGMW had over 500,000 women members.² By the end of 1943, the T&GWU alone had 306,707 women members.³

¹J.B. Jefferys, op.cit., p. 260.

²S.T. LeYenhak, op.cit., p. 31.
An additional problem here is posed by the high rate of membership turnover in the general unions. The average annual turnover rate in the TGWU for the period 1936-47 inclusive was 33% .
(V.L. Allen, Trade Union Leadership, p. 242.)

³International Labour Organisation: The War and Women's Employment (Montreal, 1946), p. 90.
By the end of 1945, the NUGMW had 45,000 women members, compared to only 19,000 at the end of 1944 (B. Drake: 'Women in Trade Unions', in G.D.H. Cole (ed.) Trade Unionism Today (1945), p. 249).
By the beginning of 1944, the ETU had a female membership of 9,077, of which the biggest single section worked in the ROFs. They had created a special women's section at the end of 1943.
(Electrical Trades Journal, January 1944).

Table : Male and Female Membership of the AEU, 1943-65.



Source: S.T. Levenhak Graph 2.

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Table 27: Trade Union Density among Male and Female Workers in Metal Manufacture, Engineering and Electrical Goods, Vehicles, Shipbuilding and Repairing, Other Metal Goods, Precision Instruments and Jewellery.

In Thou- sands	E M P L O Y M E N T				T R A D E U N I O N M E M B E R S H I P				D E N S I T Y			
	Number of Men Employed	% + or - since last figure	Number of Women Employed	% + or - since last figure	Number of Men Members	% + or - since last figure	Number of Women Members	% + or - since last figure	Men's Union Density	Women's Union Density	Change in Mal Densy	Changes in Female Density
1923	1,935.9	-	243.000	-	727.8	-	8.1	-	37.6	3.3	-	-
1928	1,813.9	- 6.3	274.500	+ 13.0	600.7	- 17.5	6.6	- 18.5	33.1	2.4	- 5	- .9
1933	1,783.5	- 1.7	295.700	+ 7.7	513.2	- 14.6	5.5	- 16.7	28.8	1.9	- 3	- .5
1935	1,832.4	+ 2.7	318.100	+ 7.6	586.2	+ 14.2	6.3	+ 14.5	32.0	2.0	+ 2	+ .1
1938	2,190.9	+ 19.6	383.800	+ 20.7	844.7	+ 44.1	7.7	+ 22.2	38.6	2.0	+ 1.6	-
1943	3,016.2	+ 37.7	1531.6	+ 299.1	1,449.0	+ 71.5	171.0	+2120.8	48.0	11.2	+ .4	+ 9.2
1946	2,544.2	+ 15.6	767.600	+ 49.9	1,507.2	+ 4.0	73.7	- 56.9	59.2	9.6	+ 1.2	- 1.6
1948	3,180.2	+ 25.0	806.100	+ 5.9	1,600.0	+ 6.2	67.0	- 9.1	50.3	8.3	- .9	- 1.3
1951	3,273.3	+ 2.9	859.200	+ 6.6	1,632.5	+ 2.0	71.4	+ 6.6	49.9	8.3	- .4	-
1954	3,467.6	+ 5.9	903.400	+ 5.1	1,717.4	+ 5.2	85.9	+ 20.3	49.5	9.5	- .4	+ 1.2
1957	3,688.0	+ 6.4	964.300	+ 6.7	1,823.9	+ 6.2	102.5	+ 19.3	49.5	10.6	.	+ 1.1
1960	3,498.8	- 5.1	966.800	+ 0.3	1,908.8	+ 4.7	118.2	+ 15.3	54.6	12.2	+ 1.1	+ 1.6
1963	3,490.7	- 0.2	974.300	+ 0.8	1,906.8	- 0.1	132.5	+ 12.1	54.6	13.6	.	+ 1.4
1965	3,596.6	+ 3.0	1038.800	+ 6.6	2,028.8	+ 6.4	153.2	+ 15.6	56.4	14.7	+ 1.8	+ 1.1

Source: S.T. Levenhak: Table 5.

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A realistic estimate of the trade union density amongst women workers would therefore be considerably higher than table ²⁷ suggests. Even if we double the figure in this table, however, we still only arrive at a proportion of less than one quarter of the female workforce being in their trade union at the peak of organisation. It is also likely that the comparison with the male density remains at about the same as given in the table, since the general union figures are not included in calculating their totals.

One of the major obstacles (besides craftist male hostility) to the recruitment of women into the trade unions was the fact that the women themselves regarded their status as industrial workers as strictly temporary. They had 'come to do their bit' because of the war emergency, to help support themselves whilst their husbands were in the services, or, more commonly, because they had to. Although the war brought many women into the factories, it did not fundamentally change the accepted view of women's role in society in the respect that their place was still thought of as being in the home. With the return of the servicemen, their domestic services would again be required.

It is against this background that we should see women's expressions of preference as to whether or not they would like to work after the war. Wartime surveys tended to ask them what they would like to do after the war, rather than what they thought they would have to do. Nevertheless, the results of a Ministry of Information survey carried out in 1943 give some insights into their preferences. The engineering industry had the highest proportion of women workers who wanted to stay on at work after the war, with 44%. On the other hand, engineering had easily the highest proportion of women who wanted to leave the

industry they were at present employed in, with 26% of those who wished to continue work wanting to leave engineering.¹ By combining these two figures, we can see that over two-thirds of the women employed in engineering wanted to leave at the end of the war. This fact is crucial when the matter of redundancies at the end of the war is considered; two thirds of the women, who were normally the first to be sacked, did not wish to keep their jobs even to the extent of saying that they did in response to a questionnaire. It also helps us to explain how it was that women's militancy reached a peak in 1943, but did not spread into the summer of 1944, because redundancy, and the fear of redundancy, was already weakening their bargaining position before it seriously affected the men. 1944 saw the largest number of days lost through strikes in engineering of any of the war years, yet there were no equivalents to the strikes in which women had played such a major role during the previous year.

When considering women from the point of view of militancy there is a danger that a rather distorted impression of their consciousness is implied. The vast majority of women workers did not strike during the war; more of them thought their job important than their male equivalents; more of them were satisfied with wage rates; less of them were critical of employers' profits; less of them cared about a say in management; less of them complained about long hours.² This was the other, numerically more important (and traditionally more strongly emphasised) aspect of women workers' understanding. It is

¹INF 1/289. 'Survey on Attitudes of Women to Post-War Employment'.

²Mass Observation: People in Production, p. 38.

against this background that the militant strikes occurred, when it seems as if the act of striking transformed the women's attitude.

Unfortunately, there are a number of obstacles to the study of women in this period, not least of which is the absence of previous historical studies. Perhaps the most significant of these is the fact that the Ministry of Labour's Disputes Books made no distinction between male and female strikers. It is therefore impossible to quantify the proportions of strikers by sex, and literary evidence has instead to be relied upon. Any attempt to look at women's history in this period has to be especially tentative until more work is done. Some of the questions raised in this section will be taken up in the local studies as a small contribution to this process which will hopefully be taken further.

* * *

To summarise the arguments of the chapter. The trade unions, and the shop stewards along with them, achieved a wider and deeper coverage in the engineering factories during the war. The workers, and the stewards with them, became increasingly confident in their relations with managements. This led, on the one hand, to the shop stewards taking on a whole range of new functions, and, on the other, to a steady upward trend in the strike rate. Two of the most strike-prone groups were largely unionised groups of workers with their own particularly pressing problems: apprentices and women. Women particularly, with their lack of trade union traditions, constituted a group which remained largely untouched by the shop stewards' movement despite the increased trade union membership of the war years. This was one reason for their tendency to combine generalised passivity with volatile aggression when provoked beyond endurance.

* * *

The Communist Party in
the Engineering Industry (2) 1939-1946.

It was in a sense fortunate for the CP that the political mood in Britain was one of expectancy rather than jingoism during the first few months of war, because it afforded the Political Bureau a breathing space to carry on an intense debate on the nature of the war. The story of these discussions has been told in several places, and we need not enter the realms of detail here. Suffice it to say that Harry Pollitt and John Campbell misread the Comintern's strategy, and argued that the war was an anti-fascist one. Palme Dutt and William Rust argued strongly against this point of view, claiming that it was an imperialist war. After nine days of wrangling, with the Comintern supporting Palme Dutt and Rust, Pollitt and Campbell had to admit defeat and its corollary in such a serious matter, Party discipline. Both were removed from the Political Bureau.¹

There can be no doubt that the CP could not have taken a stand more certain to alienate them from public opinion, especially during the desperate months of the summer of 1940. The dramatic setbacks suffered by the British Expeditionary Force were the occasion for the new feeling of desperation, which reached a climax in the last week of June as the withdrawal from Dunkirk was carried out.

The apparently 'pro-Nazi' appearance of the CP's politics led to tremendous popular hostility. Douglas Hyde described the situation:

¹ Accounts of these events are given by J. Degras, op.cit., vol. 3, p. 441, H. Pelling, op.cit., pp. 110-113, D. Hyde, op.cit., p. 70. R. Palme Dutt disagreed with Hyde's version of the events in a review of the latter's book published in the Daily Worker, March 1, 1951, and I have followed Dutt here. Dutt's account, which stresses the length and sharpness of the discussion, and the fact that the Central Committee itself had not finalised any theses on the war prior to the arrival of the Comintern's emissary, is preferable both because Dutt was present at the proceedings (which Hyde was not), and because it is consonant with Pelling's version.

"Sellers of the Daily Worker, women as well as men, were spat upon and assaulted in the streets; canvassing, they had doors slammed in their faces, even chamber pots emptied on their heads from upstairs windows. Often, out selling papers or pamphlets, we would have housewives shouting vituperations at us until we disappeared from their street." ¹

The CP's industrial membership felt the force of a managerial offensive inside the factories almost as strongly as their comrades outside the gates felt the force of popular hostility. Generally speaking, employers took advantage of the prevailing political wind to get rid of known 'troublemakers', as we shall see in the local studies. Shop stewards were also interned under Defence Regulation 18B. One such steward, Mason, a Communist from Sheffield, had his case vigorously (but unsuccessfully) taken up by the New Propellor.²

However, managements and Government officials alike were not unduly worried by Communist activities on the shop floor. In general, the feeling seems to have been that the CP was ruled 'out of court' (as the Scottish Conciliation Officer put it) by its politics.³ The only type of activity that certainly did cause some concern at this stage was sabotage. A series of documents from the full-time security officer at Woolwich Arsenal shows this clearly. Seven (named) Communists working there had been suspected of putting sand in grinding machines and other acts of sabotage. Three were dismissed instantly, and the other four were earmarked for a similar fate.⁴ The official concerned was not especially worried, on the other hand, because:

¹ D. Hyde, op.cit., p.71.

² DW, 3, 7, 12, 22 August, 1940. NP, November 1940.

³ LAB 10/360. 2 December 1939.

⁴ AVIA 22/1030. Note marked 'July 1940', and document marked '21 June, 1940'.

"At present we have a good deal of information to suggest that they are hanging themselves by pursuing a policy that the bulk of the working people abominate."¹

Three weeks later, he was confirmed in his opinion, because the skilled shop stewards' committee informed him that they were themselves in favour of the men's dismissal, and that in fact:

"...if they are not removed it may well be that their colleagues will take the law into their own hands."²

All of the men concerned were sacked. We shall probably never know whether or not the charge of sabotage was a just one, but it clearly arose in the context of a good deal of hostility to the Communists themselves both on the part of management and on the part of the shop stewards themselves.

* * *

How were the New Propellor and the shop stewards associated with it relating to the main problems confronting engineering workers? Their response was on two levels: firstly, to restructure the organisation of their work in the unions, and secondly, to offer new policies to meet the changed circumstances.

Of course, the two could not be entirely disentangled, since new policies entailed new tactics. The central political consideration was the position of the trade union officials, which J.R. Campbell outlined in Labour Monthly:

"One can advance to fascism on the basis of regimenting the working class for the carrying out of the imperialist war to the bitter end. This is the policy that the General Council of the British Trade Union Congress is helping to carry out."³

Wal Hannington, writing in the same journal some months later made a similar point, and then drew the conclusion:

"The more the trade union leadership forsakes the class struggle, the more does the responsibility

¹ AVIA 22/1030, 28 May, 1940.

² Ibid., 21 June, 1940.

³ LM, October 1940.

for leadership fall upon the shop stewards and factory committees." 1

In these articles, and in Hannington's Industrial History in Wartime, published in the summer of 1940, Campbell and Hannington drew on the experience of the First World War to illustrate the need for strong shop steward organisation linked up on a district basis. Both argued that the quarterly meetings of shop stewards held under rule in the AEU were not enough, and that there was a need for regular meetings of all stewards in every district, as well as leaflets and pamphlets on district problems. All this was not, on the other hand, to distract Party members from being active in the trade union branches and on District Committees. Campbell and Hannington had set difficult tasks, but the members had already risen to them, (as the War Cabinet noted with disquiet), increasing their influence on all the major AEU District Committees.²

Nevertheless, the new interpretation of the role of the officials offered by the CP's leadership was not reflected in the pages of the New Propellor. Partly, no doubt, because of the extreme difficulty of agitating for strikes on the shop floor at that time, the New Propellor did not revive the idea of strike action independent of the

¹ LM, February 1941, p.

² CAB 98.18. Note by the Lord President of the Council: 'CPGB: An Estimate of the Effect of the Present Campaign and Recommendations for Action...' (n.d.) This document noted that Communist representation on district committees was growing, that this was undermining the position of the union officials, "and the help they can give the Government will correspondingly diminish". See also the front page article in the Daily Worker for 6 July, 1940, stating that the Birmingham, Manchester and London AEU district committees had all passed resolutions calling for the removal of the 'Men of Munich'.

officials which it had abandoned in 1937. This stance was consonant with feeling amongst the mass of workers, and allowed the circulation of the paper to expand considerably despite the CP's political isolation outside of industry.

Another important reason for the growth of Communist influence on the District Committees noted above was the fact that branch life had been hard hit by the effects of war. Prodigious overtime, bombing, the blackout and the difficulty of transport all contributed to a lower average attendance at branch meetings.¹ Only the determined were willing to attend come what may.

However, it would be manifestly unfair to put the expansion of the CP on trade union bodies down simply to their dogged attendance at branch meetings. The New Propellor also played an important part in this process. In December 1939, the paper's circulation was 31,000 (on a sale or return basis), but in April 1940, it reported receipts of over £825.² These receipts must have included donations from a number of sources other than sales, since the paper still cost only a penny, and a circulation of nearly 200,000 would have been needed for the readers to have accounted for it. Nevertheless, it is clear that both circulation and finances were in a very healthy state by pre-war standards. In February 1940, the New Propellor expanded to take in the whole of the engineering and shipbuilding industry, a decision formalised by a delegate conference of April 1940, attended by 283 stewards from 107 works. The ASSNC, renamed itself the Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Stewards National

¹P. Kerrigan, loc.cit.

²NP, December 1939, April 1940.

Council (E&ATSSNC).¹

The New Propellor and the Communist stewards continued to make a considerable contribution to the shop stewards' movement, largely through their policies on and activities around ARP. The shop stewards took up the demands suggested in a number of CP pamphlets,² and pressed for precautions to be taken against air-raids. In July, stewards "at an important engineering establishment in the West of Scotland" (probably Beardmore's Parkhead Forge) complained to the management that sirens were not being sounded until bombs were actually being dropped. They added that the matter would be reported to the authorities and to their respective trade union district committees.³ In September, stewards at a South East London factory advised their members to take shelter as soon as sirens were sounded and not when told to by the spotters.⁴ These are just two examples of what was a widespread reaction to air-raids: in the November 1940 issue of the New Propellor, there were seven similar reports from factories all over the country.⁵

There can be little doubt that the CP, who had been in the forefront of the movement for better ARP from the start (they opposed the Anderson shelters, and led Londoners into the Tube stations instead),

¹NP, April, May 1940.

²See, for example: ARP Safety Now (id.) 10,000 of these were printed in August 1940. Bombers Over London and A Programme of Protection for Glasgow (id.) 25,000 of these were printed in October 1940. (M/S).

³DW, 22 July, 1940.

⁴Ibid., 16 September, 1940.

⁵NP, November 1940.

were setting the pace through the New Propellor. Of course, they were swimming with the stream; it is difficult to imagine any shop steward being indifferent as to the physical safety of his members. At the same time, however, the CP's attitude on this and similar questions helped shop stewards as a body to respond. By formulating a policy and pursuing it in an organised and determined way, they helped the mainstream of the movement.

In taking up the question of ARP especially with respect to the aircraft factories, the shop stewards were responding to what was recognised by Beaverbrook as a major problem. They were, therefore, able to give Beaverbrook some support in his battle with Sir Archibald Sinclair to secure more protection for their factories. The Minister of Aircraft Production first took the matter up with Sinclair immediately after his appointment, during May and June of 1940, but admitted himself 'defeated' by the end of June.¹ He continued to agitate around this for the rest of his period of office at the MAP, pointing out how these factories were extremely susceptible to air attack and how important they were to the war effort.² He seized on any opportunity to force the problem home, and the shop stewards' complaints provided him with additional arguments. In January 1941, for example, he relayed the complaints of the stewards at Rolls-Royce Derby to Sinclair, adding:

"It will be necessary for me to give an answer... to these 3,000 employees. I must let them know what the Air Ministry have to say about it."³

¹(Beaverbrook D/94),
Beaverbrook to Sinclair, 28 June, 1 August 1940. Sinclair to Beaverbrook, 13 June 1940.

²(Beaverbrook D/94),
Beaverbrook to Sinclair, 9, 10 October, 20, 26 November, 6, 8 December.

³(Beaverbrook D/94),
Beaverbrook to Sinclair, 5 January 1941.

It is difficult to measure precisely how much success Beaverbrook had in tackling this undoubtedly serious problem. Some extra protection was provided, but in April 1941, he drafted and then cancelled a memorandum to the War Cabinet complaining bitterly:

"...(in obtaining) the modest degree of defence asked for we have been subjected to constant delays and endless disappointments." ¹

Whether Beaverbrook did not present his paper for tactical reasons or because he was uncertain of his ground is not clear, but some progress had been made in increasing factory defences.² In this progress, the shop stewards had undoubtedly played their part in strengthening the Ministry of Aircraft Production's hand in its discussions with the Air Ministry.

* * *

The CP had made appreciable progress in the engineering industry during the 'Capitalist War' period. Finding themselves in a difficult position on the shop floor through victimisation, they began to take up issues like ARP which offered a route towards broader support, whilst extending their influence on all the major District Committees. Some explanations of how they were able to do this have already been offered, but there is another deeper and more fundamental level of explanation relating to their politics generally.

¹(Beaverbrook D/94),
Memo of 14 April, 1941.

²(Beaverbrook D/94),
Beaverbrook noted, for example, that the Lockheed factory at Leamington had been given additional protection in December 1940.
(Note of 6 December, 1940)

The Security Officer at the Woolwich Arsenal quoted earlier thought that the Communists were 'hanging themselves' by putting the 'Capitalist War' view, and he may have been right in July 1940. But around that time, there seems to have been something of a trimming of CP sails to the prevailing wind of popular opinion. The shift is perhaps best shown by juxtaposing two quotations from the Daily Worker. The first is from the edition of October 4th, 1939:

"We are against the continuance of the War. We demand that negotiations be immediately opened for the establishment of peace in Europe." 1

The editorial of July 3, 1940 had a slightly different emphasis:

"The interests of the people require the speediest ending of the war, not by surrender to Fascism at home and abroad, but by the strength of a free people organising their own defence and leading the way to peace and unity with the working people of all countries." 2

The demand was no longer for an immediate peace, and the need for workers to organise their own defence was positively stressed. The majority of workers thought that this was exactly what they were doing, through the Local Defence Volunteers, so where was the difference? After the suppression of the Daily Worker and the withdrawal from Greece, Douglas Hyde has suggested that this tendency went further as, unofficially and secretly, it was suggested in Party circles that the war was now 'just' in parts.³

The Daily Worker took great care to position its political line so that it always fell in a narrow area of overlap between working

¹DW, 4 October, 1940.

²Ibid., 3 July, 1940.

³D. Hyde, op.cit., p. 111.

class consciousness and the Comintern line. Thus, it was frequently pointed out by Jack Owen in his column 'A Worker's Notebook' that large profits were being made by munitions firms:¹ no moral was drawn, so the fact could appear as all things to all men. To the CPer, it was additional evidence that the war was being fought for profit, but to most people it simply meant that an Excess Profits Tax was indeed necessary. It appears that this variety of studied ambiguity characterised Communist politics as they were put into practice. Five important Communist rallies were held in London immediately after Dunkirk under the slogans:

"Bring the Guilty to Account.

Down With the Men of Munich!

Save the People of Britain!"²

Those who had a mind to could agree with these demands without disagreeing fundamentally with Churchill and his colleagues.

The War Cabinet itself noted a similar reticence on the part of ordinary CPers. The Home Office, in a memorandum to the Cabinet of July 1940, informed the latter that:

"Although the CP is opposed to the War, its members are normally careful to refrain at the present time from Anti-War propaganda."³

The memorandum went on to state that there was "no evidence" to suggest that the CP was organising to "cause trouble" in industry.⁴

As the Home Office realised, the CP was groping towards making its politics as acceptable as possible to the majority of people, who were in favour of the war. Before long, they found a useful organisational vehicle, the People's Convention.

¹ See for example, DW, June 8, 1940.

² DW, 4 July, 1940.

³ CAB 98.18. Home Office memo. of 27 July, 1940.

⁴ Ibid.

In July 1940, a 'People's Vigilance Committee' had been set up by the CP, centring its demands on a 'people's peace' and a 'truly representative government'. The Committee was headed by D.N. Pritt, the MP and lawyer who had recently been expelled from the Labour Party for his attitude to the war. The Vigilance Committee was the forerunner of the People's Convention, for which a campaign began to develop in September.¹ The Convention was conceived of as an ongoing movement, organised through regional 'Conventions', and culminating in a National Convention (originally to be held in October, but postponed to January 1941 because of the success of the campaign). In fact, however, the Convention only had one national meeting, which took place in three halls in London on January 12th, 1941.² There were 2,324 delegates, 'representing' 1,200,000 people, the largest single body of trade unionists being drawn from the aircraft factories.³

The New Propellor was harnessed to draw trade unionists into the Convention movement. The September edition printed the call from the People's Vigilance Committee for the Convention, with a number of signatures from leading trade unionists in the aircraft industry.⁴ The November editorial stressed the support that the Convention was attracting from the shop stewards,⁵ and in December, the paper voiced the Shop Stewards' National Council's concerns:

¹DW, 14 September, 1940.

²Ibid., 18 September, 1940.

³Mass Observation file 543, The People's Convention (13 January, 1941).

⁴NP, September 1940.

⁵Ibid., November 1940.

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"... that every factory will not only send delegates to the Convention but will also consult with their members in the respective factories and departments on the six points to be discussed at the Convention". 1

It later became apparent that some shop stewards had not heeded this sound advice, and had come without the full consent of their members.

The Convention was a typically 'Popular Front' operation, in that it drew support from a large number of personalities, many of whom were not in full agreement with the programme. George Orwell quoted the 'Red' Dean of Canterbury, who wrote in a private letter:

"I want you to understand that I am wholeheartedly for winning the war, and that I believe Winston Churchill to be the only possible leader for us until the war is over (or words to that effect)". 2

Orwell added that the Dean "nevertheless supported the People's Convention. It appears that there are thousands like this." Mass Observers mingling with the crowds confirmed his view: they reported that some delegates even remarked that it was 'a pity it was so left wing'. 3

Despite the broad basis of the People's Convention's support, and its limited success as a 'Popular Front' operation, it was less of a success as far as some of the CP shop stewards were concerned. The largest single group of workers amongst the two million or so supposedly represented at the Convention were aircraft workers. Probably because they feared that the programme of the Convention would not meet with the approval of their members, some shop stewards

¹ NP, December 1940.

² S. Orwell and I. Angus, op.cit., pp. 381-2.

³ A. Calder, op.cit., p. 283.

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ignored the New Propellor's advice and attended the meeting without previously making it plain to the shop floor workers precisely what they intended to do. At Napiers in London, one of the CP's 'show-piece' factories, two thousand workers repudiated the delegates who had attended in their name. They claimed that they had not elected them, nor had they given permission to the shop committees to do so. Similarly at De Havillands Edgware, four hundred workers repudiated their 'delegates'.¹ The stewards involved must have sorely regretted their mistake; there was already (as the Cabinet noted), "... great activity in trade union circles in dealing with delegates to the 'People's Convention'.² Far from helping them, the Convention had helped only to erect a barrier between some stewards and their members. Yet another blow, the suppression of the Daily Worker, was soon to follow.

Why did the Government suppress the Daily Worker? Herbert Morrison expressed the view that the 'main objection' to the paper was the fact that it was identified with the 'Imperialist War' line because the CPGB was affiliated to the Comintern.³ Since the latter was assumed to have a revolutionary defeatist line, the CPGB was guilty by association. In general, the War Cabinet Committee on Communist Activities, meeting for the first time a few days after the suppression of the Daily Worker, was inclined to accept the verdict of a Home Office memorandum of July 1940 which they had before them, which

¹Workers' International News, February 1941.

²CAB 98.18. Production Executive memo., 29 January, 1941.

³CAB 98.18. 20 January, 1941.

concluded that:

"Although the CP is opposed to the War, its members are normally careful to refrain at the present time from Anti-War propaganda". 1

Bevin, although he was at pains to point out that he realised the strength of the CP in the aircraft industry, said that he was 'not impressed by allegations of Communist activity in industry'.² The atmosphere of the Committee was far from one of alarm at the CP's success through the People's Convention, but it was felt that the paper played a pernicious role. The reason for the suppression was, the chairman stated, that it:

"... continually tried to create a state of mind in which people will refrain from co-operating in the war effort and will hinder it." 3

It was the generally demoralising effect of the Daily Worker rather than the trade union support for the Convention that caused the suppression of the paper. For this reason, it was decided to leave the New Propellor untouched.⁴ Further action in the form of detaining more Communist workers under Regulation 18B was also rejected when Bevin argued strongly against it. World News and Views was to be allowed to continue to publish, but the internment of Party intellectuals remained a possibility.⁵

¹CAB 98.18. Home Office memo. 27 July 1940.

²Ibid., 5 February 1941.

³Ibid., 'Note by Chairman', 25 January 1941.

⁴The New Propellor had not been suppressed because it was "devoted entirely to the exploitation of industrial grievances and contained no direct references to the War". (CAB 98.18. Memo. by Home Secretary, 17 January, 1941.)

⁵CAB 98.18. 20, 25 January, 5 February, 1941.

The suppression of the Daily Worker was a serious blow for the CP. After a few illegal editions, it was forced to close down completely. The ban had effects which went beyond the simple fact of depriving the CP of its main organ; the party adopted a highly cautious approach. Thus, the New Propellor continued to be published, but it was circulated in a clandestine manner which necessarily restricted its circulation and influence. Moreover, suspicion was immediately aroused about the motives of workers who had previously sold a new illegal paper. By June 1941, CP membership had slumped to 12,000, compared to 17,756 in July 1939.¹

Needless to say, the CP did not stop political work altogether, and used a number of alternative channels for the dissemination of its politics. To help to overcome the lack of a national daily newspaper, an agency called Industrial and General Information was set up to distribute suitable information to the rest of the press.² In addition, there were the well-established Party journals, World News and Views and Labour Monthly, both of which were used to some effect. The former was used as something of an alternative to the Daily Worker, in that it conveyed general political analysis to the Party members and their periphery. In one respect, it was a little inadequate to the task, because it usually had very little of any trade union interest.

¹H. Pelling, op.cit., pp. 120, 192.

²Beaverbrook toyed with the idea of trying to have IGI suppressed, either by direct means or by cutting off its paper supply, in December 1941. (Memo. of 25 December 1941, TAUT 165, in Beaverbrook D/100).

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Labour Monthly was useful because it tended to carry rather more material of this kind and had a network of discussion circles where it could be chewed over. Labour Monthly readers' groups had been set up in January 1940. Each group had a maximum of twelve members, and collected a fixed minimum each week for the magazine.¹ By mid-1941, there were groups in virtually every part of the country, including several in some towns (there were three in Manchester for example).²

Meanwhile, the remnants of the People's Convention crawled on, issuing a pamphlet as late as June 1941. In the industrial arena, these weapons were supplemented by pamphlets and duplicated bulletins. As early as 5th February 1941, the War Cabinet Committee on Communist Activities noted the increased distribution of this type of literature.³

As in the months before the suppression of the Daily Worker, CP trade unionists were able to achieve rather more than their comrades outside the factories. Nevertheless, political work was still difficult. On Clydeside, the Ministry of Information was told by its informants that the 'extremists' were generally "very quiet indeed".⁴ As one ex-CP shop steward put it:

"It was very hard to get a hearing at all at that time, very hard. Everybody thought you were fifth columnists, defeatists and suchlike.... after the Daily Worker was banned, the police were round our houses, standing on the factory gates watching you go in... the lot." 5

¹ LM, January 1940.

² See the complete list of groups in LM, June 1941, p. 291.

³ CAB 98.18. 5 February, 1941. See also the references to the distribution of a CP district bulletin in the Maltby area. (H. Beer to F.W. Leggett, 17 April, 1942 [LAB 10/432]).

⁴ INF 1/673. "Industrial Situation", 3 April, 1941.

⁵ Harold Taylor, 3 May, 1976.

By June 1941, there were signs that the CP was actually beginning to make some headway in the engineering industry again. The National Committee of the AEU, against the advice of the Executive, voted in favour of 'A People's Government and a People's Peace',¹ Meanwhile, the YCL, which had played a leading part in the apprentices' strikes of March, was finalising its preparations for the first ever national meeting of apprentice delegates to discuss common problems and united action. These were considerable achievements given the circumstances, and went beyond anything which had been done in 1940.

¹Proceedings of the 23rd National Committee of the AEU, pp. 129-30, 251-2.

Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union at the end of June 1941 rescued the CP from the isolation of the previous six months, because it brought about a fundamental change in the Party's view of the nature of the war. Now, the overriding necessity to defend the only socialist state against Nazi aggression demanded the most vigorous prosecution of the war on the military and industrial fronts. There was therefore a change in industrial perspectives: strikes had to be opposed, Joint Production Committees set up to push 'inefficient' managements, and a Stakhanovite enthusiasm for production whipped up on the shop floor.

The new line dovetailed neatly into popular views about the nature of the war. The result was a large growth in Party membership. It may be that immediately after the entry of Russia into the war, there was a slight drop in membership with 'hard liners' leaving, but there are no figures specifically for that period. By the end of 1942, there was a definite increase in membership: CP strength was claimed as 56,000. However, this membership proved difficult to retain. By the end of 1943, there were 55,138 members, and March 1945 saw a slump to 45,435.¹ Engineering workers constituted a high proportion of the membership: one in three of the delegates to the CP Congresses of 1942 and 1944 worked in engineering, and the AEU was easily the best represented union. In 1942, there were 260 delegates from the AEU compared to 142 from its nearest rival, the TGWU; in 1944, the AEU provided 193 to the TGWU's 81.²

¹ H. Pelling, op. cit., p. 192.

² CP: The CP on the Way to Win (May 1942) (M/S). Details of delegates.
 CP: Victory, Peace, Security (October 1944) (M/S). Details of delegates.
 No comparable figures were given for the 1943 Congress.

From the reappearance of the Daily Worker in September 1942 to early 1944, the Communist paper opposed strikes in a clear and unequivocal way, but, during 1944, it began to adopt a slightly different attitude. This slight shift of emphasis is important because it gives us an insight into the way in which the CP was able to gradually re-establish itself as the leader of industrial militancy after a period in which the groups of the extreme left had been able to exercise a good deal of influence on strikes.

By the beginning of 1944, there was already a change in the national political climate, and Churchill's statement that "This is no time to talk about demobilization" betrayed the way people were thinking.¹ The Communist Party, heartened by the news from Teheran that the Second Front was about to be opened, was as much affected by the new mood as everyone else; as William Rust wrote in the New Year's Day edition of the Daily Worker: "...the doom of Fascism approaches. Only now can these words be written with certainty."² It was not long before this assessment of the war led to a slight softening of the Daily Worker's treatment of strike action.

During the last two months of the year, there were two examples of the paper covering stoppages of work without condemning them or suggesting in any way that there was anything wrong in stopping work under the circumstances. At the beginning of November, a demonstration against redundancies during working hours at London Aircraft Productions was reported, and two days later it was added that the action had been successful.³ On December 18th, it was reported that workers in all North

¹ A. Calder, op. cit., p. 641.
² DW, 1 January, 1944.
³ DW, 1, 3, November 1944.

London engineering factories were to stop work from 3 p.m. on the following Wednesday in protest at the Government's actions in Greece. By the beginning of 1945, the Daily Worker was reproducing an important argument used by some strikers: that they were willing to work on war work, but that managements were bringing in private work and attempting to reduce wages and working conditions in the process. These lines were followed by strikers at Humber (Coventry) and A.V. Roe (Manchester), and reproduced in the Worker.¹

This slight but discernible shift in the Communist paper's attitude to strikes reflected a slight change in the climate within the CP which had important effects on the balance of forces between the CP and the extreme left-wing groups operating amongst shop stewards. As we shall see in the local studies, these latter groups were the leaders of industrial militancy in the winter of 1943-44. The CP's role had been a negative one, in that all they could do under the circumstances was to argue against the strikes. The relaxation in the paper's line allowed the CP stewards to shift their own position to at least an equal (but probably greater) extent. They were now in a much better position to use their strength in the important battles which were soon to be fought on the issues of redundancy and erosion of wartime standards in the factories. This was a key factor in allowing them the leeway to manoeuvre in order to regain the initiative from the small groups of the extreme left.

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¹DW, 24, 25, 31 January; 7 April 1945.

By the beginning of 1945, the Communist Party was probably stronger than it had ever been in the trade unions. At the Daily Worker conference held on May 12th of that year, there were delegates from no less than twelve trade union executives, thirty-five Trades Councils and twenty-seven district committees, as well as numerous branches and shop stewards' committees.¹

As twenty-seven district committees sent delegates, and the district committee was a body almost exclusively used within the union structure of the AEU, we may infer that the main engineering union was well represented at this conference. The Communists were undoubtedly strong amongst engineering shop stewards by this time. Party membership taken as a whole had dropped, it is true, from the peak attained at the end of 1943, but it seems unlikely that this decline had more than a marginal effect on even the numerical strength of the CP shop stewards. Many of those who left tended to be the newer members, and especially women, rather than the adult male trade unionists.² The Daily Worker was now firmly established as one of the main papers read on the shop floor; one indication of the CP's strength among trade union workers was the fact that the Daily Worker had easily the highest proportion of union members as readers that year when compared to the other national dailies. A survey showed that 69% of its readership was made up of this type of worker, which was 24% higher than its nearest rival, the Daily Herald.³ Its industrial circulation would therefore have been in the region of 75,000.

The CP's strength on the shop floor and in the trade unions was indisputable and widely accepted by contemporaries, but as the Party members themselves appreciated, success in Parliamentary political

¹ W. Rust (edited and completed by A. Hutt): The Story of the Daily Worker (1949), p. 115.

² See Sharpen Our Weapons (1943) for a detailed discussion of these problems.

³ W. Rust, op. cit., p. 116.

The main theme of this chapter may be summarised as being that the CP extended its influence in the AEU fairly steadily from the beginning of 1940 onwards. This was despite its unpopular interpretation of the nature of the war up until mid-1941, and its potentially unpopular line on strikes after the invasion of the Soviet Union. The reasons offered to explain this fact related to the way that Party members trimmed their sails to the prevailing political wind in 1940, and the way that they used JPCs and related to strikes in the second part of the war. This considerable influence amongst shop stewards was then turned to parliamentary political ends in the General Election of 1945.

* * * *

Government Labour Policy and the

Trade Union Officials during the War.

We now turn our attention towards one of the major limiting factors on shop steward activity, the trade union officials. With Bevin at the Ministry of Labour, Government labour policy was centred on the officials. They were taken into Government confidence to an unprecedented extent, but at the same time they were called on to resist any elements amongst their membership who might be tempted to use the strike weapon. In general, it will be argued, Executives were quite satisfied with this arrangement, although local officials sometimes tended to be somewhat more sympathetic to strikers. Basically, the policy was successful, as the strike rate was kept below the unacceptable level reached during the First World War. At the beginning of 1944, the situation had changed slightly, as a large strike wave occurred with Trotskyists and other extreme left-wingers prominent in their leadership. Accordingly, a new regulation, Regulation IAA, was passed, further strengthening the officials.

Our concern here is not with Government labour policy in general, but only with its effects on the official trade union movement. A wider view has already been taken by Bevin's biographers, who have made it unnecessary for us to show, for example, the great improvements brought about in a wide range of welfare, advice, recreation and health matters for the mass of working people by the Ministry of Labour. The picture that emerges of the Ministry's work is therefore inevitably rather one-sided.

Even before the outbreak of war, the Executive Committee of the AEU showed itself far more willing than its predecessor of 1914 to co-operate in the war effort by allowing the employers to introduce dilutees. A week before war was declared, they signed the Agreement for the Temporary Relaxation of Existing Customs. The Agreement allowed for 'alternative' or 'supplementary' labour to be put onto skilled work, so that skilled men could work at alternative jobs within their

capacity, and semi-skilled men could be upgraded.¹ At the end of May, 1940, they went further and signed the Extended Employment of Women Agreement. This allowed women to perform work previously done by men or boys, provided that they received the women's nationally agreed rate for a probationary eight weeks, followed by a rising percentage of the men's rate. After a total of thirty-two weeks, they were entitled to the full men's rate for the particular job.²

Only three days after this second agreement had been concluded, Bevin, the first trade union leader in British history to be directly appointed to the Cabinet, addressed a specially convened meeting of trade union executives to tell them what was required of them by the new Coalition Government:

"I have to ask you virtually to place yourselves at the disposal of the state. We are Socialists and this is the test of our Socialism... 3

Ernest Bevin was well-known to the delegates as the General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union, which he had built into a huge amalgamation in the inter-war years. Bevin was not only well-known, however: he was the epitome of the trade union leadership of the period. Starting off as an SDF revolutionary before the First World War, he led the Bristol dockers before becoming the apostle of amalgamation in the 1920s. The failure of the General Strike pushed him in the direction of Mondism, and in 1937, he showed himself willing to deal vigorously with dissident elements in his union by his handling of the busmen's Coronation Strike. Bevin, then, was a trade union leader who, like many others of his generation, had abandoned his early

¹ Jefferys, op.cit., p. 352.

² Ibid., pp. 352-3.

³ A. Bullock: The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, vol.2., Minister of Labour, 1940-45 (1962), p. 20.

radicalism for a strictly reformist perspective under what he saw as the pressure of reality. His visit to America in the 1930s had shown him that capitalism was capable of riding a severe depression, and must have reinforced his earlier espousal of the cause of industrial peace. If, at the one extreme, his philosophy could embrace worker-employer co-operation, then it could even more easily include active co-operation with the state in a time of dire emergency like May 1940. At the same time, Bevin was concerned to establish certain minimum standards as the necessary corollary of workers subjecting themselves to state direction. At first, in mid-1940, this simply emerged as sound industrial common sense, when he insisted that there were limits to the endurance of the human machine. Nevertheless, even this point of view had to be fought for against the opposition of Beaverbrook, and some of his later causes (like the Catering Wages Act) had to be fought for even harder. Even in the period immediately after Dunkirk, he did not think that industrial conscription was the answer; as he often pointed out, he wanted to be a leader and not a dictator.¹

As an ex-trade union leader himself, Ernie Bevin clearly recognised the crucial role of the trade union officials in securing the active co-operation of workers in the war effort, and especially in avoiding disputes. His confidence in their wish to remove traditional restrictions was well placed, as we have seen in the case of the AEU Executive, and it was later confirmed by their attitude to strikes. Bevin's labour policy rested upon the officials (and especially the TUC General Council and the national executives) from the start. Although Regulation IAA of 1944 sought to deal with strike agitators more vigourously, there was never any suggestion that the Ministry lost its faith in even local officials as a group.

¹ For Bevin's career see, besides Bullock's volumes, F. Williams: Ernest Bevin. Portrait of a Great Englishman. (1952). Chapter 19 deals with Bevin as Minister of Labour. T. Evans: Bevin (1946), especially chapter 7.

However, the first priority in May 1940 was to frame the necessary Regulations and Bills to give the Minister of Labour power to achieve the maximum mobilisation of productive resources in the shortest possible time. On 22nd May, Attlee introduced a new Emergency Powers Bill to replace the Act of the same title passed in September 1939, which had specifically precluded industrial conscription. The next day, The Times said of the new Act (the Bill had been passed in one day) that:

"It is doubtful whether such powers have ever been in the hands of the Executive since the Seventeenth Century." ¹

Attlee explained to the House of Commons precisely what the Act was intended to do: it was to give the Minister of Labour the power to direct any person to perform any service required of him. Workers could be moved, and the Minister could prescribe wages, hours and conditions. Excess Profits Tax was to be at a rate of 100% over the pre-war 'standard' years, so that employers could not (formally, at least) enjoy larger profits than before the war. In addition, the Minister was to control key establishments immediately, with others to follow as soon as practicable. ²

The Emergency Powers Act spawned an important new Regulation immediately after its own birth, Regulation 58A, which delegated the Minister's powers of direction to National Service Officers. Inspectors of Labour Supply were to inspect firms to ensure that wages and conditions were sufficiently high for workers to be compelled to work for them. But Regulation 58A was a 'rush job' itself, reflecting the pressure on the legislature of these months, in that it had an explicitly political side as well as an industrial one. The Home Secretary was empowered to suppress organisations "which have had associations with the enemy

¹ The Times, 23 May, 1940.

² LR, No. 29, p. 82.

or are subject to foreign influence or control and which may be used for purposes prejudicial to the national security."¹ Members of the British Union of Fascists, Pacifists and Communists were all to find themselves imprisoned under the Regulation's political clauses.

The Emergency Powers Act and Regulation 58A gave the Minister of Labour and the Home Secretary sweeping powers to deal with the pressing problems facing them, but they did no more than create a framework (and, perhaps equally importantly, an atmosphere) in which Bevin could give effect to his distinctive ideas on labour policy. Within the space of six weeks, the situation was radically altered with the introduction of the Conditions of Employment and National Arbitration Order. This Order, promulgated in July 1940, was known by its number: Order 1305. The purpose of the Order was basically the prevention of industrial disputes through the strengthening of existing procedure backed up by compulsory arbitration. If a dispute occurred, then either party was entitled to refer it to the Minister of Labour, who would in turn refer it to the existing joint machinery for settlement by negotiation. If there was still failure to agree, then the Minister was to refer the dispute to the National Arbitration Tribunal for settlement, which would be binding on both parties. Only if the Minister failed to refer the dispute to the National Arbitration Tribunal (NAT) within twenty-one days was a strike or lockout legal. Also, the Order empowered the Minister to enforce "recognised terms and conditions" for each district on any employer.²

In practice, as Wal Hannington pointed out, shop stewards came to think that the process of giving twenty-one days notice of strike action

¹ Ibid., p. 101.

² LR, No. 40, pp. 4-5.

was sufficient to ensure the legality of a strike, but in fact it was impossible after the Order for there to be a legal strike in the engineering industry, which had a well established disputes procedure.¹ The shop stewards' legal interpretation was interesting, but it did not derive from any haziness on the part of the Order, which quite clearly insisted that procedure had to be followed and strike action eschewed. The emphasis of the Order was on the preservation of the existing negotiating machinery, but its total impact went rather further than this. The Order did not simply prescribe compulsory arbitration when procedure was exhausted; it also had the effect indirectly of shifting the balance between the shop stewards and the officials within the existing procedure. Shop stewards were inclined to think that when negotiations had yielded nothing, it was time to take direct action. The officials were now able to point out that there were other methods available. The Scottish Conciliation Officer, who was an acute observer of industrial affairs, noted a tendency on the part of prominent trade union officials to argue in favour of compulsory arbitration even before the Order was introduced, for precisely this reason.²

At the same time, the Order 1305 had a very positive aspect as far as shop stewards and trade unionists generally were concerned. It laid down that all employers scheduled under its terms had to observe the normal district conditions of employment.³ The Essential Works Order of March 1941 continued this tendency to impinge on what had traditionally been regarded as managerial prerogatives in the interests of industrial peace.

¹Wal Hannington: The Rights of Engineers (1944), p. 67. Hannington's booklet contains a lucid exposition of the legislation produced for shop stewards.

²LAB 10/361; 24 Feb. 1940.

³LR, No. 40, p. 4.

The next major piece of labour legislation was the Essential Works Order (EWO). This Order was concerned not so much with strikes, as with the mobility of labour. Workers were no longer allowed to leave their employment if they worked in a scheduled establishment (all the major engineering and aircraft factories were so scheduled) without giving seven days' notice to both the employer and the National Service Officer (NSO) stating their reasons. Also, the employer was not allowed to sack a worker (although he was allowed to suspend him) without going through the same procedure, and unless the worker was guilty of 'serious misconduct'. In addition, the worker might be prosecuted for failing to carry out a 'reasonable order' from his employer. In this case, the employer had to refer the case to the NSO, who would then either dismiss the case or instruct the worker to carry the order out. If the worker still disagreed, he could appeal to a Local Appeal Board (comprising one trade union official, one employer, and a Ministry chairman). Finally, employers had to pay a guaranteed week to their workers (the time rate without piece work bonus in engineering) if there was any stoppage of work through causes outside the worker's control.¹

The Essential Works Order, taken as a whole, was much more favourable to workers than the Munitions of War Act had been in the First World War, since the Munitions Act had prevented engineers from leaving their jobs without a leaving certificate from their employer.² Thus, although the Government drew on the experience of the First World War, it did not do so uncritically; Bevin's presence alone ensured that.

Order 1305 and the Essential Works Order constituted the two main juridical pillars of Government labour policy, but simply erecting

¹Hannington, op.cit., pp. 67-72.

²Jefferys, op.cit., p. 177.

them was not, of course, enough. They had also to be applied. In any case, the important problem of wages had to be dealt with as it gave rise to difficulties. General rules could be laid down, but they had still to be applied in every particular situation. The burden of making weekly reports on the industrial situation in every region of Britain fell on the Conciliation Officers of the Ministry of Labour, and it was on the basis of their reports and recommendations that central decisions were taken. The officers were instructed not to interfere too much themselves in industrial relations (although this rule was broken by the Scottish officer), but to ensure that the normal procedure was adhered to. If, but only if, established procedure broke down, he was empowered to intervene to achieve a settlement, and, in the case of a stoppage of work, to persuade the trade union officials to use their influence with their members to secure a return to work. Quite apart from playing an important part in oiling the wheels of the Procedure for the Avoidance of Disputes (and established machinery in other industries), the Conciliation Officers had to decide on whether and when to intervene, and, rather more importantly, on whether and when to recommend prosecution of strikers.¹ The type of decisions they had to make necessitated the fullest possible reports, especially with regard to the involvement of political militants and the mood and organisation of the rank and file, and they will therefore be drawn on heavily in the local studies.

The prosecution of strikers was by no means undertaken as a matter of course, even though no strike in engineering could be legal.²

¹Inman, op.cit., pp. 403-6.

²There were three thousand stoppages in industry between 1941 and 1943, but prosecutions had been undertaken in less than fifty of these. LAB 10/248: "Minister's Proposals for Post-War Development", (n.d.), p. 41.

A number of considerations had to be taken into account, including the politics of the strike leaders, the possibilities of their being supported by the rank and file if prosecuted, and whether, on the other hand, the threat of prosecution would be sufficient.¹ The Betteshanger colliery strike in January 1942 confirmed that it was impossible to enforce the payment of fines on a large number of strikers. If it was impossible to enforce the fines, then it only brought the law into disrepute to impose them in the first place. At Betteshanger, over one thousand men had struck work over the rate to be paid for working a difficult face. The Canterbury bench sentenced the branch chairman to two months in prison, and two other men to a month each, whilst the rest of the strikers were fined. In February, the imprisoned men were released by the intervention of the Home Secretary, but the fines were not remitted. Eventually, Bevin decided not to remit the fines, but to hold warrants for non payment in abeyance. This episode was often held up by Bevin as an object lesson in how not to deal with a strike. Very few strikers were actually prosecuted: by January 1944, out of a total of one and a quarter million strikers, only five thousand had been prosecuted and less than two thousand convicted.²

Bevin's overriding desire not to undermine the position of the trade union officials also influenced Government wages policy. In July 1941, an important Government White Paper outlined some proposals on the wages and prices issues. It took as its point of departure the need to avoid the inflation of the First World War, with all its consequences in terms of large wage claims. Accordingly, it argued that wages should be kept at 'a reasonable level', but that the low paid could be granted above-average

¹Bullock, op.cit., p. 267.

²Ibid.

pay awards to bring them closer to the average.¹

The White Paper's recommendations were important in so far as they must have influenced the thinking of important Ministry of Labour officials like the Chairman of the National Arbitration Tribunal and the Conciliation Officers, but they could not be expected to moderate trade union demands. The only way this could have been done would have been by ignoring the existing procedural machinery and establishing a periodical and compulsory wage review. Bevin was a strong opponent of this point of view, put by the Treasury, The Economist and Sir William Beveridge. He argued that the Government might have to back down as they had been forced to in the First World War, and that this would clearly be detrimental to the Government. The trade union officials were the key to the problem, the crucial 'moderating influence'. If they were by-passed, then either their credibility with their members would be destroyed, or they would be forced into taking a stiffer attitude towards the Government. Both possibilities represented unacceptable risks, the Lord President's Committee decided, and Bevin's general point of view was accepted.²

In all matters, Bevin was concerned to ensure that the authority of the officials was not undermined by the direct intervention of the Government in industrial relations. The logical corollary of this position was that the trade unions should be consulted on all industrial

¹Statement by His Majesty's Government on Price Stabilisation and Industrial Policy (Cmnd. 6249, July 1941).

²Bullock, op.cit., p. 88ff.

matters. The result of this policy of joint consultation was that trade union officials (especially at national executive level) were drawn into Governmental committees to an extent unprecedented in Britain and perhaps in the world. National officials served on a large number of advisory and joint committees, including the National Joint Consultative Committee (set up to advise the Minister on legislation after Regulation 58A had been passed), the National Production Advisory Council, the Factory and Welfare Advisory Board, the Hostels Advisory Committee, the Industrial Health Advisory Committee, the Women's Consultative Committee, and, in engineering, the Engineering Advisory Panel. Local officials sat on the Local Appeal Boards set up under the Essential Works Order, the local Labour Supply Committees and Regional Production Committees.¹ In all these areas, the trade unions were able to make their views felt, but, at the same time, to retain their distinct identity as trade unionists. When they felt that their independence as trade unionists was at all threatened, they could ensure that the particular committee became unworkable. They did this in the case of the Area Boards, which were initially set up to deal with problems of labour supply. These boards were supposed to consider all questions related to labour supply, including dilution and training, but the officials refused to work in them, because the latter would not discuss dilution or any other question which they considered came within the scope of existing negotiating machinery. Consequently, these boards were replaced by the Labour Supply Committees.²

Thus, although the trade union officials played a crucial role in the Ministry of Labour's policy on matters like strikes and wages, they did not simply become Bevin's lieutenants. All officials, especially district and regional officials, were subject to the pressure of their

¹Inman, op.cit., pp. 95, 375. Parker, op.cit., pp. 121, 288, 375, 400, 416.

²Inman, op.cit., pp. 50, 64.

members as well as that of the Ministry. Finally, of course, there was the not unimportant consideration of their own political point of view to be taken into account. In any given situation, the attitudes of both national and district officials reflected all of these influences. It is necessary to investigate their different responses, and the limits of these, if we are to understand their attitudes to shop stewards.

This is not the place to describe the evolution of official policy in the major engineering unions, nor to relate the course of the annual pay claims. In so far as these matters affected the shop stewards, they will be dealt with from the stewards' point of view in later chapters. It would in any case be impossible to write an adequate account from the official point of view without recourse to the Minutes of the AEU Executive Committee, which are at present closed to researchers. Consequently, we have to rely on J.B. Jefferys' account in The Story of the Engineers (London, 1945) for a general overview of official policy.

Nevertheless, an assessment of the role of the trade union officials during strikes, has to be attempted in order to show the determinants of the officials' behaviour. The strike provides us with a useful historical laboratory for doing this, both because strikes were well documented by the Conciliation Officers and because they magnified the existing pressures on officials.

In the AEU, District Secretaries and Divisional Organisers were perhaps rather more responsive to the pressures put on them by the rank and file during strikes than were their counterparts in the T & GWU and NUGMW, who were not elected by the division or district, but appointed from headquarters in London. For a similar reason, the National Organisers tended to be less responsive than the district officials. Thus, most examples of officials below national level supporting or condoning strikes refer to AEU district officials.

In general, even these officers did not dare to openly support strikes in the face of Executive opposition. Only once did this occur during the war, and the specificity of the case explains its occurrence. In September 1943, the nine thousand workers at Vickers, Barrow, came out on strike for the abolition of the Premium Bonus system. The strikers had widespread sympathy on AEU District Committees, but they had also to contend with the hostility of the press. The national officials, urged on by Bevin, ordered the Barrow District Committee to enforce a return to work, but the Committee (which had been suspended in 1937) refused to do so, and was suspended by the EC. The District Secretary was also suspended for supporting the strike.¹ The fact was that in an isolated community like Barrow, with only one industry of any size, and where the District Committee was solidly composed of strikers, the District Secretary would have completely destroyed his credibility by opposing the strike, even supposing he had wanted to. He was restored to his position, along with the District Committee, after the strike.²

The Barrow situation was a peculiar one. Normally, even District Secretaries did not go so far as to openly support strikes; the most they did was to condone them under certain circumstances. Sometimes, the District Secretary could simply slip up by associating himself with a demand that the employers solidly refused to concede. William Fyfe, the Glasgow District Secretary did this in November 1942 when he agreed with the shop stewards at the North British Locomotive Co., Queen's Park, that they should demand payment for time lost through a stay-in strike. The Conciliation Officer implied that Fyfe had not

¹LAB 10/380. 3, 10, 17, 24 September, 1943.

²SA, October, 1943.

advocated strike action, but that the shop stewards had been encouraged by his approval of the demand. He concluded by saying that the District Committee had experienced some difficulty in obtaining a resumption of work. The Conciliation Officer had, in fact, to initiate a prosecution against the strikers' shop steward before the men would return.¹

There were occasions, on the other hand, when District Secretaries and even Divisional Organisers tacitly supported strikers because of the attitude of the firm involved. During July, 1943, for example, one of the Manchester officials disclaimed responsibility for a strike at Salford Electrical Instruments over a wage claim, because the firm had disregarded the established custom of granting a Works Conference without insisting on a resumption of work beforehand.² The next week, the Divisional Organiser, whom the Conciliation Officer referred to as "normally one of the most reasonable and helpful officials in this area", still refused to argue for a resumption because of the firm's attitude.³

These two examples are representative of the two types of circumstance that led local officials to 'hold the ring' for strikers: the militancy of the workers, or managerial obstinacy. In the first case, the workers involved (or at least their steward) made an aggressive demand which they were clearly prepared to fight for. The District Secretary, probably sensing this militancy, agreed with their demand and therefore found it difficult to oppose action to secure it. Even

¹LAB 10/363, 19 December, 1942.

²LAB 10/380, 24 July, 1943.

³Ibid., 30 July, 1945.

in this case, however, it is possible that the District Secretary connived at the strike. We have only the outline of events, and what went on behind the scenes in such cases is always difficult to establish, dealing as we are with an individual who had reason to obscure his motives from the Conciliation Officer. In the second case, it is clear that the official or officials involved were not opposing the stoppage because they thought the management obstinate. Here again, we have to be circumspect, because in fact the company was simply insisting that procedure be followed. It may have been the case that Salford Electrical Instruments had followed an arrangement that was rather more favourable to the trade union side than other firms, but the Divisional Organiser was clearly concerned that they should stay out of line. To negotiate whilst workers were on strike obviously gave him a good deal more purchase in negotiations than he would have had otherwise. In general, although workers' militancy and managerial obstinacy were related to local officials' attitudes, it also has to be allowed that officials could be helped by strikes and that they were not always averse to being assisted in this way.

When we come to consider the attitudes of the Executive Committee of the AEU, we are in much less ambiguous territory. The Executive was far from uncritical of the wartime running of industry at both company and Government levels, but it was strongly opposed to strike action. The T&GWU Executive was prepared to make a strike official even after Order 1305 had been passed, when it supported the strike at Lincoln Electrical in October-November 1940 to organise the factory.¹ This was exceptional for the T&GWU, but no equivalent example was found for the AEU Executive. Small strikes (and there were an increasing number

¹NP, November, 1940.

of these) were normally left to the district officials, and many probably never even reached Executive ears. In most of the important strikes of 1943-44, the Executive sent either one of their own number or one of the National Organisers to the strike to call for a return. At Barrow, it was Hannington and the Divisional Organiser George Crane;¹ at Rolls-Royce Hillington it was Hannington again, this time with Maloney and Dalgleish from the AEU and T&GWU Executives;² at Barr and Stroud's, it was Armstrong, a National Organiser.³ During the Albion Motors strike, on the other hand, the EC did not send an EC member to Scotland, but concentrated on pressurising the District Committee. The Conciliation officer thought that this was because the election of the Scottish representative on the EC was under way, and presumably that the sitting member would have his chances of re-election prejudiced. Once the election had been concluded, the Conciliation Officer thought that the EC would take a more direct interest in ending the stoppage.⁴ In the months immediately following the end of the war, the EC's attitude towards strikes softened somewhat. During the Humber strike of early 1946, as we shall see, the Executive only intervened when the dispute was certain to spread to the rest of the Coventry district.

The EC's attitudes have so far only been considered with respect to strikes, partly because this is the aspect which is most germane to our later concerns, and partly because it has been impossible to consult the Executive Minutes. It would be wrong to leave the subject without

¹SA, October, 1943.

²Ibid., November, 1943.

³WC, December, 1943.

⁴LAB 10/445. 20 October, 1944.

stating that the resultant impression of the EC was certainly not as one-sided as might be inferred from isolating this one aspect. Even during strikes, as we have shown, the Executive itself was by no means over-anxious to be seen to be opposing them; the Divisional and National Organisers were sent wherever possible. Shop stewards were often grateful for the pressure that the EC could put on Government departments, especially with regard to victimisations. At the beginning of 1944, Bevin was persuaded to 'deschedule' Desoutters under the EWO, because they refused to reinstate a sacked shop steward.¹ There were many other examples of similar pressure being brought to bear by the Executive, some of which will be dealt with later. This type of pressure politics, and the success which could often result with Bevin at the Ministry of Labour, helped the Executive maintain its reputation whilst it opposed strikes and negotiated what many members thought were inadequate amounts.

The AEU Executive and district officials had a distinctively positive attitude towards shop stewards when compared with other unions. This can be shown quite clearly by looking at the official discussions conducted by the TUC team negotiating for the introduction of trade unionism at Fords in early 1944. During 1941, Fords had agreed, under pressure from the Ministry of Labour that as their factories were scheduled under the EWO, they would deal with trade union officials as and when the need arose. This formulation fell far short of full trade union organisation, of course, and the unrecognised shop stewards at the Dagenham factory were particularly displeased with the arrangement as it worked in practice. Accordingly, they sat in the works manager's office in January 1944 and refused to leave until they had been recognised. They were eased out by Vic Feather, who informed them

¹NP, January, 1944.

that the TUC was in fact negotiating with Fords for a more satisfactory arrangement.¹

Between January and April 1944, the TUC negotiated with Fords. Understandably, given Ford's reputation, the TUC team pointed to the benefits which the company would receive from unionisation. As Arthur Deakin of the T&GWU pointed out, the tyre manufacturing industry had had industrial disturbance 'reduced to a minimum' by unionisation. Fords, on the other hand, wanted more concrete signs that this would be the case in their factories. As A.E. Smith, one of their team, said:

"The biggest fear the company had was that shop stewards were not handled in the right way by the unions and he had the impression that not only were the unions unable to handle the shop stewards but that the shop stewards themselves were endeavouring to gain control and defy the union in every direction." 2

Feather had a broadly similar view of some of the shop stewards. There were, he wrote:

"Five or six people of whom I have had personal experience who I think are totally unsuitable from any point of view, either the unions point of view or the management, for appointment as shop stewards. Every issue they raise is a political one, or inspired by political motives, and they appear to be satisfied not to get things put right but to be able to point to further iniquities of Ford's. The remainder of the stewards are good chaps, who are sound trade unionists, who are themselves of the opinion that the proper way to deal with Ford's is as trade unionists and not politicians.

To a certain extent, Ford's are right when they suggest that the unions have no control over the stewards, and that the stewards act in an irresponsible way.

¹LAB 10/443, 7, 14, January; 4 February, 1944. See also TUC: T.602.57.4.

²T.602.57.4. Minutes of Negotiations.

Ford's would accept the decision as to the suitability of a steward from the general secretary of a union, or the National President, or the National Executive, or an independent arbitrator, or the TUC, but not from the district officer appointed by popular vote like the AEU officials, and whose political affiliations are common to those affiliations held by the shop stewards to whom Ford's object." 1

The whole document is extremely interesting in its agreement with Ford's as to the undesirability of the political shop stewards, in its view of the AEU District Officials and for what it reveals of the TUC's general attitudes. However, it is crucial that Feather's views are not confused with those of the AEU Executive. Feather himself realised that his views would be opposed by some of the TUC team, and writing to Walter Citrine,² suggested an argument in support of his position:

"Selection of shop stewards is likely to be the biggest difficulty, although even from a union's point of view the suggestion of Ford's that there might need to be stricter control over the shop stewards may not be unhelpful." 3

The AEU representatives were not persuaded by Feather's argument. In the final agreement drawn up with Ford's, only full-time officials were allowed to negotiate with the company. The AEU dissented from the majority point of view, pointing out that Ford's neighbour and supplier Briggs Bodies had an agreement which included shop stewards.⁴

¹T.602.57.4. Memo. by V. Feather.

²For Citrine's attitude to shop stewards (which was less than enthusiastic), see two articles he wrote for the Western Mail, November 23rd and 26th, 1942. In these articles he argued that shop stewards were usurping executive functions.

³T.602.57.4.,
Feather to Citrine, nd.

⁴T.602.57.4.,
Note from AEU EC to TUC, 16 September 1945.

In conclusion, the attitude of the AEU Executive towards shop stewards was considerably more favourable than that of the rest of the TUC negotiating team at Ford's, but this did not mean that they were any more prepared to tolerate strikes than any other Executive. They opposed all strikes during the war. Their local officials were not so comprehensive in their denunciation of strikes; they did not usually actually support them, but they were on occasion prepared to adopt an attitude of 'benevolent neutrality'.

Generally speaking, the Ministry of Labour was quite well pleased with the impact of Order 1305 on industrial relations. Strikes had remained relatively small and short, the legislation had usually been effective in ensuring that they remained so. A memorandum written by Bevin in June 1943, stated that the Order had strengthened the trade unions' hands in dealing with 'sporadic troubles'. Bevin had to admit, however, that the situation was not as one-sided and simple as this statement might suggest. The penal clauses of the Order could sometimes put executives in difficult positions; when they pointed out to strikers the legal consequences of their action, they could be seen as threatening the strikers with imprisonment. Bevin suggested that this could lead to a 'weakening of trade union executive authority and control.'¹ The memorandum did not spell out where this latter tendency had shown

¹LAB 10/248. 'Minister's Proposals,' June 8, 1943.

itself, but it seems likely that Bevin had the most strike-prone industries (coal mining and engineering) in mind when he qualified his original statement. Only a few months after drafting this memorandum, Bevin began to consider taking further steps to strengthen the Trade Union Executives.

During 1944, a new and important Order in Council was promulgated, designed to shore up the by then slightly suspect edifice of the Executives' authority over their members. A large wave of stoppages in the mining and engineering industries precipitated the new Order. The wave was of tidal proportions. Between 24th January and 11th April, 1,850,000 working days were lost in the coal mining industry. At the beginning of April, 12,000 apprentices struck work for nearly a fortnight, and 30,000 engineers and shipyard workers were out in Belfast over the imprisonment of five shop stewards by the Northern Ireland Government. This was the largest conglomeration of strikes in these two industries since the beginning of the war. The mining strikes in particular threatened to throw what had always been the most problematic industry for the Government, into further productive chaos when the invasion of Europe was imminent. Moreover, there was evidence that Trotskyists were involved in leading the disputes.

These Trotskyists were only organised in tiny groups, but they directed themselves towards the very centre of the Ministry's most sensitive area: industrial disputes. The Scottish Conciliation Officer had been concerned with their activities since the end of 1942, and he asked Bevin for support in dealing with them in November 1943. In support of his request, he stated:

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"(The Militant Workers' Federation) seems to be acquiring increasing influence and because of this to be able more readily to undermine official Trade Union authority" 1

The Scottish Conciliation Officer was not the only senior Ministry of Labour official to be concerned at the influence of the Trotskyists in strikes. When the Deputy Secretary at the Ministry of Labour, Leggett, learned that the Trotskyists were active amongst the Tyneside apprentices, he pointed out the extent of their influence and suggested a remedy:

"I think it is quite clear from this that the militant socialist movement is playing an exceedingly active part not only in the apprentices' agitation but also in the mine workers' troubles.....it is likely that the Minister will be asked to take steps to intern these agitators." 2

In later chapters, the history of these remarks will be dealt with in so far as they relate to the engineering industry. At this point, it is sufficient to note that some officials in the Ministry of Labour were becoming worried about the influence of these agitators.³

The Regulation was a logical extension of the Ministry's labour policy. It was published immediately after the strikes ended, after

¹ LAB 10/281. Galbraith to HQ, 10 November 1943.

² LAB 10/451. Note of 22 February 1944.

³ Some historians have tended to underestimate the importance of the Trotskyists. Allan Bullock dismissed the WIL as "The insignificant British Trotskyite Party" (its precise name seems to have evaded him). Bullock also mis-spells Jock Haston's name ("Jock Halston"). A. Bullock, *op. cit.*, p. 302, note 2. M. Foot describes Bevin's assertions that Trotskyists were involved in these strikes as "fantasies". M. Foot: Aneurin Bevan, vol. 1 (1962), p. 449.

being discussed with the TUC and employers' representatives. It was made quite clear against whom it was directed. A memorandum stated that:

"(The Regulation) should strengthen the hands of Trade Unions in dealing with irresponsible elements".¹

As Bevin had earlier remarked:

"..... I will not be a party while I am in office to doing anything at all, under any circumstances, which will weaken the legitimate trade unions in any way - rather I want to strengthen them - I feel that steps must be taken to see that the war effort is not impeded by these activities."²

In its original form, as shown to the TUC at the Trade Union Consultative Committee, the Regulation provided for the prosecution of any person who declared, instigated, made anyone take part in, or otherwise acted in furtherance of, a strike amongst anyone engaged in essential services. This included any strike which was otherwise legal under the Order 1305. The penalties provided for were five years penal servitude or a fine of £500, or both. "Essential Services" was to mean any factory, mine, dock, etc., scheduled under the Essential Works Order. In short, it provided stiff penalties for anyone instigating or trying to extend a strike in a scheduled factory, under any circumstances. It therefore made picketing illegal.³

The TUC made several suggestions, one of which caused some argument at the meeting of the Trade Union Consultative Committee when it was discussed. Dukes of the TUC pointed out that a trade union official

¹LAB 10/467. Industrial Relations Dept. "General Memo: Defence Regulation 1AA. Scope of the Regulation"(n.d.), p. 5.

²Bullock, op.cit., p. 269.

³LAB 10/467. Industrial Relations Department. "General Memo: Defence Regulation 1AA."

could be prosecuted if he inadvertently said something at a meeting which might be taken out of context and construed as instigating a strike.¹ Bevin replied that the Regulation:

"Should not normally affect union officials as a local official trying to act in accordance with the Arbitration Order would not incite a strike. On the other hand, some members of unions did instigate strikes against the advice of the responsible Executives, and such persons would be prosecuted under the new Regulation." 2

Bevin thereby tried to sidestep an amendment exempting speakers at meetings called in accordance with trade union rules. He was unsuccessful, however (possibly because he was unwise enough to leave the room during the debate), in persuading the TUC to drop their proposal, and the amendment was accepted. Bevin had shown that he did not want to exempt local officials from the scope of the order; he clearly did not regard them as being as reliable as the National Executives.³ It was later realised by the Ministry that under this particular clause shop stewards had the right to call for strike action, since they were allowed, under AEU rules, to call a shop meeting for any purpose.⁴

In fact, then, at least part of the sting had been taken out of the Regulation by the TUC's amendment, although it remained illegal to picket, administer unofficial strike funds, or to do anything else 'in furtherance of' a strike. However, it was not generally realised that this was the case at the time, and the Regulation was violently opposed

¹LAB 10/467. 'Minutes of the Forty-Second Meeting of the Consultative Committee held at the Ministry of Labour 11 April, 1944,' p. 2.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 3.

⁴LAB 10/467. Industrial Relations Department. 'General Memo. Defence Regulation 1AA,' p. 3.

by a minority in the House of Commons led by Aneurin Bevan. Bevan proposed a 'prayer' to annul the new Regulation, arguing that the latter was designed to prop up the trade union officials:

"It is the trade union officials who are invoking the law against their own members. Do not let anybody on this side of the House think that he is defending the trade unions; he is defending the trade union official who has arterio-sclerosis and who cannot readjust himself to his membership. He is defending an official who had become so unpopular among his own membership that the only way he can keep them in order is to threaten them with five years gaol." ¹

Bevin replied that Bevan was advocating an unfettered right to strike, and that what was being objected to was the Order 1305 rather than Regulation 1AA.² Many of the Labour members decided to abstain on the vote, so that although the 'prayer' was defeated by the overwhelming majority of 314 to 23, only 56 Labour MPs voted in favour, whilst 109 abstained.³

The Parliamentary furore over the Regulation was one reason why it was never actually used. More important, it was hardly necessary to use it, because the wave of strikes of early 1944 was not extended, and the influence of the extreme left in the shop stewards' movement declined rapidly in the following months. It is impossible to say precisely what part the Regulation played in damping down the strike rate and in diminishing the extreme left's influence, because this cannot be measured with any precision. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the Regulation has been criticised by historians as unnecessary, the desired results were in fact forthcoming.

¹M. Foot, op.cit., p. 453.

²Ibid., p. 453-55.

³Ibid., p. 456.

In summary, Bevin centred his policy on the Trade Union Executives, whom he regarded as entirely reliable in the crucial matter of opposing strikes. The first and most important Order in Council dealing with labour matters, the Order 1305, strengthened the officials en bloc by the imposition of what was in effect compulsory arbitration. The second vital order, the Essential Works Order, was not basically concerned with disputes, but rather with severely restricting the mobility of labour. However, both orders had some positive aspects as far as workers were concerned. The Order 1305 empowered the Minister to require any person, including any employer, to do anything he deemed necessary. The EWO also compelled employers to observe district rates and conditions.

In general, Bevin's faith in the Trade Union Executives proved to be well-founded. They provided practically no support for strikers at all during the entire war. The district officials were rather different, in that they were much more open to shop steward pressure; they therefore tended to have a more ambiguous attitude towards strikers. At the beginning of 1944, a massive outburst of strikes in the mining and engineering industries prompted Bevin to further stiffen the attitude of the union officials against strikes through the promulgation of Regulation 1AA. The Regulation made it an offence to instigate or act in furtherance of a strike in an essential service. It was a draconian measure, and met with some forceful opposition, but it played a part in damping down the wave of unrest then sweeping the two key industries for the war effort.

* * * *

Introduction to the

Local Studies

These local studies are divisible into two distinct halves: Coventry and Manchester form one half, and the Clyde and the Tyne the other. Because of the detailed nature of the histories of industrial relations in the localities, the main comparative strands are to be found within and between the two groups, rather than from district to district at random. The four areas have been grouped in this way because of their industrial structures, the type of workforce and method of wage payment, which are basically similar within the groups, but different between them. Thus, in Coventry, a relatively high level of dilution obtained, combined with a large semi-skilled and female workforce, and piece work as the main method of wage payment. In Glasgow, on the other hand, there was a larger proportion of skilled men, and therefore less piece work. By comparing Coventry with the Clyde, it will be possible to see how these differences created different relationships between political militants and the engineering workers on the shop floor. The comparison will then be developed a stage further by comparing Coventry and the Clyde with districts of a similar industrial structure, so that the weight of other factors can be assessed.

Before undertaking the local studies, the two most important sets of considerations for considering the relationship between the left wing and the rank and file will have to be dealt with. One of these subjects, skill mixes and trade union organisation, has already been dealt with but will be quickly recalled here. The other matter of importance, the state of the CP and its left wing rivals in the localities at the outbreak of war, will be outlined for the first time.

It was stated earlier that the varying levels of trade union membership in the different districts could be accounted for by reference to

unemployment and the proportion of skilled engineers in the local workforce. In Coventry and Manchester, AEU membership was similar at about twenty percent of the possible membership, whilst it was rather higher in Newcastle, where there was both a higher proportion of skilled men and a higher rate of unemployment. In Glasgow, which also had a high proportion of skilled men, there was a still higher rate of unemployment, and consequently a very small group of unionised engineers (roughly 10%). On the other hand, further investigation showed that the Clydeside had a degree of shop steward organisation which was higher than that existing in, for example, Coventry. Overall, the figures showed that there was considerable scope for recruitment to the AEU (and there was even more for recruitment to the semi-skilled unions) in every area, with the partial exception of Newcastle.

If a good deal of caution has to be exercised in the interpretation of the available data on skill and trade unionism, the same is equally true when looking at the state of the left wing in these areas. It has continually to be borne in mind that political groupings have a tendency to exaggerate their size, and that it is not possible to corroborate the claims from other sources. Nevertheless, it can be asserted without fear of contradiction that the CP grew considerably during the late 1930s. The Central Committee's report to the 1935 Congress stated that the CP's increased influence had not been reflected in increased membership, but three years later the situation was quite different.¹ Between 1935 and 1938, the CP grew from 6,500 to 15,750.²

¹Draft Resolution on Building a Mass Communist Party, 13th Party Congress, Manchester, February 25, 1935, p. 1.

²Report of the Central Committee to the 15th Party Congress, September 1938, p. 39.

The YCL expanded from less than 700 in 1934 to 4,602 at the beginning of June 1938.¹

Party membership was very unevenly distributed. The main concentration was in London, which had 40% of the total members by 1939.² Outside of London, Scotland, and especially the Clydeside, was an important area for the CP. Estimates of membership in the four areas under consideration are bound to be rough, since they rely on oral evidence, but Clydeside certainly had the largest body of members. This group of branches probably contained at least a thousand Communists. Manchester's branches were the next most important, with about four hundred members. Tyneside was the next strongest area, with between a hundred and two hundred. The Midlands branches had never been strong, however, and Coventry was especially weak, with only about fifty to a hundred members. These estimates are only tentative, but they are broadly consonant with the figures which we have for the YCL. About one third of the League's membership came from the London branches, followed by Scotland, with 830 and Lancashire with 292. The North East Coast as a whole had only 155 members, and whilst it is impossible to find figures for Coventry, the Midlands region came under the Central Committee's category of "weak or non-existent".³ Recruitment to the CP in the year leading up to September 1938 further accentuated these imbalances, with London and Scotland leading the way, the other districts

¹ Report of the Central Committee to the 15th Party Congress, September 1938, p. 37.

² H. Pelling, op.cit., p. 104.

³ Report of the Central Committee to the 15th Party Congress, September 1938, p. 37.

well behind and the North Midlands registering a decline in membership.¹ In the following year, little change occurred, as recruitment in the industrial areas was 'sluggish'.²

The other left wing groups had a similar regional pattern of strength and weakness. For the Independent Labour Party, Scotland had been the great area during the 1920s, with London and Lancashire the most important English regions. Soon after disaffiliation, the ILP entered a period of extremely rapid decline. Between July and November 1932, 128 branches were lost in Scotland, and in mid-1934, the Lancashire ILP 'almost collapsed'. London, on the other hand, lost only one of eighty-nine branches. By the beginning of the war, the Clydeside ILP contained no more than a handful of activists, whilst in the rest of the country outside of London there seem to have been hardly any activists at all.³ The Trotskyist grouplets, which were partly parasitic on the ILP, had a similar pattern of membership. Material for Youth For Socialism came almost exclusively from London and the Clydeside, but there were probably no more than a dozen WIL members on the Clyde by 1939. The Anarchists of the Anarchist Federation was also strongest in these two areas.

All the left-wing groups had a similar regional membership distribution, with a strong concentration in London and a rather less

¹ Report of the Central Committee to the 15th Party Congress, September 1938, p. 40.

² H. Pelling, op.cit., p. 104.

³ R.E. Dowse: Left in the Centre (1966), p. 185.

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strong agglomeration on the Clydeside. These areas were followed, in descending order of importance, by Manchester, the Tyne and Coventry. To discuss membership solely in terms of numbers is, of course, rather misleading. In Coventry, for instance, the aircraft industry was important, and the CPers were able to use the New Propellor as a lever to increase their influence, an opportunity denied their Clydeside comrades. This, in turn, leads on to the question of left wing strengths within the districts, a subject which will be dealt with in detail in the local studies.

* * *

COVENTRY

"Something over twenty years ago I worked in Coventry. It does not seem that the people of Coventry have altered much since. In those days the aborigines of Coventry were the most self-satisfied, self-opinionated, self-conceited, self-centred, pig-headed and muddle-headed people of even Saxon England. Whatever Coventry did or thought was right in Coventry's eyes just because Coventry thought so..... Today, in the hour of the Empire's greatest need, we have tens of thousands of its workpeople on strike about nothing at all... but for.... what they call a principle. The idea of Coventry having any principles, except money-grubbing, is really funny."

(The Aeroplane, 5 December 1917, on the Midlands strike for the recognition of shop stewards.)

After the First World War, when Coventry had been one of the major munitions centres, the town developed into a centre of the motor industry. A comprehensive list of the many small car firms with their factories there in 1920 would be very long indeed, but by the mid-1930s, a considerable number had gone out of business. Nevertheless the relatively prosperous car industry dominated the town, with Standard, Daimler, Humber, Riley, Triumph, Alvis, Armstrong Siddeley and Morris all having at least one factory there. The remainder of the engineering industry in Coventry was at least as buoyant as the motor branch, with Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft manufacturing aircraft at Baginton and the General Electrical Co. and British Thompson Houston making electrical apparatus of all kinds.¹

With this type of industrial structure, it is hardly surprising that unemployment in Coventry was never less than 2% below the national average throughout the inter-war years. The only problem with the motor industry as far as workers were concerned was the seasonal lay-off, which tended to come in the spring and summer. Even this problem was less important than it might have been, given the importance of the building industry in the town at this time. The building industry was second only to engineering as an employer of labour, and had its highest labour requirements in the summer. Thus, it was often possible for workers to leave the car factories to find work building the new housing estates which were springing up to house incoming workers.²

Coventry had a reputation as a boom town, and large numbers of workers flocked to it during the Depression years, to find semi-skilled work in the car factories. By 1938, the estimated population was 213,000,

¹Coventry Directory of Manufactures, 1936.

²P.S. Florence and A. Shenfield: "Economies and Diseconomies of Concentration: The Wartime Experience of Coventry," in Review of Economic Studies, vol. 12, (1944-45), p. 81.

and by the following year, it was 229,000.¹ The immigrants were not to be disappointed in their expectations; high wages and steady work were available to a large number over the next thirty years.

During the First World War, Coventry had been the most militant of the major engineering districts, with more working days lost through strikes than the Clyde.² In the Second War, the Clyde took its place as the most strike-prone district, losing 337,662 days compared to Coventry's 82,764, between 1941 and 1945.³ During 1940, it is very difficult to measure the preoccupations of shop stewards through strike figures, since there were so very few strikes, but the first ten months of the year saw the stewards and the District Committees discussing the problems caused by victimisations. In the rest of the country, victimisation through the transference provisions of the March 1941 Essential Works Order, continued as a serious question for the rest of the War. Transference was a skilled man's bête noir in the main, and in Coventry, where the body of skilled men were covered by the Coventry Toolroom Agreement, of January 1941, the problem was much less pressing.

Piece work bargaining, the traditional concern of the Coventry shop stewards, was pushed even more into the centre of the industrial arena by the Toolroom Agreement, which provided the semi-skilled with a unique opportunity to increase their earnings. Shop stewards were able to return to the daily battles with the already hard pressed rate fixers armed with a new weapon, a mutually agreed statement of earnings in the

¹M.P. Fogarty: Prospects of the Industrial Areas of Great Britain (1945), p. 26.

²J.S. Hinton, op.cit., p. 234.

³Strike figures are only quoted for 1941-1945 in order to achieve comparability. Before 1941, "mixed" engineering and shipbuilding strikes were recorded under either shipbuilding or engineering. From 1941, each set of strikers was recorded separately. Post-1941 figures are therefore much more reliable for comparisons between districts. Fortunately, the strike rate in 1940 was so low that the omission is unimportant.

major local factories. Piece work earnings, which had been a pre-occupation, became an obsession over the next three or four years. A sort of 'Klondyke fever' developed among the semi-skilled. The opportunity of making piece work 'killings' by pulling the wool over the rate fixers' eyes, and of ameliorating the rigours of wartime life by buying on the thriving local Black Market was not to be passed by. Many workers felt that the boot was now on their collective foot, and the strike figures on piece work show that they used it. However, the shop stewards were preoccupied with the problem of victimisation rather than piece work earnings during 1940-41. The problem was probably considerably more acute in the Coventry district because of the unparalleled expansion of local industry between 1936 and 1940, and because of the importance of the aircraft and aero-engine industries. By 1940-41, the aircraft industry had labour requirements which would expand it by almost 50% of its strength of the spring of 1940, and more than double it by the summer of 1941.¹

This expansion was on an unprecedented scale, but the growth of the town's engineering industry had already posed its problems for would-be trade union organisers. The award of aero-engine contracts to three of the town's motor manufacturers in 1936 led to the construction of new 'shadow' factories to cope with the demand; such was the atmosphere among the town's industrialists at this time that the Alvis Co. built a shadow factory without any government contracts, so confident was it that they would arrive in due course. Their confidence was rewarded with a contract for Gnome-Rhône aero-engines in 1937.² During 1939-40,

¹P. Inman, op.cit., p. 38, Table 2.

²K. Richardson: Twentieth Century Coventry (1972), p. 70.

a new set of contracts was awarded to these companies, and three new shadow factories built.¹

These seven new factories were built to the most modern specifications, to allow the maximum use of semi-skilled labour. At the Rootes No. 2 shadow factory at Ryton, for example, automatic machinery was used in every possible operation; on one job, the use of bar automatics instead of capstans reduced a machining time from forty minutes to four and a half.² With unemployment in the town well below the national average already,³ much of the new labour required could be taken from the immigrants flooding into the town, who could be employed without any need for previous engineering experience.

Consequently, the town expanded tremendously between 1931 and 1939, growing by an extra 62,454 persons. Of these 62,454, eleven thousand have to be discounted because of a boundary change, and the natural increase was 9,306, but this still leaves 42,148 migrants in a total population (in 1939) of 229,500.⁴ The immigrants came from the area around Cardiff and Newport, the Lancashire cotton towns, Clydeside, Greater London, the coalmining districts of Northumberland and Durham, and Tyneside (in descending order).⁵ The proportion of these immigrants entering the engineering industry varied depending on where they came from. Those from the mining districts showed a clear preference for

¹W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 289.

²Machinery, April 4, 1940.

³M.P. Fogarty, op.cit., pp. 31-33.

⁴G.L. Marson: "Coventry: A Study in Urban Geography" (Unpublished MA dissertation, Liverpool, 1949), p. 132.

⁵P.S. Florence and A. Shenfield, "Labour for the War Industries: The Experience of Coventry," in Review of Economic Studies, vol. 12 (1944-45), p. 43.

engineering (and a marked aversion to the Warwickshire pits), with 80% of them entering engineering, compared to 50% of those from the other areas.¹

These immigrants inundated the town during 1938 and 1939: fully a quarter of the total number of immigrants entering Coventry between 1920 and 1939 arrived in the twelve months prior to July 1939. Not surprisingly, most of them were young, single men, who created something of a housing problem in the town despite the fact that they brought few dependants.²

Since the immigrants who entered engineering were predominantly from mining areas, it might be supposed that they had some previous experience of trade unionism. On the other hand, many of them had been recruited as trainees by the local employers precisely because of their age, and may never have worked in the mines.³ In any event, they still presented, in terms of their numbers, a considerable organising task for local trade unionists. It was further exacerbated by the fact that the immigrants who arrived in the town in the two years immediately prior to July 1939 showed a marked tendency to change jobs more frequently than earlier immigrants or native Coventrians: 56% of them changed jobs in the year after July 1939 compared to 25% of pre-1937 immigrants.⁴ This made it difficult to track them down, to check their cards and to transfer them between trade union branches.

¹G.L. Marson, p. 143.

²P.S. Florence and A. Shenfield, ibid., p. 41.

³COVEMPS, March 1934. The Coventry employers expressed a definite preference for men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five.

⁴P.S. Florence and A. Shenfield, ibid., p. 44.

These immigrants certainly did not lack militancy; they were frequently noted for their combativity inside the factories (and sometimes inside the pubs). Just after the war started, the Rootes Co. complained to their colleagues in the Coventry Engineering Employers Association that one particular gang was causing continual trouble in the polishing shop of their Number One shadow factory in Stoke Aldermoor. The gang comprised one hundred and thirty three men, of whom forty-eight were trainees from the depressed areas, who had, as Rootes' Mr. Booth remarked, "not even as much engineering knowledge as a labourer in the shop". They did, however, have the audacity to refuse to man certain jobs, and this proved the final straw for Mr. Booth, who decided to break the gang up.¹

It may be significant that the workers in question were from the 'depressed areas'. Their willingness to assert themselves in their new jobs made them amenable to joining a trade union if they were encouraged to do so by a shop steward. However, during 1940, the type of immigrant coming into the town and particularly into the shadow factories changed somewhat. London, the South East Coast, Leicestershire and Northamptonshire entered the list of major areas of origin behind Lancashire, the Clyde and the Cardiff-Newport area. In addition, the proportion of women immigrants entering employment in the town increased dramatically; Coventry had a below-average widow and spinster population, soon absorbed by the shadow factories. By 1941, approximately five immigrants in every fourteen entering the factories were women, bringing the total proportion of women in the Coventry factories as a whole to 25%.²

¹COVEMPS, November 1939. The polishing shop had struck for two days in June. (Ibid., July 1939).

²P.S. Florence and A. Shenfield, ibid., pp. 38 and 41.

These new and more recent immigrants probably posed a greater threat to trade union organisation than their pre-war counterparts. The Coventry employers were estimating their labour requirements at five thousand per month for every month of 1940, to expand the engineering labour force by about fifty percent in that year.¹ If the earlier immigrants presented a daunting prospect to the trade union organiser, this scale of absorption was even more frightening. Moreover, it seems unlikely that these newcomers had the same kind of experience of trade unionism, as their predecessors. Some of the women may have had experience in the Northamptonshire boot and shoe industry, or the Lancashire cotton mills, but this was an experience of trade unionism that was qualitatively different to that of the miners. The whole problem merits further investigation, but it seems reasonable to assert that the people coming into the town in 1940 must have proved rather more difficult to recruit than their predecessors.

In any event, it was in the recently built and worst-organised factories that most victimisation occurred: the shadow factories, a small car firm and an electrical engineering firm were the main places at which AEU stewards were sacked during 1940 and early 1941. The Coventry District Committee of the AEU discussed the victimisation of shop stewards on eleven occasions during the thirteen months between January 1940 and February 1941.² The circumstance of the shadow factories'

¹Ibid., p. 33.

²16 Jan. '40: convenor Standard Aero shadow factory sacked; 5 March: Nine men suspended from SS Cars; 30 July: two stewards sacked at the Alvis Aero shadow factory. These cases were further discussed at the meetings of 21 May, 27 August, 8 September, 13 October 1940. On 8 February 1940, Ernie Roberts' sacking from Alvis and from Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft was discussed, and his previous sacking from Armstrong Siddeley raised. On January 1941, a steward was sacked from the British Thompson Houston, and on 17th February, another was sacked at Nuffield Mechanisation and Aero. (All dates refer to the AEU DC Minutes.)

poor organisation was to prove an important weakness as far as organising support in the district for sectional strikes over victimisation was concerned. When a strike occurred over the sacking of a convenor, it proved difficult to spread it to the rest of the factory, and therefore harder to stimulate support from other factories in the area. Another major difficulty, compared to the Clyde, was that the District Committee of the AEU was not controlled by the CP, and it was more concerned with nipping in the bud any rival to its control, rather than with stimulating shop steward activities outside of their own factories.

The first stirrings on the part of the stewards themselves towards district activity over victimisation occurred in mid-1940, and the episode showed that the District Committee of the AEU was definitely not prepared to encourage them. In July 1940, Ernie Roberts was sacked from his job as a fitter at Armstrong Siddeley for calling a strike in the absence of the convenor. These were bizarre grounds for sacking a steward. The matter of whether or not he should have consulted his convenor before recommending strike action was normally considered an internal question of trade union procedure, and not one which directly concerned management. Roberts took this up with the District Committee, which decided to call a meeting of Roberts's shop, the Aero Fitting shop, and to ask Stokes, the Divisional Organiser, to send a report to the EC. Meanwhile, Roberts had not been inactive, because motions from two branches calling for a special district meeting of stewards were received by the District Committee. Consideration of these was deferred until the EC had replied to Stokes's report, and the Committee had itself reported to the six-monthly meeting of shop stewards, which

was not due for nearly a month.¹

The AEU DC had shown itself reluctant to take action via the shop stewards over victimisations. The attitude of the DC was to be markedly different on the next occasion that the problem reared its head. This may have been partly due to the fact that the district's shop stewards had already been approached on the difficulties at the particular factory concerned, and there was therefore a general understanding and sympathy with the workers here amongst Coventry workers. The convenor of the Standard Aero 2, Rogers, had been sacked in January 1940, and the management had refused to agree to a Works Conference on the subject.² No further action seems to have been taken, but in April there was a strike of inspectors at the factory, which received financial support from all over the district.³ At the DC meeting of 22 September, Wilcocks, the new convenor, reported that the company was challenging his right to act as such by dictating where and when shop meetings were to be held.⁴ Soon afterwards, Wilcocks was sacked, and a strike of 250 workers started on 26th September.⁵ Stokes and Taylor appealed to the strikers to return, but only a few did so. The rest remained out, and a meeting of these remaining strikers was held, attended by about 120.⁶

¹AEU DC, 23 July, 30 July, 8 September, 1940.

²AEU DC, 16 January, 1940.

³NP, May 1940.

⁴AEU DC, 22 September 1940.

⁵LAB 10/350, 28 September 1940.

⁶AEU DC, 29 September 1940.

The following day, the District Committee called Wilcocks before it to explain the circumstances leading to his dismissal.¹ The DC voted at this meeting to support the strike, to call for full financial support from all local factories, to draw up and distribute a local bulletin describing the strike, to draft a press statement and to elect representatives from the DC to sit on the strike Committee. A deputation was also elected, to visit the EC in London to demand action on the victimised stewards, failing which a ballot was to be taken for strike action in the district.² A week later an aggregate meeting of stewards was held which passed a motion:

"This meeting..... views with alarm the general victimisation of shop stewards and militant trade unionists and considers that the root cause of it is the collaboration of the trade union leadership with the employers. Therefore it demands the cessation of such collaboration and an immediate fight for the restoration of the right to strike as the only weapon to stop intimidation." 3

The District Committee of the TGWU and the Trades Council were also supporting the strike. The Conciliation Officer remarked on the "serious position", and added that "the union", by which he seems to have meant the officials, was "much embarrassed".⁴ It was argued by the officials that the AEU DC meeting which had taken such decisive action in support of the strikers was an unusually small one, and this was in fact correct. Eight of the DC of 22 were present. The meeting had been dominated by the CP, and the deputation to London contained two Communists, Wilcocks himself and Joe Steele, from the Standard parent factory, of three

¹Ibid., 6 October 1940.

²Ibid., 29 September 1940.

³AEU DC, 29 September 1940.

⁴LAB 10/350, 10 October 1940.

delegates. One of the two elected to sit on the strike committee, Lewis, was also in the CP.¹ Although the CP had used the meeting to the fullest extent, they had still had to persuade the other members of the DC present that their policies were the most appropriate; there were only four CPers on the DC. Moreover, this success was built on at the next meeting of the DC, when a motion of censure was passed on Taylor, the District Secretary, for not having implemented the policy of the previous meeting.

The CP was definitely behind this motion of censure. An article in the Daily Worker on the strike stated that one of the officials concerned (presumably Taylor) was "not only not pulling his weight", but was actually "obstructive".² They were obviously concerned to discredit Taylor, who was a renegade from their own ranks, because of the way that he was behaving over the protection of stewards from victimisation. This was soon to be shown to be the case by another sacking. Nevertheless, there was little that could be done to actually remove Taylor or any other official immediately, and the CP was primarily concerned with winning the strike. They were able to achieve this by threatening the employers and the district officials more directly. Using the prestige of the Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft shop stewards committee, they called an aggregate meeting of shop stewards, irrespective of union, to discuss "matters of vital importance to all workers".³ The meeting discussed the Standard Aero dispute, although what it decided is unknown.⁴ In any event, it seems to have had an effect on the Works

¹AEU DC, 29 September, 1940.

²DW, 3 October 1940.

³DW, 5 October 1940.

⁴NP, October 1940.

Conference then taking place, because the management agreed to reinstate Wilcocks.¹

The CP, working through the AWA shop steward's committee, had been able to suggest the possibility of district action taking place, and the strike had been won. Since the meeting of 4th October had elected no permanent committee, that was the end of the matter.

In other areas, the CP had set up permanent committees of shop stewards on less impressive bases; why had they not done so in Coventry? The 4 October meeting, and a similar one called by the AWA shop stewards in March 1941 provide two strong clues, since they both considered the question of trade union organisation. The strikers at the Standard Aero had included fifty non-unionists, i.e. the strikers themselves were only about 60% organised.² Nor could the other Standard factories be looked to as potential supporters, since they too were as yet only semi-organised.³ The district's shop stewards must have felt that their first and most important task was to organise the droves of new recruits coming into the shops. Unorganised workers could not be called on to take sympathetic action with any very real prospects of success on a factory level, let alone beyond that. 1940 saw a tremendous development in shop steward organisation in the town. The leading trade unionists worked incessantly to organise the flood of workers pouring into Coventry: they met them at the railway station, spoke to them at hostels, visited their lodgings and even continued to use the old method of factory gate meetings where possible. The Minutes of the AEU District Committee show that there was a great increase in the number of shop

¹DW, 9 October, 1940.

²AEU DC, 25 March, 1941.

³In November 1941, the Standard shop stewards had their first meeting to attempt to obtain 100% trade unionism (AEU DC, 7 November, 1941.)

stewards recognised at this time. In 1938, fifty new shop stewards were recognised; in 1939, one hundred and twelve; the first three months of 1938 saw the 1939 total equalled.¹ Moreover, taking the AEU alone certainly leads to an underestimation of the rate of election of stewards. The TGWU and the NUVB were at least equally active, and had the additional advantage of being able to recruit women. The machine shops and assembly areas were open fields for the enthusiastic new shop stewards. There were very few existing members among the new entrants to the factories, and they were all fair game. Consequently, a variegated trade union membership pattern arose in the scramble, from which only skilled areas like toolrooms and sheet metal shops were exempt. The TGWU in particular began to re-expand amongst the semi-skilled, carrying on the work started by the Worker's Union in the First War. Led by the already experienced and tireless Jack Jones, they expanded their membership until, by the end of the war, it rivalled that of the AEU.

The considerable industrial expansion of Coventry, the concentration of the local engineering industry and the relatively high wages being paid to the semi-skilled led to problems in the local labour market for the employers. Skilled men were being attracted out of the toolrooms and on to production, where they could earn more without using their skill. The result was a shortage of toolroom labour. This was not a new problem for Coventry employers, but the solution agreed after the intervention of the Ministry of Labour was tolerated rather than welcomed by them.

During the early 1930s, there had been a continual feud between individual employers to secure the services of toolmakers. In 1934, the employers association agreed on one way out of the difficulty: to intensify work in the toolrooms by introducing piece work where

¹ AEU DC, 9 April 1940.

possible, combined with the strict enforcement of a district rate for those remaining on time work.¹ By late 1936, eight toolrooms were on piece work, including those at Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft and the Standard Motor Co., but the problem had not been solved.² On the contrary, it had been exacerbated, because by the end of 1935, the scarcity of skilled labour was such that seven of the eight firms were paying above the district rate, and were therefore attracting more skilled workers.³

The increased tempo of production which occurred in the early months of the war brought an already precarious situation in the supply of skilled labour to the point of collapse. Toolmakers were "moving down the line", leaving the toolrooms half empty. Without toolmakers, who supplied the large numbers of jigs, tools and fixtures for the semi-skilled, war production would rapidly grind to a halt. Nationally, the problem was less acute, and was solved by an agreement which ensured that toolmakers enjoyed a fixed percentage differential over the earnings of skilled piece workers in their factory. In Coventry, the concentration of engineering firms was so great, and the type of labour required so specialised, that such a solution would not work. Employers would continue to "poach" labour from one another. Therefore, an agreement was needed which ensured that the workers would have nothing to gain through moving, i.e., the earnings of skilled piece workers in the district had to be taken as the basis for the toolmakers' differential. The actual agreement, signed in January 1941, stated

¹COVEMPS, April, 1934.

²Ibid., October 1936.

³Ibid.

that the basis for the calculation was to be the earnings of these skilled piece workers in all the main engineering factories in Coventry, calculated monthly, and mutually agreed by the employers association and the AEU District Office. An outside auditor was to check the figures.¹

The agreement was a very favourable one for all the local engineering workers. For the skilled men, the guarantee of a uniform district rate based on piece work earnings had two major benefits. Firstly, although they did not know it at the time, it was to give them a steadily rising rate over the next thirty years. Secondly, and more important for our purposes, it removed the financial sting from transfers within the district, since the rate was the same in all the major factories, and even small factories had to observe the rate in practice. For the semi-skilled, the agreement had a different significance, although the end result, unusually high earnings, was the same. Shop stewards were now able to refer to a mutually recognised statement of skilled piece workers' earnings in every major factory in Coventry. In their negotiations with rate fixers and foremen, they were able to constantly assess the comparability of earnings at their factory. Even the leading factories in terms of earnings were able to capitalise in this way, since they were able to 'leapfrog' as the highest earning factories changed places at the top of the earnings league month by month. During 1941, the 'loose' rates that were being fixed on unfamiliar munitions work gave the shop stewards an additional boost in pushing up piece rates. The net effect can be seen in the figures themselves, which show a very steep rise in earnings during 1941 compared to our

¹Coventry Toolroom Agreement, 7 January, 1941.

earlier wage figures. By September 1941, one leading member of the Coventry Engineering Employers Association went so far as to say that the "problem" of piece work prices was entirely attributable to the Toolroom Agreement.¹ By mid-1941, when the CP's position on the war changed, the CP nationally was in a difficult position in the shop stewards' movement. What was their situation in Coventry?

The shop stewards themselves were, by this time, less concerned with victimisations and more interested in pushing piece work earnings up. Trade union organisation, although by no means complete, was definitely spreading, and the worst 'black spots', the shadow factories, were being eliminated. As we have seen in an earlier chapter, Communists were very much to the fore in bringing Coventry workers into the trade unions, and their involvement in piece work bargaining will soon be dealt with.

At this point, some kind of balance sheet of the CP's activities around victimisations can be drawn up. The CP had never been strong in Coventry engineering, but such strength as they had was concentrated in the aircraft factories where trade union organisation was relatively good. This had been true in the late 1920s, and it was still the case in 1940. A survey of the Daily Worker fighting fund at its peak, in August and September 1940 inclusive, shows that the most regular contributions came from the Armstrong Siddeley and Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft factories (both Whitley and Baginton). During these two months, there were eight contributions from the Armstrong Whitworth and Armstrong Siddeley factories, three from the Standard Aero No.2, and one each from the Coventry Gauge and Tool and the British Thompson-Houston.² During the winter of 1940-41, the CP was able to begin to

¹ COVEMPS, Minutes of a meeting between the Coventry Engineering Employers Association and the Engineering Employers Federation, 22 September, 1941.

² DW, 1, 5, 16, 17, 20 August; 6, 26, 27 September 1940. One of these contributions (on September 6th) was of £25.10s. from one section at Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft.

expand from its limited base in the aircraft factories into the rest of the engineering industry in the town. Assuming that all the contributions to the fighting fund cited above were from factory groups, there were five such groups in the autumn of 1940. Before long, there were two more, and in early October, fifty-four new readers of the Daily Worker were claimed, of which twenty-five had come from the factory groups.¹ These gains were small but significant in a town like Coventry, but they do not fully reflect the increased prestige of the Communists amongst the local shop stewards. By using the Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft shop stewards committee to call a district meeting, they had brought the Standard Aero strike to a successful conclusion. A Communist convenor had kept his job, but more importantly, the AWA shop stewards had further enhanced their reputation, and could be relied on to take the lead in district affairs in the future. Using a shop stewards' committee rather than setting up a permanent unofficial committee had another distinct advantage for the CP: they were sheltered from disciplinary action from the local officials and the District Committee. It would have been difficult for either the officials or the District Committee to attack the best organised factory's shop stewards for calling a meeting for the ostensible purpose of improving trade unionism in the town, and they did not attempt to do so. At the meeting of the AEU District Committee held immediately after the second district shop stewards aggregate called by the AWA stewards, the point was minuted that "if our stewards were making themselves responsible to an unofficial body, that they would cease to come under the DC control". Considerable discussion followed,

¹ Party Organisation - Weapon for Victory (1943), pp. 8-9. (M/S)
DW, 9 October 1940.

but no motion was put.¹

It would be entirely misleading to give the impression that most of Coventry's engineering workers were primarily concerned with the victimisation of shop stewards or the negotiation of the Toolroom Agreement in this period. These matters only concerned sections of workers and the shop stewards. In fact, it was difficult for even the stewards and officials to keep their minds on negotiating when a German bomb destroyed the room in which they had^{been} meeting the employers on November 14th, 1940.² The main concerns of engineering workers besides finding enough hours in the day to rest after the exhaustingly long hours of work were whether or not to stop working when air-raid sirens were sounded, how to force employers to take adequate air-raid precautions and last but definitely not least, where to live when they were bombed out of their homes.

The impact of bombing was the main and massive problem. Historians have traditionally concentrated on underlining the devastation caused by the terrible raid of November 14th, but the full impact of the bombing cannot be appreciated unless it is seen against the backdrop of the battering received during the previous month. In the month leading up to November 14th, there were no less than eighteen raids of varying intensity on Coventry, including some daring spot attacks on selected crucial industrial targets.³ One raider was sent, for example, to bomb (in daylight) the Hobson Carburettor shop at the Standard which he only narrowly missed, hitting the paint shop instead.⁴

¹ AEU DC, 25 March, 1941.

² V. Hanna: "Coventry: City Faces Shutdown"; in Sunday Times, 30 May, 1971.

³ Midland Daily Telegraph, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21-23, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30 October, 1, 2, 5, 6, 13 November, 1940.

⁴ K. Richardson, op.cit., p. 81.

The November 14th raid was fantastically destructive, with industrial targets hit hardest of all. 1,600 people were killed or injured during the raid, many of them at work. At Morris Engines, the roof was blown off almost completely, leaving workers exposed to snow and rain whilst at their machines. A large number of people were made homeless, gas and water supplies were completely disrupted, food became extremely scarce, and there was a danger of typhoid.¹

How did the Communist Party respond to the situation in Coventry? It is difficult to answer this question satisfactorily because November was an extremely hectic month in the town, and many things must have gone unnoticed which would otherwise have been recorded. On the surface, it seems as if the CP deployed their resources quite well. They had already pointed out the inadequacy of the town's ARP arrangements during October. On 11th October, the Communist shop steward Bill Warman had chaired a meeting of the Moat's House Residents' Association called to criticise the town's ARP provision. The meeting was indeed justified, because only one local factory (the Coventry Gauge and Tool) had a deep shelter.² The arrangements were defended by George Hodgkinson of the National Emergency Committee.³ These warnings proved a basis on which further action could be built after the November 14th raid. The Trades Council passed a motion at an emergency conference calling on Bevin

¹ Coventry Standard, 30 November, 1940; 13,000 workers were unemployed in the first week after the raid. At work, many workers were employed clearing up the debris, or transferred to other factories. [Lessons of Recent Heavy Air Raids, December 1940, pp. 3-4; 'After the Raids', 30 December 1940. (LAB 8/362)] Twenty-one important factories, including twelve directly involved in aircraft production, were "severely affected" by fire or direct hits, but the shadow factories were unaffected (Calder, op.cit., p. 236, Sunday Times, 30 May, 1971.)

² K. Richardson, op.cit., p. 77, note 8.

³ Coventry Standard, 12 October, 1940.

(who was visiting Coventry) to take a whole number of emergency measures for the defence and welfare of the town.¹ Shortly afterwards, the CP published a short pamphlet entitled Coventry - What Now? It has proved impossible to find a copy of this pamphlet, but it was certainly produced at speed, appearing on December 4th, only a week after the Trades Council meeting.²

There can be little doubt that the CP reaped considerable benefit from their interventions: the People's Convention had strong contingents from the heavily blitzed areas of London and from Coventry.³ It may also provide a partial explanation of the CP's success in trade union terms. It must be admitted that this may not have been because of the specific initiatives taken by the CP in Coventry, which had always been relatively small and ineffective in tenant's agitation (the basis of the CP's ARP work in London).⁴ It may have been at least equally to do with the general mood of questioning of the war which followed the November raids,⁵ and the way which the Daily Worker and the People's Convention fitted neatly into this. In any event, the CP did make some considerable gains through the bombing, so that Coventry, which had only had one signatory of the People's Convention manifesto, was able to send a sizeable contingent to the Convention itself.⁶

¹LAB 10/350. 30 November, 1940.

²DW, 5 December, 1940.

³Home Front, February, 1941 (M/S).

⁴S. Schifferes: "Tenants' Struggles in the 1930's", (Unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Warwick, 1973), pp. 88-89.

⁵Calder, op.cit., pp. 246-259.

⁶Home Front, February, 1941.

The Coventry branches of the CP benefitted greatly, as did the CP as a whole, from the wave of enthusiasm for the Russian entry into the war. Naturally, the figures quoted by the CP themselves must be treated with some caution, but there seems little doubt that the organization in the area expanded tremendously. One estimate states that the CP expanded from about seventy to about one thousand, five hundred.¹ In the first three months of 1942, the Midlands membership quadrupled, according to a contemporary CP publication, which added that a large proportion of these were industrial workers.² In January 1943, the branch had what its secretary, Jack Cohen, called its "first real Annual General Meeting" at which the outgoing city Committee presented a report and a new City Committee was elected. It was announced that the CP in Coventry had grown from seven factory groups and one area group to thirty-three factory groups and five area groups.³ At this time, one of the main difficulties faced by the CP nationally was the assimilation of newly-won membership, and was a problem in the Midlands to an even greater extent than in other areas. Between June and December 1943, for example, membership fell in the Midlands area from 4,323 to 3,678.⁴ The national problems of the CP factory groups in which only a small minority of the members were active, rapid turnover of members and so on, were, by their own admission, particularly acute in this area.⁵ Despite these problems, the CP

¹K. Richardson, op.cit., p. 96.

²World News and Views, XXII, p. 206.

³J. Cohen: "Coventry's AGM" in Party Organisation - Weapon for Victory (1943), pp. 8-9, (M/S).

⁴Strengthen Our Organisation (March 1944), p. 10 (M/S).

⁵Cf. Joe Marshall: "Building a Factory Leadership" in Organise to Mobilise Millions (n.d., probably 1943), p. 4. (M/S).

extended its influence in the local shop stewards' movement. Although the local factory groups had more than their fair share of the difficulties which troubled the CP nationally, their position was not affected by them. On the contrary, they transcended these difficulties. This unusual combination of circumstances must lead us away from an explanation of their developing strength relying on the relative position of local internal party organisation and morale. The two tendencies ran in different directions.

The changed interpretation of the nature of the War offered by the CP after the Soviet Union's invasion had no more perceptible effect on the general tendency for the strike rate to rise in Coventry than it did in the rest of the country. Strikes increased both in number and in size. In 1941, 2,345 working days were lost through eight strikes; in 1942, 7,462 (19 strikes), in 1943, 13,281 (17), in 1944, 18,296 (28), and in 1945, 41,380 (10). (See Clyde, p. ³³⁰ below for similar pattern). What were these strikes about?

In general, the answer is that in Coventry more than in any other district, they were piece work disputes. The picture that we obtain from examining the causes of strikes as recorded in the Ministry of Labour Disputes Books is quite graphic. In Coventry, piece work disputes were much more common than on the Clyde. (See table). In 1941, 30% of strikes were on this issue, compared to 0.3% on the Clyde, and the preponderance of these disputes increased over the next two years: in 1942, 40% in Coventry and 0.5% on the Clyde; in 1943, 67% in Coventry, compared to 3.6% on Clydeside. In 1944, the pattern begins to change slightly, in that disciplinary disputes become more important in Coventry than they had before, but piece work still retains its dominance: 71% compared to 0.04% on the Clyde. Discipline

questions accounted for 3,580 days lost in 1944 in Coventry, compared to 1,800 the year before, nil in 1942 and 630 days in 1941.

TABLE 28

Percentage of working days lost through disputes on different types of wage disputes, Coventry and Clydeside, 1941-45.

	Wages other than p/wk. times		p/wk. times	
	Clyde	Coventry	Clyde	Coventry
1941	33	19	0.3	36
1942	84	30	0.5	40
1943	89	9	3.5	69
1944	20	14	0.004	63

In itself, this analysis of strike figures is of strictly limited use unless we know where they took place. Indeed, even when we know where they occurred, it is necessary to relate the number of days lost to the number of workers in the factory (or, to put it another way, the number of potential strikers). For Coventry, we can approximate to such an equation (which we cannot for the other areas) by dividing the number of days lost through disputes between 1941 and 1945 by the number of skilled piece workers as given in the Toolroom Agreement's Minutes. The resultant table cannot serve as anything but a rough guide to strike-proneness because of its reliance on the number of skilled piece workers as an indicator of the size of the workforces, but it is probably most reliable at each extreme. The results emerge

as follows:

Humber: 59
 Rootes No.2: 20
 Daimler: 6
 Dunlop: 5
 Alvis: 3
 Daimler No.2: 3 Rootes No.1 : 3
 Daimler No.1: 2
 Herbert: 1
 Wickman: 1
 AWA: 0.5
 Standard: 0.3
 Standard 1 and 2: nil.

29
Table 1: Strike-proneness
in the major Coventry
factories, 1941-45.

The great difference between the Humber and Rootes No.2, and the other factories is largely accounted for by a long strike in 1945, but even without this strike, these factories still account for 15,245 of 82,764 days lost in the district. The Humber-Rootes group of factories definitely supply the greatest number of days lost per head, and the AWA and Standard groups of factories the least.

30
TABLE : SHOWING THE AVERAGE HOURLY RATE OF SKILLED PIECE WORKERS AT
THE SEVEN HIGHEST EARNING COVENTRY FACTORIES, From September 1940 to
September 1944.

	shillings
Standard Motor Co.	5.34
Rootes Securities No.2	4.81
Standard Aero Nos.1 and 2	4.77
Armstrong Whitworth A/C	4.42
Daimler No.1	4.39
Rootes No.1	4.35
Daimler No.2	3.97

(Toolroom Minutes)

This relationship is interesting because of the way it correlates with the earnings of skilled piece workers as given in the Toolroom Minutes. Again, it is not claimed that these figures are a completely reliable

indicator of the wages being earned throughout the factories, because they only relate to one group of workers. However, they do represent a fair reflection of comparative piece work values. The gang system used in the Coventry factories cut across skill divisions, and piece work values were the same for all workers in the same gang, irrespective of skill. Their different basic rates would result in different earnings, but these were proportionate to the earnings of the skilled men.

Unlike the situation on the Clyde, the highest earning factories in Coventry were not the most strike-prone. The Standard group of factories, Rootes Securities No.2 and the Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft Baginton factory had the highest piece work earnings for most of the War, although there was obviously a certain amount of fluctuation in earnings from month to month. With the exception of Rootes No.2, they also had virtually no stoppages, as the above table shows.

These less strike-prone factories had two further common features. They were well known for their high levels of trade union organisation; they had made drives for the closed shop on numerous occasions, suggesting that 100% organisation was relatively close for them. Also, they had the most widespread use of the gang system in their production shops.

These factories were also Communist strongholds. By April 1943, the convenors of the two main Standard factories were Communists, and the convenor of the AWA shop stewards declared himself a supporter of the E&ATSSNC in 1944.¹ The fact that these factories had the leading

¹Bill Warman was factory convenor at Standard, Canley, and Harold Taylor was T&GWU convenor. Joe Steels was convenor at the Standard No.2 shadow factory (Banner Lane). All of these men were CP members. Bill Tattersall (convenor at AWA) declared his support for the E&ATSSNC in February 1944 (NP, February 1944.)

Communist shop stewards committees is confirmed by the AEU DC Minutes. In 1943, for example, the Standard Joint shop stewards (which covered all of the Coventry factories) sent two motions to the District Committee: one dealt with the need for a three power conference and the other with the 'friends of German fascism' in Britain.¹ The AWA shop stewards sent a resolution to the District Committee supporting the call made by the Confederation District Committee for a district meeting on the attacks being made on earnings, and in November called a meeting of convenors themselves to discuss the release of Oswald Mosley.² There were only two other occasions that year in which there were clear indications of Communist activity: two motions calling for the affiliation of the CP to the Labour Party from Armstrong Siddeley and British Thompson Houston shop stewards' committees.³ Between July 1941 and the end of 1945, the shop stewards from the Standard factories sent eight motions to the AEU DC, the AWA stewards sent four, whilst no other factory sent more than one each.⁴

Clearly, it was in these factories that the Communists were most confident of their support amongst the rank and file. One solid reason for their confidence was the part they had played in organising workers into trade unions. Another was the gang system.

The gang system was a form of wage payment, and did not therefore originate with the CP, but all the circumstances indicate that they looked on the system favourably, and tried to spread and develop it along certain lines. The gang system appears to have been introduced into Coventry by the management at the Standard Motor Co. at their new Canley

¹AEUDC, 11 May, 14 September, 1943.

²Ibid., 11 May, 23 November, 1943.

³Ibid., 2 March, 1943.

⁴AEU DC, 22 July 1941; 10 March, 12 May, 23 June, 21 July, 11 August, 29 September 1942 2 March, 11 May, 14 September 1943; 18 January, 12 September, 10 October, 19 December, 1944; 2 January, 1945.

plant in 1922.¹ It was both a form of wage payment and a method of organising production. A group of men working on a particular job contracted to perform the job in a certain number of hours, and any time 'saved' was credited to them in the form of bonus. The bonus was divided between the workers according to the number of hours worked and the basic rate of each man.² The work was organised by a chargehand, or 'ganger', who was appointed by the management (though the consent of the gang was usually regarded as necessary) and paid out of the gang's earnings in the same way as any other member of that gang. The ganger negotiated times with the rate fixers. Thus, the system differed from some other forms of sub-contracting like the 'butty' system worked in some coal-mining districts in that the ganger was both work supervisor and worker. He stood to gain the same amount as everyone else in negotiating with the management, and did not simply pay his 'butty-men' as much, or as little, as he wanted.

During the 1920s, this system was used at the Standard Motor Co., at Herberts, and briefly at Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft (in 1927), with some slight variations in its detailed workings. It may also have been used in other Coventry factories in this period. It had some clear attractions for management in a coercive labour market, in that the gang was a self-disciplining work group requiring little external

¹This account of the gang system relies on a number of interviews (with Bill Warman, Harold Taylor, Bill Wellings and others), and on two printed sources: S. Melman: Decision Making and Productivity (Oxford, 1958), which is a study of the system at Standard written from a managerial point of view; Dwight Rayton (pseud.): Shop-Floor Democracy in Action. A Personal Account of the Coventry Gang System (1972), the reminiscences of an old AWA worker.

²S. Melman, op.cit., points out that this led to the extensive use of young workers in the 20s and 30s because of their lower basic rate. (p. 34).

supervision; if a man did not pull his weight, the gang insisted on his removal, he was sacked, and another man taken on.¹ In this sort of atmosphere, gangers tended to be task-masters first and negotiators second, rather than vice-versa. Thus, the gangers tried to increase piece work earnings by intensifying work on the gang, rather than by negotiating better times for the jobs. Several old workers from Herberts (where the system was at its worst from the workers' point of view) told the writer that they remember being sworn at, threatened with the sack and even struck by gangers trying to extract more production before the war.

Under these circumstances, piece work earnings tended to remain fairly static, only moving upwards if more production could be extracted from the gangs. Where the system did not work in this way because the threat of unemployment was less real, the gangers were weaker, or for any other reason, managements quickly became disillusioned with it. Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft provides a case in point. In 1927, some boys there asked to be allowed to work in this way, but the management were only prepared to allow a brief trial. The trial resulted in higher piece work earnings, and was therefore declared a failure.²

These boys had shown the potential of the gang system in a relatively favourable labour market (certain types of skilled labour were still in demand at the factory, as they were throughout the aircraft industry). The system could be made to work in the workers' favour by emphasising the solidarity of the work group so that piece work times could be

¹Melman also cites another advantage: the elimination of craft barriers. (pp. 61-62).

²D. Rayton, op.cit., p. 9.

improved. It was readily evident to all the workers in a gang that it was in everyone's interests to obtain the best deal possible on every job in the gang. In this respect, it was quite different to individual piece work, where each worker was on his own.

As unemployment dropped and workers became more willing to take collective action, the whole weight of a gang could be thrown into a dispute. Behind every small and individually unimportant piece work argument, the rate fixer and foreman could see the possibility of the whole gang taking action. Piece work earnings in these factories could therefore be pushed upwards as better times were negotiated.

Better piece work earnings and the problem of discipline in the gangs were closely linked. As trade unionism developed, the shop stewards tried to push the gangers in the direction of negotiating better times rather than simply using the whip on gang members. One of their problems until the late 1930s was the fact that gangers were appointed by management. By the beginning of the war, this obstacle had been overcome, and the gang system was beginning to work very much in the shop floor's favour. In mid-1940, the MAP's senior technical officer was shocked by the situation he found at Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft:

"This shop is the WORST SCANDAL I have yet come across. Half the men are doing nothing and the other half are doing women's jobs...the shops are in scandalous disorder...lack of discipline. The management is obviously weak."¹

These remarks, whilst they form part of a technical report ostensibly dealing with organisational and productive questions, actually throw light on the effect of the gang system on productive discipline. Gangs were able to determine how much they worked ("Half the men are doing nothing...") and what they did ("the other half are doing women's work"). The consequence was a loss of managerial control ("The management is obviously weak"), leading to a "lack of discipline". In 1938, the stewards

¹ LAB 8/374. Report by MAP Senior Technical Officer, Egerton-Banks, dated June 1940.

had succeeded in establishing the principle that gangers were to be elected by their gangs rather than appointed by management.¹ By detaching the gangers from the managerial structure, the AWA shop stewards created the possibility of bringing them increasingly into their own sphere of influence. Shop stewards and gangers co-operated in negotiating piece work times just as they had before, but the gang members and shop stewards were now in a better position to prevent gangers from exercising managerial powers over workers. As the system spread from AWA into other Coventry factories, the principle of the elected ganger spread as an integral part of it.²

As we have seen, the gang system had been reintroduced at Armstrong Whitworth by 1938. In fact, the workers there had succeeded in persuading the management to readopt it during the early 1930s as the changeover from wood to metal aircraft created serious problems in the organisation of production. The company was therefore temporarily receptive to the idea.³ From AWA, the system spread to other Coventry factories, as aircraft work was introduced and AWA workers taken on. Managements could see that the AWA men knew their job in terms of aircraft work, and allowed them some autonomy in organising it. At the same time, many factories retained large numbers of individual piece workers, and Armstrong-Whitworth Aircraft, Standard and Herberts remained the factories with the most extensive use of the gang system.⁴

¹K. Richardson, op.cit., pp. 114-5.

²Ibid.

³D. Rayton, op.cit., p. 9.

⁴Minutes of a Local Conference held between Coventry Engineering Employers Association and the AEU and CSEU, 15 May, 1945.

The gang system provided an excellent channel through which the shop stewards in the Coventry factories could keep their ears to the ground to hear any rumblings on the shop floor, and take them up before they became earthquakes. At the same time, it allowed them to bring a good deal of pressure to bear on managements without striking, and this was how they were able to resist demands for reductions in piece work prices in some areas, and drive earnings up in others. Both of these points are stressed by Harold Taylor, T&GWU convenor at the Standard Motor Co. for most of the war:

"I liked it (the gang system - RC) because it was a good way of communicating, because it isolated problems that you could have a go at dealing with before it spread, because you went to the gang, the shop steward would call you in. The shop steward would see the ganger, and if they couldn't sort it out they came to the senior shop steward or convenor and they would say: 'Here's a problem.' If I couldn't deal with it, I'd get the committee and say 'Look, there's a problem with this gang here.' And very often we could sort it out. Or if it was a genuine grievance of some importance and significance to the whole of the shop, we'd drag it out and say 'We're having a shop meeting about this, because we're not having this kind of thing.' About some circumstance, even about some problem of rate fixing, or interference with established procedures or restrictions of rights or things like that, and we'd drag it out and then the management retreated and we returned to the status quo." ¹

Shop stewards under the gang system were thus able to be very responsive to their members needs, and at the same time to use the solidarity generated as a result to successfully bring pressure to bear on their managements. As Taylor suggested in the last sentence of his statement quoted above, it was a form of pressure which companies recognised as particularly powerful. What need was there, then, for striking?

¹Harold Taylor, 12 April, 1976.

To summarise the argument so far. Coventry had smaller strikes than the Clyde, because most of them were concerned with relatively minor piece work issues. These strikes did not occur in the better organised factories, but were scattered through the rest of the town, and were most frequent in the Humber-Rootes group. The less strike prone factories were the Standard and Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft, which shared some important characteristics. Most importantly, they were the backbone of the Communists in the local engineering industry; although not by any means the only factories with CP stewards, they were the only ones in which the CP felt sufficiently confident to pass regular political motions, organise meetings, and so on. These factories were well organised in a trade union sense, and had the most widespread use of the gang system. It was this relative strength in shop floor terms which made them less strike prone.

The other side of the coin should now be looked at if we are to go beyond an analysis dependent on a small group of unusual plants (the less strike prone). What features marked off the more strike prone? Were they less well organised, less well paid, and so on?

Some of these questions can be answered immediately. As we can see by reference to the Toolroom Minutes, they were in general less well paid, with the single exception of Rootes No. 2. Like all of the main factories in the area, they used the gang system, but less than the Standard or AWA; they were thus more reliant on more traditional piece work methods. At the Humber, the shop stewards were plagued by an unusually large number of domestic basic rates, and a great variety of work (staff cars, armoured cars, aero engines).¹ As far as Communist

¹John McPhee, 3 February, 1972.

influence is concerned, they were, like most factories in the area, amenable environments for CPers. In January 1945, John McPhee, a young Scottish Communist, became convenor at the Humber, whilst the Rootes No. 2 shop stewards were sufficiently CP-influenced to send in a motion on the Greek situation at the end of 1944.¹ It appears that it had taken the CP longer to arrive in the Humber-Rootes group, but they had finally reached their objective.

A very similar observation could be passed with respect to their progress towards 100% trade unionism, and the two features are probably related since unorganised workers obviously could not elect Communist stewards. At the end of 1941, it was still necessary to hold an organising meeting of one of the largest sections at the Humber, the Aero Engine Test (about three hundred workers), this at a time when the AWA and Standard factories had about 100% and 90% organisation respectively.² The Rootes No. 2 was also a black spot for trade unionism, as we shall see.

This, then, was the main contrast between the two groups of factories, and indeed between the high-earning factories and the others: trade union organisation. Even the most persuasive CP shop stewards held no sway over the unorganised, and they were sometimes reminded of it quite forcefully.

There were several occasions on which shop stewards complained that the unorganised and recently organised were fond of taking strike action. These shop stewards may have been influenced either by their

¹AEU DC, 19 December, 1944.

²Ibid., 4 November, 1941.

Communism or by their conception of trade unionism in making these complaints, but it seems quite likely that their claims had some basis in reality. The two most strike-prone factories in the Humber-Rootes group (the Humber and Rootes Securities No. 2) had no women AEU shop stewards at all during 1943 and 1944.¹ Of course, they may have had a large number of T&GWU women stewards, but later complaints about the lack of organisation seem to point away from such a situation. The men stewards did not seem to be able to control the aggressiveness of the women, even where they were members of the trade union. When they were not, the task was clearly more difficult.

In Coventry, a relatively high proportion of the women employed in the factories were young, single women 'exported' from the North-East and Scotland. Living in the hostels scattered around the town, hundreds of miles away from their families, they tended to have a high rate of absenteeism.² One case in particular was taken up by the local bench, when two girls from Scotland (who became known as 'the two Janes') were sentenced to imprisonment for persistent absenteeism. The case aroused considerable anger in the local trade unions, and two of the magistrates (Sidney Stringer and George Hodgkinson, both out-of-trade AEU members), were summoned to the AEU District Committee to explain their actions.³

¹AEU DC, 1943-44.

²This was remarked upon by a delegation from the Scottish TUC's Organisation of Women sub-committee sent to the Midlands to look into the circumstances of transferred girls in the area. They reported that the main group of girls in financial difficulties was those under 21. They also remarked on the lack of trade union organisation among women in some factories (Organisation of Women Committee Report to the 1943 Women's Advisory Conference, p. 44, in 1943 STUC Report.) (TUC).

³AEU DC, 14 July, 1942.

The women's response was not solely on the level of apathy, however: they also sought collective solutions to the drudgery of wartime work. Single women in particular were active as shop stewards; in 1943, seventeen single women were elected shop steward, only slightly less than the married stewards, with twenty-one. Even in Coventry, where the proportion of single women was high, this seems to suggest an imbalance in favour of the single, 'mobile' women, who were more prepared to take out cards.¹ With such small numbers, the question must remain open, but the Conciliation Officer's reports are quite definite in asserting that the women in general were 'irresponsible'. In September 1943, he referred to a strike by women transferred to the Dunlop over piece work times, and explained it in terms of the fact that they were unused to factory life. In December, he noted that 'indiscipline' was on the increase in the district, and that this was due to the recruitment of people with little or no trade union experience. He went on:

"These new members look to their new alliance with organised labour as a means for promoting quickly their ends regardless often of the merits of their demands or the provisions of the Order 1305 etc..."²

As we shall see in the case of two strikes at Rootes securities No. 2, the women were not simply interested in gaining higher piece work earnings. They were also quite adamant that they were not going to be subjected to 'indiscreet remarks' from supervisors, or any other form of managerial insults, particularly when they had sexual overtones.

¹The national ratio of married to single women amongst women who started work in wartime was, by January 1944, over 5:2. (P. Inman, op.cit., p. 491).

²LAB 10/353, 25 September, 1943.

Even in the piece work disputes, it is possible to see a strong element of intransigence as the women made their mark on the workshop community.

Two strikes at Rootes Securities No. 2 provide typical examples of stoppages by female 'green' and largely unorganised workers. At the beginning of September 1942, the heat treatment section stopped work on a piece work dispute. Heat treatment of components, it should be pointed out, is unskilled work, involving labouring in poor conditions due to the heat and the fumes from the chemicals used. It is therefore quite likely that these workers were new to the factory and quite possibly unorganised, since 'old hands' would try as hard as possible to move on to less unpleasant jobs. For the same reason, there would probably be high labour turnover on the job, as new entrants tried to move off the job and into the machine or assembly shops. It seems likely that this was the background to their refusal to deal with their grievance via a shop steward. They also rejected the advice of other stewards to return to work, but eventually did so after being addressed by a union official who promised them immediate negotiations.¹ In this case, some of the workers involved may have been trade unionists, since they accepted the advice of the official although they had rejected that of the shop stewards. The second strike definitely involved non-unionists, as the convenor admitted to the AEU District Committee that the section (the clutch section) was poorly organised. The strike occurred in January 1943, over an 'indiscreet remark' passed by a supervisor, and spread to the whole of the rest of the day and night shift, despite the claim of the convenor that he had

¹LAB 10/352, 5 September, 1942.

done his "utmost to secure a resumption."¹ One reason for the strike, and possibly a reason for its extension, was low wages on the clutch section (the original strikers).²

Rootes Securities No. 2 was something of a peculiar case, because it contained some of the highest earning skilled piece workers in the district, according to the Toolroom Minutes. At the same time, there was considerable discontent there about piecework earnings. When the Conciliation Officer asked workers there to put their complaints in writing, petitions were received bearing a thousand signatures, and the complaints were "almost entirely concerned with the operation of timing operations and rate fixing".³ It seems likely that the more poorly organised sections were falling behind the skilled piece workers, and that wide differentials were causing problems of comparability within the plant.⁴ Another aspect of the advantages of the gang system is thus negatively brought to light. The gangs, which the stewards constantly sought to enlarge, encouraged the unity of the work group in arguing for better piece work values. On the other hand, where there was more individual piece work, better organised sections could make greater gains (especially if they were organised in gangs and the others were not). If these better organised sections were also skilled, which seems quite likely, they would be an even more

¹AEU DC, 12 January, 1943.

²Minutes of a Works Conference held at Rootes Securities No. 2, 15 December, 1942.

³LAB 10/351. 1 November, 1941.

⁴P. Inman, op.cit., remarks on the tendency for exceptionally wide differentials of this sort to occur in Coventry, p. 324.

acute source of grievance to the others, because their higher basic rates would bring them even greater rewards than the less skilled could gain from the same values.

Rootes Securities No. 2 was an unusual factory in that it combined high earnings amongst the skilled piece workers with poor trade union organisation. There were, however, a number of reasons why the new entrants to factories (of whom a high proportion were, of course, women) and the poorly organised should be relatively combative. Most importantly, perhaps, they entered a situation in which there were great possibilities for piece work bargaining, some of which were inherent in the situation, and some of which had been built up by the shop stewards. But they did so without a great deal of respect for the restraint being urged by many shop stewards. Crudely (and slightly unkindly to them), it could be said that they had the privileges of Coventry piece work without recognising any responsibilities to the stewards who had helped build up these privileges.

During the War, a large number of favourable working practices had become established as custom and practice in the Coventry engineering shops. Taken individually, these changes did not amount to very much, but in toto, they represented a substantial infringement of managerial prerogatives as they existed elsewhere. It is very difficult to compare piece work custom and practice in one district with custom and practice in another. It would be rash, for example, to claim that a certain practice was used in Coventry, but was not accepted elsewhere, because our inevitably incomplete knowledge does not allow such categorical statements. An additional problem is that, almost by definition, these practices arose on an ad hoc basis, and were not systematically recorded. Indeed, managers, even among themselves, often had a vested interest in keeping quiet about them, lest the wrath of the local Employer's Association was vented on them. Any description must

therefore be more impressionistic than is desirable, but the numerical wage data exists to back up the impressions.

The employers were fond of quoting the practices of other districts when negotiating with Coventry trade unionists, and the customary reply was not usually to deny that local conditions were better, but to reject the comparative method. At a Works Conference in August 1940, Stokes, the Divisional Organiser asserted this quite firmly:

"... in a sudden outburst Mr. Stokes said "I want you to understand quite definitely that we, as representing the workers, are not going to have Birmingham's or any other district's conditions introduced into Coventry... we don't care what happens in the rest of the country so that you must understand that quite definitely." ¹

The employers' contention that Coventry's conditions were better (and indeed they improved considerably after 1940), seems correct. One important example was the custom of "putting a job on the floor". All that this meant was that if a piece work job was considered unacceptable to the worker for any reason, he could simply put it to one side.² He might do the job when other work was slack in preference to waiting time, or alternatively, the employer might try another worker or another section, or even, if pushed, sub-contract the work to a small outside shop. Another practice relating to piece work was to calculate piece work times on the basis of a reduced 'hour'. At a Local Conference at the beginning of 1942, the Chairman of the Employers' Association stated that 50 minutes was the standard 'hour' in Coventry,

¹ Minutes of a Works Conference held at Rootes Securities No. 2, 15 August, 1940.

² See, for example, a Local Conference of 1945, at which it was contended by the union that "putting a job on the floor" was custom and practice when a worker's right to do this had been challenged in the sawmill at the Humber Co. (Minutes of a Local Conference, 1 April, 1945).

and therefore, the bonus percentages quoted for Coventry should be increased by one sixth to obtain a realistic comparison with the rest of the country.¹ A further blow for the employers was the extension of the Toolroom Agreement to workers who were not intended to be included in it. Within less than a year of the Agreement's formal inauguration, at least two quite large groups of workers bargained their way into the Agreement: the whole of the Coventry Gauge and Tool works, and the machine tool fitters at the Humber.² In 1943, they were joined by another sizeable group: all the skilled inspectors in the district.³ As the Humber management plaintively noted, their fitters were 'strictly not entitled to it' under the Agreement,⁴ which defined the recipients of the rate as "skilled operators... in... Coventry Toolrooms or skilled men who are transferred from production to toolmaking work in Coventry Toolrooms".⁵ The extension of the agreement meant more than just more money for these men. It also meant freedom from piece working, and less intense work. The employers disliked these extensions of the Agreement not so much because of the extra wages, but more because they led to reduced output.⁶

¹Minutes of a Local Conference, January 1942.

²COVEMPS, 15 December 1941; Minutes of a Local Conference, 6 February, 1941.

³COVEMPS, 26 August, 1943.

⁴Minutes of a Local Conference, 6 February, 1941.

⁵Coventry Toolroom Agreement, 7 January, 1941.

⁶COVEMPS, July 1941.

In addition to these working customs, there was continual negotiation and renegotiation of factory agreements on waiting time, lieu bonuses, merit rates, tea breaks, shift arrangements and so on. Disputes arising out of attempts by managements to repudiate these customs or refusing to negotiate new ones twice led to the threat of district strike action in 1943 and 1944. The first case was when the Humber management refused to renegotiate on a factory basis the existing (1936) provisions for waiting time. A protracted overtime ban failed to move them, and the Conciliation Officer thought there was the chance of district action, but the dispute went to arbitration.¹ In 1944, he again thought it possible that there might be an extension of a strike at Rootes No. 2 over an attempt by the Rootes management to establish that piece work jobs would be worked at time rates if rates were not mutually agreed, but the strike did not take place.² Both incidents showed how important custom and practice, especially in piece work matters, was to the local stewards.

There is another conclusion that can be drawn from these incidents: that although the stewards were clearly concerned with the attacks of an aggressive management (Humber-Rootes) they were not prepared to actually take district strike action. One reason, and probably the most important one, for this limit to their concern, was the considerable growth in size and influence of the CP in the local engineering shops and trade union bodies.

¹LAB 10/353. 5, 12, 19, 26 June, 1943.

²LAB 10/444. 31, March, 7 April, 1944.

The Midlands district of the CP had the largest increase in membership of any district during the months immediately following the entry of Russia into the war, and despite problems of 'paper' membership and a high turnover of members, the area became an important one for the CP nationally.¹ By 1944, a considerable number of convenors and shop stewards were sufficiently close to the CP to attend their regular meetings of shop stewards held at the Elastic Inn in Lower Ford Street. As J.A. Yates noted in 1950: "The Communist shop stewards captured much of the leadership"² In 1944, most of the important plants had Communist senior stewards or convenors: Bill Warman was convenor at the Standard Motor Co., John McPhee was convenor at Humber, Jock Gibson and Bill Wellings were senior stewards for the TGWU in the Daimler parent and No.2 shadow factories respectively, and Bill Tattersall (not a CPer, but a close supporter and keen seller of the New Propellor) was convenor at AWA.³ Beyond their actual members and close supporters, there were a number of shop steward's committees willing to support their initiatives. Thus, in March 1944, the AEU District Committee acceded to the request of the AWA stewards that they circularise the district with collection sheets for the rebuilding of the Stalingrad Telephone Exchange; by the following week, nine convenors and twelve branches had returned the sheets.⁴ Of course, the level of activity asked for was not high, but the response is interesting.

How successful was the CP in translating its strength among the stewards into influence on the district trade union bodies? The Trades Council, a favourite CP stamping ground in Coventry as in other areas, was dominated by the Communists during the war. In January 1941 Bill Warman, at that time a shop steward at AWA, was elected President.⁵

¹ D.F. Springhall: "Fifty Thousand Communists," in LM, May 1942.

² J.A. Yates: Pioneers to Power (Coventry, 1950), p.93.

³ See biographies.

⁴ AEU DC, 14, 21 March, 1944.

⁵ Minutes of the Coventry Trades Council, Jan. 1941.

and the President was a CPer for the rest of the War.¹ The Coventry Trades Council did not, however, play a large part in shop floor affairs; compared with Manchester or Glasgow, it was strictly a talking-shop. Much more important were the District Committees, and especially the AEU District Committee, which was a more authoritative body in its union structure than the T&GWU or CSEU District Committees. During 1942, the CP built on its earlier gains, and succeeded in getting a motion passed calling for the ban on the Daily Worker to be lifted. Of course, calling for the ban to be lifted was quite different from supporting the paper, but nevertheless, it represented a step forward.² By 1943, the District Committee had expanded to its maximum size during the War, with a membership of thirty, and it is possible to identify at least five CPers among them. In addition, Ernie Roberts returned to the Committee in September 1943, after a successful appeal against his suspension from office for twelve months.³ In 1944 and 1945, the left scored a considerable victory when Roberts was elected to the Presidency of the District.⁴

It was far from plain sailing for the CP however. In February 1943, the DC asked the EC to deal severely with anyone involved in unofficial activity, naming the E&ATSSNC.⁵ Also at this time, a General Purposes Committee was set up, which strengthened the hand of

¹List of Presidents in Trades Council papers.

²AEU DC, 3 February, 1942.

³Ibid., 8 September, 1943.

⁴Ibid., 4 January, 1944, 2 January, 1945.

⁵Ibid., 9 February, 1943.

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the local anti-Communist officials. Formally speaking, the function of the Committee was to sift business for the plenary committee. It comprised six members of the District Committee, plus the District Secretary, ex-officio. The CP never succeeded in having more than three members on the Committee, and the District Secretary was therefore continually able to determine what went before the District Committee and what was ignored.¹ The net result was that the District Committee was never decisively wrested from the control of the anti-Communist group. A gap was beginning to develop between the strength of the CP among the shop stewards and their rather weaker position on the AEU DC. One reason, the setting up of the General Purposes Committee, has already been mentioned. But perhaps the most important cause of this disjuncture was the fact that the right wing was organised against the CP. Both Stokes and Taylor had been members of the CP, but had turned away from sympathy for the general aims of the Party. Armed with an intimate knowledge of the local 'left', they set out to combat its influence in the branches and on the DC. This came out in the open during 1945, when a member was brought before the DC for having said that the Committee was "rotten" because it was divided between the Communist and anti-Communist groups. In discussion, the Committeemen had to admit that there was some truth in what he said, but that the groups should be re-named the "Roberts and Stokes-Taylor groups". Incidentally, they also heard that Roberts had been discussing a meeting of convenors to combat the influence of the right wing, an interesting tactic in that it showed where he thought his main support would come from.²

¹Ibid., 23 February, 1943.

²AEU DC, 18 January, 1944.

The situation on the T&GWU DC seems to have been slightly different, reflecting the rather different relationship which the District Secretary, Jack Jones, had with the CP. Jones had been instrumental in reviving the District Committee in the early months of the War, along with his right hand man, the CPer, Jock Gibson. The T&GWU District Committee was thus revived by the left in a way that the AEU DC was not. The same applied to the CSEU District Committee, which was again set up by Jones (who was President) and Gibson (T&GWU representative), who could set the tone of a Committee which comprised the local officials of all the small engineering unions.¹ The CP was thus able to establish its influence on the T&GWU DC more effectively than they were in the AEU. For example, the T&GWU DC passed a motion supporting the CP's request for affiliation to the Labour Party in February 1943,² whereas two motions from branches to the same effect but to the AEU DC during February and March were rejected by a motion of 'next business' on the first occasion and ruled out of order, the next.³

The CP, although contained on the AEU DC by the right wing, consolidated and extended its control of important shop stewards' committees. They used traditional CP methods to strengthen their position and that of the shop stewards, and similar techniques were used elsewhere, but Coventry saw their most extensive and effective application. The left wing had developed considerable strength in the Coventry shop stewards' movement by the end of the war. What methods had they used to build this strength up? Our answer to this question is divided into parts: the first deals with the shop stewards' committees themselves, and the second with links between shop stewards in different factories under the same ownership.

¹J. Gibson, 7 November, 1973.

²DW, 11 February, 1943.

³AEU DC, 23 February, 30 March, 1943.

The shop stewards of the Standard Motor Co.'s main factory at Canley became a model for Communists locally and nationally by their imaginative and effective tactics. Bill Warman, at that time a tough Sheet Metal Workers' shop steward in his early thirties and Communist convenor at the Standard, stresses today that the shop stewards took every care to ensure the involvement of the rank and file in the business of the shop stewards' committee. He described one incident in which the company doctor refused to treat him because he was wearing a hammer and sickle badge on his overall. Warman left the room and reported the matter to the shop stewards' committee, who decided that the doctor must be sacked. The individual shop stewards took their collective decision back to sectional meetings, which endorsed it, and the doctor was sacked by the managing director, Sir John Black.¹

The Standard shop stewards sought to make their modus operandi well known in the district, and they were able to build up a considerable reputation. At the beginning of 1944, an NUVB steward at the Standard reported to his branch committee on the business there, and "gave a very interesting account of the methods the Standard shop stewards and committee have for carrying out their business."²

The shop stewards at the Standard were slightly exceptional in that they combined all the new features of the shop stewards' committees. They had a convenor elected irrespective of union (something the AEU DC tried to avoid, insisting that only their stewards had the right to be elected convenor), a shop stewards' paper and regular meetings between the three main factories. In addition, they had the largest number of women shop stewards recognised by the AEU District Committee,

¹W. Warman, 3 April, 1974.

²Minutes of the NUVB Branch Committee, 7 January, 1944.

with thirteen elected during 1943 and 1944.¹ Of course, other factories may have had more thorough T&GWU organisation amongst the women, but it is quite clear that the Standard had the best AEU shop steward coverage. Also, the shop stewards' committee was one of the few to have a separate youth representative sitting with the shop stewards when matters of special interest to young workers were discussed.²

Many other factories had at least some of these features. Several factories had 'shop' rather than union convenors, and at least four had regular factory papers (Daimler No. 2, Rootes No. 2, and the Humber Bulletin, which later became the Humber Clarion, and Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft).³ Very few of these papers have survived, but it is possible to gain some idea of what they were like from the few extant copies of the Humber Clarion. Printed on glossy paper, it projected a very professional image. Many of the articles were of general political interest (on Russian engineers, for example) and were criticised freely in the letters column.⁴ Special editions were produced (a May Day 1946 copy was brought out in conjunction with the Trades Council) in addition to the fairly regular monthly editions. It seems quite likely that the papers produced for the shadow factories were also intended to cover the main factories, or that these had their

¹AEU DC, 1943-44.

²Ibid., 8 February, 14 March, 1944.

³AEU DC, 18 January, 27 June, 29 August, 1944.

⁴Humber Clarion, July, 1945.

own papers, since they were regarded by stewards as extensions of the main ("parent") factories. If this was in fact the case, then the majority of factories in the district had their own papers, a distinctive feature of Coventry. In any event, there were certainly strong links between the factories through the combine committees.

The combine committees are the most important grouping of shop stewards by the end of the War, and it is worth looking at them a little more closely. They usually represented shop stewards' production committees which had undergone a change in ~~objectives~~ ^{objectives} towards the end of the War. In November 1942, we can see one in action, when the Napier group of shop stewards wrote to the JPC at Sterling metals to protest against the large amount of scrap castings being sent them.¹ Several groups of factories in Coventry had this type of committee: the Daimler and Dunlop factories were two others apart from those mentioned above.²

These committees had other possible uses, which were quite distinct from their ostensible function of improving production. The state of production itself could be used, for instance, to ascertain the chances of success in a piece work dispute, or to find out whether work was being moved from one factory to another. Ultimately, they could be used for the co-ordination of strike activity, as the Daimler combine was in the strike there. By 1945, we can see the shop stewards beginning to feel the need to coordinate with their brothers at other factories under the same management quite keenly. At the Humber, the management complained that some shop stewards from the Stoke

¹COVEMPS, 30 November, 1942.

²LAB 10/444, 7 July, 1944.

factory had "commandeered" a staff car (they were made there) to drive up to Ryton to see the stewards on a matter of common interest.¹

Before concluding the discussion of Coventry by describing two important strikes over redundancies, it is worth taking a mental tea-break to look back and forwards in the analysis. It has been argued that the political leadership in Coventry, in industrial terms, was invested in the group of factories dominated by the CP, which were also the best paid, and best organised in both piece work bargaining and trade union terms. These factories were therefore crucial in orchestrating a unified response to the new problems posed by the arrival of peace. As it happened, the major attacks on jobs and conditions were concentrated on the weaker bodies of workers, and they had to defend themselves with the weapons at their disposal. The strikes showed that these weapons were quite sharp; the combine committees functioned well in exchanging information and co-ordinating action. But even these bodies were inadequate to the Herculean tasks which faced them. The local employers were determined that the wartime inroads on their prerogatives should be wiped off the slate, and that wages should be reduced. They were helped in this by the continuation of wartime legislation which was used in the Humber strike by the newly-elected Labour Government to "hold the ring" for the employers, and by the fact that Coventry's conditions were unusually good. They hoped, with the aid of the Government, to isolate Coventry. They succeeded in this partly because the response in Coventry itself was less than wholehearted. In the end, the Standard factories were cut off from

¹Minutes of a Local Conference, 1 February, 1945.

the district, and whilst the AWA shop stewards strove manfully to perform their traditional role, they were hamstrung by the defection of the Standard.

The narrative has been anticipated slightly, but the second strike, at the Humber, took up where the Daimler strike left off, and the two should therefore be taken together. But first the Daimler strike. The strike was started because of information received by the shop stewards at the Daimler factories in Radford that machinery was being moved from the No. 1 factory and installed at the No. 2 factory, which was then being taken over by the Daimler Co. from the Ministry of Aircraft Production. The work involved, bus engine building, had been developed at the No. 1 factory, and there was now a disagreement over the rates to be paid for the work. Clearly, the management was moving some of the work in the hope of weakening the bargaining position of workers in the No. 1 factory and of imposing lower rates in the No. 2 factory if it proved necessary to move the work completely. Both factories demanded the full wartime piece work times and conditions, which the company refused, insisting on a downward revision of times.¹

A joint strike committee was set up to conduct the strike, including delegates from all three factories. The strikers refused to see the management except through the medium of their committee.² In other words, the issue had immediately broadened into the recognition of the committee as the bargaining agent for the Daimler workers. Had

¹CET, 8 January, 1946.

²Ibid.

this been conceded, it would have represented a massive gain for the shop stewards' movement nationally, because no such committees were recognised by employers anywhere at this time.

This strike had been more or less by way of a protest and only lasted just over a day,¹ but it was only a dress rehearsal for a more serious stoppage just under a fortnight later. Demands were drawn up clearly: the men should be transferred with the work from the No. 1 factory to the No. 2, there should be a "fatigue allowance" of ten minutes in every hour when fixing piece work times, war rates should be restored for inspectors, and the joint committee recognised.²

At the beginning of the strike, the No. 2 factory was still working, but a mass meeting was held there and two days later they came out in support of these demands. On the AEU DC, a motion was carried calling a meeting of shop stewards to express their solidarity with the Daimler strikers.³ Incidentally, it is interesting to note how the balance of forces on the DC stood at this point: for the first time, a motion supporting the affiliation of the CP to the Labour Party was carried at the same meeting.⁴

The joint strike committee ran an extremely active strike, calling frequent mass meetings to explain the developments in the situation to the rank and file: there were meetings on the 24th, the 28th and the 1st of February.⁵ By this time, it seems that the strike committee had agreed to settle for something less than the original demands: no machines were to be moved until after a Local Conference, and piece

¹Ibid., 10 January, 1946.

²Ibid., 22 January, 1946.

³CET, 25 January, 1946.

⁴AEU DC, 29 January, 1946.

⁵CET, 24, 28 January, 1 February, 1946.

work times were to be calculated on the basis of a fifty minute hour at the parent factory only.¹ These new conditions for a return seem to have been railroaded through the strike committee by Taylor and Stokes (who attended the strike committee) with the assistance of Barratt, the right-wing convenor of the main factory.²

Neither the mass of Daimler workers nor many of their stewards were willing to accept the terms.³ A mass meeting rejected them, and soon afterwards, the Daimler stewards decided to call a district meeting of stewards to put their case.⁴ By this time, the Humber was also in dispute over a piece work question, and a speaker from the Humber at the mass meeting had already suggested liaison.⁵

The district meeting of stewards decided to go one better than the steward from the Humber and to call a one-day strike throughout the town in support.⁶ Meanwhile, the Daimler strikers stood firm, refusing a proposed settlement little different from the formula previously rejected by them.⁷ Their persistence was rewarded when the district strike took place on February 6th, and a mass meeting of 6,000 workers heard a number of left-wing speakers. Andy Newman, CP District Committeeman was in the chair, and Bill Tattersall and

¹CET, 26 January, 1946.
²Derek Cox, 18 April, 1973.
³CET, 30 January, 1946.
⁴Ibid., 4 February, 1946.
⁵Ibid., 30 January, 1946.
⁶Ibid., 5 February, 1946.
⁷Ibid.

Ernie Roberts among the well-known speakers. A motion was put for a further one-day strike, and was passed.¹

On February 10th, before the second district strike was due, the employers made a settlement with the strikers. The terms represented a considerable improvement on the original ones. Pre-strike conditions were to obtain at the parent factory, no machines were to be moved and no redundancies announced pending a local conference, together with some slight piece work concessions at the No. 2 factory. Joint negotiations were not conceded.² Ultimately, the Local Conference did not accede to the union's request for no movement of machinery, but piece prices were to be based on fifty minutes per hour.³

The Daimler strike showed the value of combine organisation, even though the committee was not recognised by the company. If the committee had not existed, then it seems possible that the strike would not have started at all. It was the effective exchange of information that led to the problem being spotted. More importantly, when the problem had been discovered, the committee was able to initiate action to solve it.

On a district level, the CP gained a good deal of prestige from their role in the dispute. They had been the initiators of the combine committee, and they were also the leaders of the district strike. Finally, it seemed to give them a new lease of life on the

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¹CET, 11 February, 1946.

²Ibid.

³AEU DC, 19 February, 1946.

AEU DC, where they had been able to have a motion passed calling a district meeting of shop stewards.

We have already seen how the Daimler was by no means alone in having to cope with aggressive managerial tactics. The Humber had been on strike at the same time as them, and over similar issues. But there was an additional element of frustration on the part of the Humber shop stewards, who felt that their management had been especially obstreperous in their dealings with both stewards and officials. The high strike rate at the Humber-Rootes group of factories has already been noted, and from 1943 onwards industrial relations in these factories acquired a particularly abrasive tone. The Works Manager's job went to a Mr. Pryor, who declared that he was not interested in domestic custom and practice, but only in observing the national agreements. Accordingly, he attempted to destroy a large number of these customs, and to encourage the foremen to follow suit. He replied to shop stewards' protests with the remark that if he had wanted his foremen to act as wet nurses, then he would have equipped them with udders. Ultimately, an unsuccessful strike took place for his removal.¹

This, then, was the background to the Humber dispute, but the primary cause of the big strike of 1946 was that hardy Coventry perennial, piece work times, combined with a more recent problem, redundancy. The conjuncture of the two causes is important, because the connection between them was transparently clear to the Humber workers in a way which it was not to the Daimler strikers (for whom

¹Minutes of a Local Conference, 1 February, 1945.

redundancy was less of a pressing problem). Also, the strike was the first large dispute under the Labour Government, which gave it a national significance. The leaders of the strike in the district realised that the nature of the dispute and its timing made it an important test case.

The Humber-Rootes management wanted to time all piece-work jobs as laid down in the national agreement, i.e. to enable a man of "average ability" to earn 27.5% of his basic rate. They were therefore seeking to impose a wage cut of about 100% in most individual cases. During January, a 'go-slow' started in protest. In retaliation, the company announced 1,300 redundancies at their main Stoke factory in February, announcing that this was the prelude to the dismissal of a total of 4,000 of 5,000 workers there. The Humber Stoke factory stopped work, followed by the Rootes shadow factories and the dispersal factory at Tipton, Staffordshire.¹

The Essential Works Order was still in force, so the Ministry of Labour was able, if it wished, to suspend the notices through the Manpower Board, whilst negotiations went on. The shop stewards also instructed the 1,300 sacked to fill in appeal forms against their dismissal and to send them to the Ministry immediately.² Meanwhile, a "Coventry Workers' Dispute Committee" issued a statement declaring that there was no redundancy, and that "the declaration of redundancy by the firm is designed as retaliatory and provocative action."³ The Dispute Committee met as required, and comprised

¹DW, 26 February, 1946.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

representatives from all the main factories. It was chaired by the much-respected Bill Tattersall, convenor at AWA Baginton.¹

On February 25th, it became apparent that the strikers would need the support of this committee, because the Manpower Board announced that the redundancies would not be withdrawn for the one week that the trade union officials had requested to allow negotiations to take place.² The officials decided to contact the Conciliation Officer, who telephoned the Employers' Association. Through his mediation, the employers made an offer of sorts: redundancies announced on or before 23rd February would stand, but those announced after this date were to be suspended, provided that there was a full resumption of work.³ As the Daily Worker correctly pointed out, this did not amount to very much, because about 750 redundancies had been announced after 23rd February.⁴ The stewards rejected the proposed settlement unanimously, stating that all sacked workers would have to be reinstated before work would be resumed. A further meeting of Humber stewards held on March 1 confirmed this resolution and requested the AEU and TGWU Executives to meet the Ministries of Labour and Supply.⁵ They also decided to call a meeting of the Dispute

¹ John McPhee, 14 May, 1972.

² DW, 27 February, 1946.

³ AEU DC, 3 March, 1946.

⁴ DW, 27 February, 1946.

⁵ AEU DC, 3 March, 1946.

Committee to obtain solidarity action in the district. The Committee called a mass meeting of all Coventry engineering workers for March 3rd.¹

The effective leadership of the strike was passing more and more into the hands of the unofficial committee, and away from the local and national officials. Locally, the AEU and Confederation DCs met two of the local Labour MPs, Maurice Edelman and Frank Bowles to discuss "political aspects of the motor industry". In London, the ECs visited the Ministries.² Neither meeting had any material effect on the strike. They may have raised false hopes among a section of the strikers, but they certainly did not deter the Humber stewards or the Dispute Committee from taking militant action.

The Dispute Committee met immediately before the mass meeting of March 3rd, and was attended by representatives from fifteen factories, who pledged their 'full support'.³ Unfortunately, however, the support was not as full as it might have been, because the representatives from the Standard explained that they could not take action in a dispute which did not concern them, because they had reached a very favourable agreement with their management on the questions at issue in the Humber dispute.⁴ The defection of the Standard was a devastating blow to the strikers; to lose the support of perhaps the most respected and well organised shop stewards in the town at this point can only be described as a disaster.

¹DW, 1 March, 1946.

²CET, 2 March, 1946.

³DW, 4 March, 1946.

⁴John McPhee, 15 May, 1972; CET, 12 March, 1946.

The mass meeting of March 3rd took place in the worst imaginable circumstances, since the weather was truly appalling. There was a good deal of snow on the ground, and it was still snowing. This did not deter between six and seven hundred workers (according to the Coventry Evening Telegraph) or three thousand (according to the Daily Worker) from attending the meeting.¹ On the following day, the Dispute Committee met with the Humber shop stewards, heard that the Ministry of Labour refused to intervene on the redundancies, and passed the following motion:

- 1) That the Rootes Group acting through the Humber management is leading a general attack on Coventry wage standards, their insistence on 27.5% as a basis for fixing piece work prices is the first attempt to depress Coventry wages to national level.
- 2) That the Ministry of Labour is declaring 1,300 workers redundant at the instance of the Humber employers and have actively and unjustifiably interfered in a Trade Dispute. It declares that this position is of real and immediate danger to all Engineers in the District and can only be combatted by united and determined action by all workers in the District. It further resolves that decisive action is necessary and calls for Strike Action. To that end, it demands that a meeting of all shop stewards in the District be convened to endorse this resolution."²

The DC of the AEU supported this meeting of shop stewards, and called on the EC to make the strike official.³ On March 11th, the district's shop stewards heard that the Executives had reached a solution that they were prepared to recommend: that those redundant men who had appealed to the Ministry would be reinstated.⁴ This was

¹ DW, CET, 4 March, 1946.

² AEU DC, 5 March, 1946.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 11 March, 1946.

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rejected by the stewards, who reaffirmed that the only basis for a return to work was the unconditional withdrawal of all notices, and a "reasonable" basis for piece work negotiation. They called for an all-out, district-wide strike in support of their demands.¹ There seemed little doubt that they could carry this out, since there were four hundred stewards from eighty-three factories present, according to the Coventry Evening Telegraph, not generally a great user of hyperbole on such occasions.²

The date settled on for the strike was Wednesday, 13th of March. On the 11th, the officials attended a meeting of convenors, chairmen and secretaries of shop stewards' committees, and persuaded them to accept the Executive's proposals as the basis for a return to work.³ The next day, the Evening Telegraph went back on its earlier statement that the stewards accepted the Executive's settlement.⁴ The strike was obviously poised on a knife edge, and the Evening Telegraph was doing all that it could to tip the balance away from the strikers. The day before the strike was due to start, the paper again sowed the seed of doubt in the strikers' minds, when they pointed out that the Standard was unlikely to take part in the strike.⁵

The AEU Executive, when it heard of the stewards' decision to escalate the strike, wired the District Committee instructing the Humber strikers to return, and the rest of the district to stay at work on Wednesday 13th.⁶ The pressure of the EC on the Committee

¹AEU DC, 11 March, 1946.

²CEF, 11 March, 1946.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 12 March, 1946.

⁵Ibid.

⁶AEU DC, 12 March, 1946.

allowed the opponents of the CP to regroup. The Committee passed a resolution that the Executive's decision be communicated to all stewards.¹ On Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, when shop meetings were being held to decide on whether or not to support the strike, the local officials worked "feverishly" to instruct the stewards to keep their members at work.²

Consequently, the mass meeting was attended by only four thousand, and the Coventry Evening Telegraph gleefully displayed the banner headline: "80% IGNORE STRIKE CALL". The Humber shop stewards had the humiliating experience of conducting a "district" meeting attended by less workers than there were Humber strikers.³

The Daily Worker tried to turn the debacle into a success; their first edition the next day called the EC's intervention "timely" and went on to say:

"Had the all-city stoppage taken place as originally planned, in these new circumstances, it could only have complicated the Humber dispute which it was designed to help." 4

In fact, there were no "new circumstances" which justified the intervention of the EC. The district's shop stewards had already rejected the Executive's proposed settlement. What was true was that the CP was unwilling to carry through the strike decision in the face of determined opposition from the national officials.

It is perhaps a measure of the strike's momentum that it continued despite the setback. It was fortunate that it did, because the

¹ AEU DC, 12 March, 1946.

² CET, 13 March, 1946.

³ Ibid.

⁴ DW, 14 March, 1946 (first edition).

strike had a fairy tale ending, complete with 1,400 knights in shining sheet metal. A mass meeting of the tightly organised Sheet Metal Workers decided to call a district strike unless the Humber dispute was settled satisfactorily in the next few days.¹ At this point, the Humber shop stewards saw their chance to move towards an acceptable compromise. They called a city stewards meeting, attended by 112 stewards, who passed a motion asking the District Committees to request their Executives to intervene in the cases of the original 550 workers made redundant to see which of them wanted reinstatement. 254 of them stated that they did, and the employers agreed to reinstate them. The other workers, sacked after the original 550, were to be reabsorbed within three weeks. Negotiations reopened on piece work.²

The Daily Worker carried the Headline: "Humber Dispute Ends with Workers' Victory" when the settlement was announced, and there was a good deal of justification for their characterisation of the outcome.³ The company had been forced to climb down completely on redundancy, and piece work earnings amongst the skilled did not show any decline immediately after the strike.

To the strikers, of course, the way in which the strike had been won was immaterial, and there is no doubt that their dogged defence of established conditions contributed to Coventry's post-War prosperity. Nevertheless, the strike had been won in a curious way. The strike threat by the small but vital group of Sheet Metal Workers undoubtedly swayed the balance of forces decisively towards the Humber strikers, but it was only after the threat of action by the mass of engineering

¹DW, 15 March, 1946 (first ed.).

²AEU DC, 19 March, 1946.

³DW, 20 March, 1946. (first ed.).

workers had been averted. In a sense, although a victory, the settlement was almost gained by sleight of hand, because only the Sheet Metal Workers had the ability to decide the strike apart from the district's workers as a whole. Their intervention was as unexpected as it was effective. Neither the Daily Worker nor the Evening Telegraph anticipated it; all eyes had been on the body of engineering workers.

Finally, it is necessary to summarise the salient features of the Coventry shop stewards' movement during the War before going on to develop comparisons with the Clyde. Coventry had experienced a huge expansion in industrial capacity during the rearmament period, which created a pool of unorganised labour in the town, thus making the national problem of victimisation even more pressing there than elsewhere during 1940. To a large extent, this problem faded into the background during 1941, as trade union organisation improved. The concerns of the shop stewards shifted from being primarily connected with victimisation to being associated with piece work. Comparatively good pre-War conditions were built on via a proportionately large number of small strikes and sanctions taken to improve piece work earnings and conditions. There were two main devices used to power this dynamic: the gang system and the Toolroom Agreement of 1941. These devices were used throughout the district, but their most extensive and effective utilisation was to be found at the leading Communist factories (Standard and AWA). These factories were the best paid and the best organised in trade union terms; they were also the least strike prone. Communist shop stewards had been able to argue against strikes very effectively, because they could demonstrate that the tactic was not needed. In fact, these factories appeared to be proof of the CP contention after July 1941 that strikes were unnecessary in the fight for improved conditions. Strikes

mainly occurred amongst unorganised and poorly organised workers in the latter period of the War, who did not have the respect for the shop stewards who had organised large sections of the workforce previously.

The continual process of trade union organisation during the War gradually reduced the number of unorganised workers, but the arrival of peace stimulated the employers to new attacks on established working conditions through redundancies. Coventry was the only town under consideration here to resist these attacks effectively. Led by a district organisation of shop stewards and by strong combine committees, a large part of the gains made during the War was preserved.

The Communists had been to the fore in all these events at least as much as in any other district, and it is worth looking forward to the history of the Clyde stewards here to say that the oppositional elements were very small and ineffective in Coventry. The CP had led the stewards in the successful defence of an important convenor in 1940 by using a prestigious shop stewards' committee, and this committee was to lead their anti-strike policy in the second half of the War, as it did the redundancy strikes in 1946. This was, of course, one reason for the CP's success. But just as much as this positive explanation resting on their actual achievements, there was also a negative one: the CP factories were almost completely isolated from industrial discontent. Unorganised workers, as the CP had themselves discovered during the 'Third Period', were not the best foundation for building a militant industrial opposition to the existing leadership. Still, the Humber strike put a serious dent in the bodywork of the previously immaculate reputation of the CP-dominated

Standard factories. Over the next ten years, rust entered the dent,
and the district became a stronghold of the right wing.

* * *

MANCHESTER

Unlike the three other districts under consideration, Manchester was not dominated by the engineering industry. The various branches of the engineering industry employed less workers in the town than did the textile industries taken as a whole.¹ The cotton mills were extensive employers of female labour in particular, and it is this that accounts for Lancashire's relatively high proportion of working women (44% in 1931, compared to 39.8% in Warwickshire, the next highest), and relatively low share of domestic servants (11.1% compared to the next lowest, Warwickshire's 14.4%).² This is an important factor when considering the social impact of unemployment in the area; many families could fall back on one of the women's earnings in times of male unemployment, and hope to avoid the Household Means Test.

Diversity of industrial structure probably helped Manchester to avoid the levels of unemployment reached in the North East and Scotland; the monthly average in 1932 was 18.7% compared to Newcastle's 26.7% and Coventry's 15.1%.³ The internal structure of the engineering industry in the town was very diverse: locomotive building (Beyer Peacock and Ferguson Pailin), the motor industry (Fords and Crossley Motors), electrical engineering (Metropolitan Vickers, Ferranti, Salford Electrical Instruments), textile machinery (Mather and Platt, Dobson and Barlow), wire drawing (Richard Johnson's), and machine tools (Churchill Machine Tools) were all well represented.⁴ The town was therefore much less reliant on the more depressed branches of the

¹H. Clay, K.R. Brady (eds.), Manchester at Work (1929), pp. 100-107.

²Fogarty, op.cit., p. 20.

³Ibid., pp. 26-30.

⁴H. Clay, K.R. Brady (eds.), op.cit., pp. 109-115.

engineering industry than the North East and Scottish towns, then, although it was not as prosperous as Coventry.

Working people, perhaps partly because of the poor housing position in the town as well as unemployment, seem to have been quite willing to leave for the South. As we have seen, they provided Coventry with its largest source of immigrants after Wales, and the town's population decreased by 3.4% between 1931 and 1938 to a total of 766,311.¹

During the late 1930s, Manchester benefitted from several Government contracts, and the local engineering industry began to revive. The main beneficiary of this revival was the aircraft firm A.V. Roe, who expanded into several old mills around the town as their existing plant at Newton Heath became inadequate.² They were already laying the foundations of their wartime importance in aircraft manufacture when they were to employ over 35,000 workers.³ The Vulcan Foundry Co. was rescued from likely bankruptcy by a tank contract,⁴ and Fords given an important aero-engine contract.⁵ Metro-Vickers also extended their Trafford Park factory for aircraft manufacture.⁶

The Manchester district's engineering factories were very quiet in terms of strike action between the outbreak of War and the beginning of 1941. It was almost as if the 'Phoney War' atmosphere had penetrated into the class war, and become so firmly implanted there that

¹Fogarty, op.cit., p. 27.

²NP, September, 1937.

³W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 240.

⁴Beaverbrook archive: D/67. Document by J.S. Crawford dated 29 June, 1942.

⁵Inman, op.cit., p. 44.

⁶Ibid.

it could only be removed by a major explosion of militancy like the apprentices' strike of March 1941. Very few working days were lost through strikes: 516 in four disputes, compared to Coventry's 10,646 in six. So struck was the local Conciliation Officer with this state of affairs that he remarked on it four times in only five months, and refrained from tempting fate by proffering an explanation of the emptiness of his 'In' tray. It is difficult to find an adequate explanation of why virtually nothing happened, but there was an air of expectancy in the town during the early months of 1940, which almost turned to relief in the autumn when it was seen that Coventry was to be the object of Goering's fury rather than Manchester, as had been widely expected.¹ Of course, Manchester was bombed from November 1940, but by April 1941, the Southern centres of the aircraft industry had received a much heavier battering than those in the North.² In that month, two girls from the Blackburn Telephone Exchange, Doreen Atkinson (19) and Dorothy Cresswell (20) volunteered to change places with two girls in London for three months, saying: "It's not fair that they should have to suffer all that while we're safe up here".³ Needless to say, they were not followed by masses of engineering workers, but engineers seem to have been willing enough to temporarily suppress their grievances in the interests of the War effort, partly because it seemed that workers in other parts of the country were experiencing what

¹William Rust, in his CP pamphlet "What's Wrong With Lancashire?" (nd., but late 1930s) had expressed this sort of anxiety, during the period in which the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by the rebels in the Spanish Civil War had attracted a good deal of attention.

²Calder, op.cit., p. 236-238.

³Manchester Evening News, 9 April, 1941.

they had themselves expected. The strikes which did occur were not primarily on specifically wartime issues (unless we include the high rate of inflation of the first year of the war in this category).

Three of the four were on wages issues, whilst one was over the sacking of a fitter at A.V. Roe. The strike at A.V. Roe only lasted one day and was ended by the district officials. It is true that on the fringes of Manchester, at Brockhouse Engineering, Stockport, and at Northern Aircraft at Ashton-under-Lyne, there had been much larger strikes over the victimisation of shop stewards, but these had not been taken up by the Manchester stewards as a body.¹

In this situation, the Manchester CP seemed to develop a temporary industrial blindspot. So immersed were they in other matters, that they failed to send in any reports on the strikes that did take place. This included the biggest strike in Manchester in 1940, a sectional strike over piece work at Metro-Vickers lasting nine working days in late October-early November. Why did they pass over this opportunity to help publicise (and thereby gain support for) a strike?

One possible explanation may be discarded from the start. It was certainly not because they did not have the human resources to contact the strikers and to interview them for the paper. Metro-Vickers was in fact one of the strongest CP factories in the district. There were a number of other factories in which the CP was strong: A.V. Roe, which had sent the largest single donation of any aircraft factory to the Rolls-Royce grinders' strike of 1937,² Gardner's Peel Green, where the Communist Arthur Walmsley had fought as AEU convenor for

¹LAB 34/55.

²NP April-May 1937.

full trade union organisation for six years,¹ and Crossley Gas Engines, Openshaw, which sent regular donations to the Worker's Fighting Fund.² There were also several groups of members and sympathisers in other factories, and among the professional middle class. The Daily Worker's Fighting Fund acknowledged contributions from the staff of the Manchester Guardian, a group of medical students, and some workers at the English Steel Corporation.³

Indeed, Manchester was something of an English equivalent of the Clyde as far as Communist culture and activity was concerned. It was at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester in March 1933 that Oswald Mosley had been forced for the first time to close a meeting at the request of the police because of the crowd's hostility towards the Blackshirt stewards.⁴ The Manchester Communists and the humanitarian left generally were later very active in their support of the Spanish Republic. Large meetings were held with prominent Liberals like P.M. Oliver on the platform, engineers worked overtime to send much-needed machine tools and munitions to Spain, money was collected to fill a foodship, and a large body of volunteers travelled to Paris to join the British Battalion.⁵ In the evenings, the meetings of the Left Book Club flourished, with over six hundred registered members.⁶

¹ See biography of A. Walmsley, p. 588.

² DW, 19, 26, 30 November, 1940.

³ Ibid., 7 August, 3 October, 1940.

⁴ R. Skidelsky: Oswald Mosley (1975), p. 353. See also pp. 388-9, an account of the interruptions from left-wingers during the meeting.

⁵ Manchester Guardian, 15 August, 1938.

⁶ W. Rust: What's Wrong With Lancashire?, loc.cit.

Many of these people retained an interest in Marxist ideas despite Gollancz's sharp disagreement with the CP over the nature of the war, and could still be seen browsing through the extensive stock at Collett's Hanging Ditch Bookshop during 1940.¹ At the end of July, 1940, the CP was able to hold an impressive meeting to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the foundation of the CP. It was attended by three thousand people, who donated £327 to Party funds.²

It was this high level of support for the CP in Manchester that led the CP to decide to hold the People's Convention at the Free Trade Hall. Their plans were thwarted at the last minute by the Luftwaffe, who first damaged and then destroyed the Free Trade Hall during the mid-November raids. Either an alternative venue had to be found in Manchester, or the host town changed.

Up until late November, when it was decided to switch the Convention to London, Bill Whittaker, the District Organiser, worked frantically to co-ordinate the Party's work on the council and in the trade unions.³ The Labour councillors and other left-wing dignitaries could be mobilised comparatively easily, since they only had to sign the manifesto, but the shop stewards had to be persuaded of the importance of enlisting workers' support. D.N. Pritt, the leading figure in the Convention campaign, visited Manchester to stress the importance of the Convention and to explain precisely what was required. A small room was hired,

¹E. Frow, 3 December, 1974.

²DW, 30 July, 1940.

³Ibid., 7 December, 1940.

but it soon became clear that the stewards were eager to help, because Pritt was hardly able to find any room to stand by the end of his speech.¹

All this helps to provide us with the answer to the question posed earlier in relation to the Party's inactivity in the industrial field. Jack Owen, the Councillor, engineer and Daily Worker reporter, was working at Vickers-Armstrong and organising support from four other councillors in Manchester and Salford.² Nor could the Metro-Vickers stewards themselves do very much in this direction: whilst the dispute was going on, the leading trade unionists in the plant were organising support for a mass meeting to elect delegates to the Convention. The Worker praised their activities, and the praise was well-deserved: six hundred engineers attended the meeting, heard Jack Owen, Bill Rust and the Reverend Etienne Watts speak, and elected twenty-five delegates.³ Meanwhile, shop stewards at Gardner's and A.V. Roe followed suit.⁴ If they had been disappointed that the Convention had to be moved to London, it did not show.

These activities may have distracted the CP shop stewards from publicising a strike in their own back yard, but they did not prevent them from continuing their tradition of organising in the trade union branches. They had not yet succeeded in taking over the AEU DC, but they were soon able to obtain much better results than they had done only just over a year previously. In March 1939, the DC had refused to support a strike at Gardner's Peel Green works. The strike was the

¹D.N. Pritt: Autobiography, vol. 1, From Right to Left (1941), pp. 247-8.

²LM, November, 1940.

³DW, 12, 17, December, 1940.

⁴Ibid., 11, 20 December, 1940.

culmination of a long drawn out battle to organise the factory, and focussed on a demand for the removal of a non-trade unionist on the drilling section. The shop stewards pledged their support to the strikers, but the DC said that it could "neither condemn nor condone" the strike.¹

At this time, Eddie Frow, already an experienced trade unionist, was shop stewards' delegate to the District Committee, and he was joined by a young intransigent of a shop steward from Metro-Vickers, Hugh Scanlon. They were the only two members of the Manchester DC of the AEU to support the People's Convention, but they were able to push a resolution through calling for the removal of Chamberlain, the formation of a 'People's Government', the conscription of wealth and the nationalisation of key industries, and one calling on the EC to see that the Factory Acts and adequate rest periods were observed.² By December, they were able to go beyond resolutions and to get the DC to support the mass meeting called by the ETU Committee (prompted by the left-wing District Secretary, Jenkins) in protest against the refusal of the Engineering Employers to grant the national pay claim.³

The CP was no less active on the Trades Council, but it came under some heavy fire from the Labour Party delegates which all but sunk it without trace. The defeat was all the more heavy for the fact that the Manchester and Salford Trades Council was a body of some influence and prestige. It had been involved in an engineers' strike in 1931,

¹Eccles and Patricroft Journal, 24 February, 3 March, 1939.

²DW, 8 August 1940.

³Ibid., 2 December, 1940.

had organised substantial financial help for the wiredrawers' strike at Richard Johnson's between 1935 and 1937,¹ supported the 1937 apprentices' strike, and was later involved in engineering strikes in 1942 and 1943.² The continuous involvement of the Council in engineering disputes was a reflection of the relative immaturity of shop floor organisation. In Coventry, where the shop stewards were stronger, the Trades Council played little part in any strike during the 30s³ (although it did support the apprentices in 1937) and when an inter-union problem was raised by a delegate from Armstrong Whitworth's in 1942, he was told to refer it to the shop stewards' committee.⁴

During the last months of 1940, the CP made strenuous efforts to secure the support of the Trades Council for the People's Convention. In December, matters came to a head when it appeared likely that they would succeed.⁵ The General Secretary of the TUC attended and managed to persuade the delegates against such a course. Trouble then arose over the nomination of Tom Brown of the National Union of Clerks as President for 1941 because it was pointed out that Brown was a member

¹ Mick Jenkins: Time and Motion Strike, Manchester 1934-7 (Our History series), Autumn 1974, p.23.

² Reports of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council, for 1931, 1937, 1940, 1942, 1943.

³ See also the list of affiliated branches in the Report for 1930. No less than twenty AEU branches were affiliated. In 1930, the Coventry Trades Council hardly existed, because it was split between a CP "Provisional Industrial Council" and the rump of the Council proper. (Minutes of the Midland Bureau of the Minority Movement, 21 December 1929, 22 February 1930).

⁴ Minutes of the Coventry Trades Council, 2 April, 1942.

⁵ DW, 23 December, 1940.

of the Society for Democratic Aid, a proscribed organisation under the 'black circular'. His nomination was refused on the casting vote of the President. The TUC then decided to suspend the Trades Council, and a meeting between the non-CP delegates and the TUC decided to expel eleven members.¹ Of course, some of these delegates later reappeared, but the anti-CP faction did not take this lying down, and they threatened to secede in 1943, when motions for the opening of a Second Front were being proposed.²

Up to this point, the tempo of strike activity in the local factories had been very slow, and served only to reinforce the already established pattern of left-wing activists working through their branches and district bodies rather than on the shop floor. The CP shop stewards had used their influence on the shop floor to the full in support of the People's Convention, but in the process had done less than they might have done to publicise the strikes which did take place in 1940. They continued their work on the district bodies, and on balance made headway, since their successes on the ETU and AEU DCs must outweigh the defeat on the Trades Council. Even the Trades Council setback, which was admittedly quite comprehensive, had occurred because of the apparent imminence of their carrying the day, and only then through the intervention of the TUC itself.

The Manchester apprentices' strike of March-April 1941 changed the whole atmosphere of non-militancy which had characterised industrial relations in Manchester up to that point. The strike was remarkably

¹L. Bather, "A History of Manchester and Salford Trades Council" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Manchester, 1956), pp. 210-212.

²Labour's Northern Voice, January, 1943.

solid, and over seventy thousand working days were lost (twice as many as in all the other wartime strikes in the district added together). The apprentices showed how district action could bring results, and how difficult it was for the trade union officials to bring them under control in the face of such militancy. It required the first prosecutions under the Order 1305 to end the strike.

The apprentices' grievances were initially the same as those of apprentices all over the country: an inadequate share of an already small national pay award to the adult workers. The Clyde apprentices had taken the lead in recognising the need for a national response, and had travelled south to call for strike action in support of their demands. Barrow struck almost immediately, and the Scottish lads went on to Manchester, where they met apprentices from Metropolitan-Vickers. It was agreed that they would stop work on the 19th March, for the Clyde demands.¹

The Metropolitan-Vickers apprentices stopped work as they had promised on the 19th, but they returned the following afternoon on the advice of the local officials, who told them that a national application for an advance was under way.² By 26th March, it appeared as if the strike would peter out in Lancashire, as the Barrow lads returned to work that day, and there were just seven hundred strikers left, in Rochdale. The Rochdale lads had waited for the outcome of the national negotiations, and when they heard it realised that it was

¹LAB 10/379. 22 March, 1941.

²Ibid.

inadequate in one important sense: Lancashire apprentices in their first year would lose money if they were paid at 25% of the adult rate.¹

The Rochdale apprentices travelled to Manchester to point this out to their Manchester counterparts and, in the words of the Conciliation Officer, to 'stir up trouble'.² They certainly succeeded in stirring up some trouble, too, because they managed to persuade the apprentices at A.V. Roe to come out, and to hold a mass meeting to decide on further action. The meeting heard the Rochdale lads, and decided on striking. The rest of that day and the morning of the next, the apprentices worked hard to bring the other lads out as quickly as they could. Shouting in to their friends at work, visiting them at home on the evening of the 27th, and meeting them at the gates during the dinner break the next day, they asked them to attend another mass meeting.³ The meeting was attended by three thousand, and heard Kenneth Warburton, secretary of the strike committee, explain fully the reasons for the strike and urge them to only listen to their committee. Several other lads spoke, including one Fred Withers, who proposed that the employers be allowed a week to "think it over", but the meeting rejected his proposal.⁴ By that evening there were nine thousand lads on strike, and the local officials were concerned. They held a meeting at which they tried with the backing of the AEU DC to get the strike called off,

¹LAB 10/379, 29 March, 1941.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Trial report in Manchester Evening News, 8 April, 1941.

but they were howled down. Since the officials had failed, the Conciliation Officer saw no other way of ending the strike than by prosecuting the strike committee under Order 1305. Gaining the approval of the Ministry, he had them charged on the Friday night.¹ The strike was ended, and on the following Wednesday, the local employers agreed to negotiate locally on any apprentices inadequately covered by the national agreement.² Probably because the strike had already ended, the six members of the strike committee were bound over.³

The keen activism of the apprentices and their willingness to use the district strike weapon threw into sharp relief the passivity of Manchester's adult engineers. Although the adults had not played any great part in the dispute, the lessons in terms of the effectiveness of district action were certainly taken to heart by a significant group of stewards.

Within days of the apprentices' strike ending, we have the first indication of the Conciliation Officer's concern with an unofficial district body of shop stewards, the Manchester Shop Stewards' Council. The cause of the activity was the sacking of some sheet metal workers from Northern Aircraft, Ashton-under-Lyne, who could not find work in the Manchester district because they had previously struck work, and had earned themselves a collective reputation as 'troublemakers'. The shop stewards' council called a meeting, where it was decided that the sheet metal workers should withdraw all dilutees in the sheet metal shops until the men were found work in the Manchester district

¹LAB 10/379, 29 March, 1941. MEN, 4 April, 1941.

²MEN, 8 April, 1941.

³LAB 10/379. 12 April, 1941.

(and they were adamant that this did not include Barrow, to which isolated town the Conciliation Officer had already kindly offered them a one way ticket). If withdrawal of dilutees did not have the desired effect, then all the sheet metal workers in Manchester would have to strike. In fact, the threat was quite sufficient, as all the men were placed.¹

The incident is interesting because it shows that the district's shop stewards did not feel themselves able to offer any practical assistance at all to the Northern Aircraft men, let alone a sympathetic strike. The sheet metal workers were advised to work through their own tight-knit craft organisation. The Shop Stewards' Council could see clearly what was required, but was not able to put it into practice. The Conciliation Officer was still able to write in November 1941 that:

"We have not so far heard very much of the unofficial shop steward movement in this area." ²

The Shop Stewards' Council had obviously not acquired much of a reputation in the 'Imperialist War' period.

The Manchester shop stewards had been troubled by victimisations like their opposite numbers in Coventry, as the small A.V. Roe strike and the Northern Aircraft affair had shown. However, they had been much less successful in defending themselves. Why was this? It was probably not because of the AEU DC's attitude towards unofficial bodies; the committee did not (unlike the CSEU DC) publicly oppose the apprentices' strike. Part of the reason must be the low level of domestic strike

¹LAB 10/379. 12, 19 April, 1941.

²Ibid., 1 November, 1941.

activity, which can in turn be related to the very poor state of trade union membership in the engineering factories in Manchester.

Manchester's state of organisation contrasted starkly with that obtaining in Coventry. By the end of 1940, there was not one single Coventry factory without a shop stewards' committee. Before the first group of shadow factories had been built in 1937, the Midland stewards had been steadily eating into non-unionism in every major factory, and had passed the stage of using the Trades Council to set the ball rolling. In Manchester, on the other hand, the Trades Council was still initiating organising drives. In the autumn of 1937, the Secretary of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council, Jack Munro, told the Manchester Guardian that:

"There was certainly good ground for such an effort, as there was an enormous number of workers... outside the unions." ¹

Nor was Munro referring only to textile factories and the like; sizeable engineering works like Salford Electrical Instruments and the internationally infamous Fords were hardly touched by trade unionism at this time. As Royal Ordnance Factories sprung up at the beginning of the war, the overall situation deteriorated. At the beginning of 1943 (when Fords had at least agreed to negotiate with union officials and was not therefore strictly an 'open shop'), ² the Conciliation Officer reported:

"Another surprising feature of our work just now is the number of quite large establishments where the workpeople are unorganised.

¹ Manchester Guardian, 11 September, 1937.

² This was as a result of pressure exerted by the Ministry of Labour in late 1941 (LAB 10/379: 11, 27 October).

The reason offered very often is that the employers will not allow trade union membership. We had a deputation this week from one factory making shells where there are various skilled workers in addition to the women operators and we are told that there are no trade unionists in the whole establishment." ¹

This situation persisted throughout the war, despite the gradual improvement in trade union membership which undoubtedly took place. In mid-1947, a trade union questionnaire circulated to all the sizeable engineering factories in the area revealed that only eighteen of the fifty-eight factories had shop stewards' committees.² It is clear that shop steward organisation was in a parlous condition throughout the war, and that it was not a matter of weak shop stewards' committees, but of entire factories remaining untouched by trade unionism. The reaction of Coventry or Glasgow shop stewards to the Daily Worker's revelation must have been a mixture of amazement, horror and gratitude for not having to work there. Why did such a situation exist?

One set of explanations derives from the industrial geography of the area. Manchester was a sprawling conurbation then as now, stretching about twelve miles from Eccles to Ashton-under-Lyne and about fifteen from Heywood to Altrincham. About sixty large engineering factories and a much greater number of smaller ones were scattered all over Manchester in a quite different pattern to that obtaining in districts of comparable size like the Tyne and the Clyde.

¹ LAB 10/380. 27 February, 1943.

² DW; 15 August, 1947.

On the Clyde, for example, it was possible to travel along the river and to pass the gates of the main yards and marine engineering shops almost without turning a corner. It is hard to imagine the skilled trade unionists of the nearby factories and yards like Beardmore's (Dalmuir) or John Brown's (Clydebank) allowing a trade union blackspot like Singer's at Clydebank to remain unorganised throughout the War. Men from the yards mixed with their fellow workers in the pubs at dinner and along the road home at night. On the other hand, it was quite possible for an isolated Ordnance factory to remain under the shadow of non-trade-unionism in Manchester. Active trade unionists were obviously concerned, but for the majority of workers it was a matter of less urgency; out of sight could often mean out of mind.

The geographical difficulties were compounded by the large number of medium and small factories in the district. Firms like A.V. Roe, for example, took over several old mill buildings and used them to disperse their manufacturing capacity to avoid the dual risks of extensive damage from German bombs and the hardly less 'restrictive' inroads of militant shop stewards. A.V. Roe's acute management had taken special care to isolate the well organised sheet metal workers from the others.¹

Another reason relates to the diversity of Manchester engineering when compared to Coventry. Different types of engineering meant different relationships within workshop communities, and different methods of wage payment. These circumstances could obviously pose

¹NP, September, 1937.

problems for the semi-skilled, as they could for even the skilled men who formed the largest group of organisers. For example, a toolsetter from Metro-Vickers might move or find himself transferred to one of the Royal Ordnance Factories which mushroomed in the area during the first year of war. In his old factory, he could establish himself as his operators' guide through the workshop jungle, and initiate new entrants to trade unionism quite easily. He could help them with the piece work system by arguing with rate fixers from a thorough knowledge of the jobs, machines and individual piece work. At the Ordnance Factory, his experience would not be very relevant. Piece work was on a group basis, with 'lead rates' fixed before a final rate was assessed to eliminate 'loose rates'. Machinery was extremely modern, and dilution therefore very well advanced, so that he would find himself the odd man out even when amongst the men. At one North-Western ROF, for example, two-thirds of the workers were women, a high proportion, but of the one third men, only one in fifty was skilled. The factory in question was unorganised.¹ Alternatively, he might have to contend with work at one of the Ford factories, where the old recipe of day rate and intensive supervision was still being used by the management to stave off the advent of complete unionisation. Work there was very intense. It was no wonder that the Ministry of Aircraft Production was pleased with Ford. Not only had they broken all production records (on Rolls-Royce engines!), they had also avoided 'bribing' their workers with high piece work earnings.² There was little scope for the would-be

¹ DW, 9 March, 1943.

² AVIA, 9.145/107. Internal memo, dated 24 July, 1944.

shop steward here.

Diversity, then, was the hallmark of Manchester engineering, and it was a considerable obstacle to overcome. In Coventry, a relatively small group of trade unionists could move from factory to factory organising workers, but Manchester reminds us that it was not as simple as that even for the Coventry men. Workers are not simply 'organised'; the trade unionist has to establish himself with the other workers, and he has to master the job and the system of wage payment if he is to be able to choose his moment for drawing workers into the union. Moreover, the process had to be as rapid as possible. New entrants to the factory could be organised without great difficulty, but once they had spent some time there, and become used to being 'nons', the problems associated with recruitment were raised to a much higher level. In short, workers had to be shown the value of trade unionism, and quickly. In Manchester, this proved rather more difficult than in Coventry.

At this point it is perhaps worthwhile making a slight digression to consider the special difficulties which the Royal Ordnance Factories posed for trade unionists, since the North-West had more than its fair share of these new plants. In fact, thirteen of the twenty-one engineering ROFs were located in the North-West and the North-East, and within these regions, Manchester had more than the Tyne.¹ In addition, the filling factories also employed engineering workers on a wide range of manufacturing and maintenance tasks.

Several of the ROFs' peculiar features have already been noted: they were often isolated (especially in the case of filling factories), employed a very low proportion of skilled men, and they had their own

¹W. Hornby, op.cit., p. 133.

very 'tight' system of piece working. There were other aspects which made ROFs poor environments for trade unionists. Probably the most important of these was the fact that as soon as they were set up, the management held elections for Whitley Works Council representatives, for which all workers, unionists and 'nons' alike, were eligible. These Whitley men were primarily messenger boys for management. The Daily Worker gave one example from a North-Western ROF. The representatives reported to a meeting of 700 workers that canteen arrangements were to be altered, and that "It did not matter whether the men agreed to the hours or not, the scheme would be carried through". Only three men voted in favour, and four voted against, with the majority abstaining in disgust. The result of the new arrangement (at least, as the Daily Worker told the story) was that some workers were completely unable to get home from the isolated factory after having eaten in the canteen, and had to shelter in the local police station.¹

There were other aspects which must have made life difficult for trade unionists. The atmosphere inside the ROFs was one of "Go To It". The great majority of the ROFs were built in a crash programme in the first eighteen months of war, and they did not have any established workforce at all. Therefore, there could not be any traditions of trade union militancy in the factory. Of course, the same applied to the Coventry shadow factories, which soon developed a distinctive form of militancy of their own. But these factories were even more dominated by women labour than the shadow factories, and the skilled men in a much smaller minority. The ROF managements were thus able to establish the tone of industrial relations

¹DW, 1 September, 1940.

better than the Coventry employers could. Moreover, the private companies were felt to be manufacturing for profit, whereas the ROFs were in existence to provide munitions. A general sentiment that companies were 'on the fiddle' whilst wanting a 'war on the cheap' fuelled the fires of militancy in the private sector, but were absent in the ROFs. Perhaps this was why they provided the Daily Worker with many of its more genuinely sensational articles on Stakhanovite feats of production, like one praising workers at a North-Western ROF for trebling their output in a management-inspired campaign.¹

Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 soon led to a wave of enthusiasm for the resistance of the Red Army amongst Lancashire workers, just as it did in the rest of Britain. Recruitment into the CP branches and factory groups was not quite as large as it was in the Midlands, but neither were the difficulties they had to face in the form of strike action so acute. It will be argued that Communist influence inside the factories was rather less solidly based than it was in Coventry, but that skillful handling of the few important strikes which did take place ensured that no opposition to the CP developed.

The second half of the war saw an increase in the strike rate in Manchester engineering factories, on about the same scale as in Coventry. Between July 1941 and the end of 1945, 68,643 working days were lost, compared to 64,453 in Coventry. A slightly lower proportion of these strikes than in Coventry were on piece work issues: 20,953. Most of these (16,500) were lost through one strike at A.V. Roe in 1944,

¹DW, 9 March, 1943.

but the majority of the rest of the strikes were concerned not with the timing of operations as in Coventry, but over the implementation of bonus schemes of one kind or another. Schemes were introduced during 1942 to enable time workers to approach piece workers' earnings, and for the piece workers themselves, to ensure that they were not able to capitalise on 'loose' rates and so on. During 1942, six of the seven piece work strikes were over these systems, but difficulties were quickly ironed out and there were only three more strikes on this type of issue for the rest of the war. If we subtract these strikes from the total together with the A.V. Roe strike (which was over the Award No. 326, i.e., not really a piece work issue) then we find that only three of the piece work disputes were over times, amounting for less than 10% of the total number of days lost in the district.

With the possible exception of A.V. Roe, strikes did not cause the CP stewards to lose any sleep at night; they were either short, well-contained protest affairs as at Metro-Vickers, easily solved like those for the introduction of bonus systems, or isolated domestic strikes of little importance to the rest of Manchester. It was only at A.V. Roe that there could be any suspicion that strikes were running at a high enough level to take them out of the control of the CP shop stewards. If this were true, then the A.V. Roe group might provide the soil in which an opposition to the CP would grow. These factories, particularly the Woodford one, were citadels of Communist power amongst the shop stewards, and they contained some of the best paid workers in the Manchester district.

Manchester was nothing like as well paid as Coventry, and piece workers would have been better off in the best of the Clyde piece working factories. Consequently, Manchester's engineering workers were less than enthusiastic about reports in the newspaper that to be

a munitions worker was to be the holder of an especially well-paid sinecure. One aircraft worker, who signed himself 'WP' was sufficiently annoyed by the publication of the Report of the National Committee on Public Expenditure in the local press in 1941 that he wrote a letter to the Manchester Evening News on the subject. The Committee found that the average weekly earnings of the highest paid men in an aero-engine factory that they had visited were £7, whilst about one hundred men earned £11-£12 and twenty earned £12-£13. 'WP' replied that "It is all piffle." He said that where he worked, skilled men were earning £3/14/- per week of 47 hours, plus piece work bonus of between 5 and 30/-. He went on: "Where the £7 to £14 per week comes from I personally - along with thousands more - would be delighted to know." He speculated that the committee had been so far out because they had accidentally examined the managerial staff's weekly salaries.¹ There is some evidence that 'WP's' view was rather closer to reality for most engineering workers than that of the Committee on Public Expenditure.

By 1945, toolmakers at A.V. Roe's Newton Heath factory were earning 109% bonus, which was based on the earnings of the skilled piece-workers there under the National Toolroom Agreement.² This simply bore no relationship to the earnings of equivalent workers in Coventry, where the district average piece work bonus had been 225% over four years previously.³ There was a large number of examples of Manchester workers objecting to their low earnings when they came into

¹ MEN, 30 May, 1941.

² MG, 6 April, 1945.

³ Minutes of a work's conference held at Rootes Securities (Coventry) No. 2, 15 October, 1941.

contact with their Coventry counterparts. Two interesting instances occurred in early 1943. Several skilled men were transferred from Armstrong Siddeley's Coventry factory to their Manchester plant, where the men were amazed to hear of their visitors' wages, which were, as the Conciliation Officer noted, "very much in excess of what is paid in this area". The Armstrong Siddeley men accordingly made a claim to bring their rates up to those obtaining in Coventry.¹ A second case involved one of the lowest paid factories in Coventry, George Wilson Gas Meters, where the management had offered their workers a 25% increase in wages, twice as much as they proposed for their Manchester equivalents. Understandably, the Manchester men were not amused, and applied for the same increase.²

Average wages in the ROFs had always been lower than in private industry, although a small proportion of highly skilled men could earn more than they could outside.³ At the Chorley ROF, to the North-West of Manchester, for example, operators were earning 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ ("and sometimes even more", as the historian of the ROFs put it), which was only equivalent to the national average of 1937!⁴ Earnings were successfully held down in these factories by a cunning system of piece work payment under which provisional times were rigidly policed, and a certain production target reached before bonus was paid at all.⁵

¹LAB 10/380. 6 March, 1943.

²Ibid., 27 March, 1943.

³British Labour Statistics Historical Abstract (DEP 1971), Table 63.

⁴I. Hay: ROF (1949), p. 94. M.L. Yates: Wages and Labour Conditions in British Engineering (1937), p. 138.

⁵I. Hay, op.cit., pp. 93-4.

A comparative survey of piece work earnings would be incomplete without some mention of waiting time values. Waiting time (i.e. time spent waiting for materials, for toolsetters, millwrights and so on) was not covered by national or even district agreements, and was normally assessed on a custom and practice basis even during the war. The Essential Works Order introduced another element into domestic bargaining on waiting time, because employers considered themselves entitled to enforce the payment of time rates only under the clause which guaranteed workers their time wages provided that they reported for work each shift.

In Manchester, this attempt by the employers to minimise waiting time payments was largely successful, mainly because of Clause ten of the 'Manchester Agreement' (see pA12), which stipulated that waiting time should be paid at time rates. In Coventry, on the other hand, waiting time seems to have been around 50% at the Daimler factories, the Alvis factories and the GEC. The difference that this made to earnings was considerable, as waiting time was quite common in the munitions factories throughout the war.¹

In Manchester, it is much more difficult to establish precisely which factories were the highest earning in the district. This is partly because the general level of earnings was low, and there were therefore less articles in the local papers quoting the highest pay packets they could find. Another confusing element is introduced by the relatively low differentials between factories, which makes it difficult to separate one factory from another in terms of earnings. In addition, it only really makes sense to compare earnings at

¹Minutes of Works Conferences held at Daimler No. 2 (18 November, 1941), Humber (18 November, 1941), GEC (15 June, 1943).

approximately the same period, since hours, basic rates and piece work values were constantly changing.

Taking 1944 as the basis for comparison, it appears that the highest earning factories were averaging about 100% over the basic rate. The top factory was probably Vickers-Armstrongs, where 3/- per hour was paid for fire watching (which suggests that the piece workers were on well over 100%).¹ Metro-Vickers was probably slightly less well-paid, as skilled men there claimed a rate of 3/- per hour in February 1944, when they changed from piece work to day rate.² For an average male engineer's week of 53.3 hours,³ this would have given them £7/14s/8d.; equivalent to about 90% above the basic rate. At A.V. Roe, piece workers were earning slightly more, on 109% (equivalent to over 3/- per hour or over £8 per week).⁴ These three factories, then, all had skilled piece workers earning around 3/- per hour or more, or about eight pounds a week for an average week of over fifty hours.

The top skilled men in the ROFs were probably paid more than this (they had traditionally had higher rates for their most highly skilled men), but the piece workers in these factories probably earned less than their counterparts in private industry. The difficulty here is that the ROFs had few skilled piece workers; they had been designed

¹ Interview with Eddie Frow, 3 December, 1974.

² Ministry of Labour Gazette, July, 1943.

³ British Labour Statistics Historical Abstract, Table 84, LAB 34/59, February, 1944.

⁴ MG, 6 April, 1945.

with the maximum dilution in mind, with piece workers and highly skilled versatile setters. It is therefore almost impossible to compare like with like in this case, but piece workers earned about 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ %.¹

Skilled men in other factories earned slightly less than in other privately run factories. At Armstrong-Siddeley, the lieu rate for skilled men was 65% in 1943, and was therefore probably still slightly below the highest factories in 1944.² The Ford factories were definitely lower paid than the rest, using flat day rate as they did. Top tradesmen there were only earning £8/3/1 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. for a week of forty-five hours in 1949, five years later.³

It is possible to state from this evidence that the top three factories (Metro-Vickers, Avro and Vickers-Armstrong) were slightly ahead of at least some of the other factories in the district. These factories (along with Gardners, for which no evidence is available) were the great CP strongholds. Vickers-Armstrong was especially prominent as a Communist factory, with a factory branch of about five hundred, and the first factory paper in the area.⁴ But the correlation between high earnings and the strength of the CP which was so clear in Coventry is rather less vivid in Manchester.

¹ See p.

² LAB 10/380. 6 March, 1943.

³ DW, 22 September, 1949.

⁴ Cf. two excerpts from an interview with Eddie Frow (3 December, 1974):
 "I always remember one evening, Norah Jeffery was coming, and I wanted to see Norah about something, and I went in to a meeting of the Vickers Armstrong factory branch that she was speaking at, and, oh, there must have been a couple of hundred there, and that was just an ordinary factory branch meeting...."

In Metro-Vicks, they had a bookshop in an air-raid shelter - not just books, I mean they had a whole array of stuff. They used to come from all over the factory there, at various times (they could do things in working hours then). I don't suppose every worker, but those who sold the lit. they'd come from their departments, and see what there was, and take stuff and take it back to their department...."

Manchester's low earnings and relatively loose grip on the conditions of piece working contrast markedly with wages and controls in Coventry. It is worth pausing here to ask why this was the case, in order to understand the anatomy of piece work militancy the better. In the smaller factories, and those shops to which extensive dilution had not yet penetrated, there is a simple explanation for the lack of militancy: piece work was a relatively new phenomenon. None of the strikes over the implementation of bonus systems were in the semi-skilled sections of the large factories (with the possible exception of one at Salford Electrical Instruments in 1945). They were all in small factories or amongst groups of skilled workers like patternmakers who were not accustomed to piece working at all. These workers were unable to acquire the techniques of piece work bargaining overnight, and although they were sure to make advances, they were well behind in the race.

However, this explanation is insufficient to account for the relatively low level of militancy which underlay the low piece work values in the larger Manchester aircraft factories, where piece work was well established and known by the operators. The main explanations lie in the importance of factors specific to Coventry: the gang system and the Toolroom Agreement, but to cite these is still to beg the question. The gang system would never have spread so rapidly, the TRA would never have been necessary (and the possibility of a Manchester-type agreement never ruled out) in the absence of a wide stratum of workers who knew how to exploit piece work to their advantage. An illustration of this point occurred at a North-Western aircraft factory in 1943, when a group of men demanded a system of pooled bonus, but soon afterwards had to demand its withdrawal because they found that although the piece work values had not been reduced, they were earning less. These men did

not appreciate that one important element in the gang system was the organisation of work, and that a number of men put together did not equal an effective gang.¹

What was it, then, that marked off Coventry's piece workers? It was a combination of their previous work experience, and the lease of life which the immigrants to the town gave the dormant tradition of semi-skilled trade unionism. During the late 1930s, and the first year of the War, there was a good deal of immigration into the Coventry district of miners and shipbuilding workers from the depressed areas. These men were accustomed to piece working and were able to adapt to the system with ease. These immigrants had some knowledge of piece work, but this did not in itself distinguish them from the native Coventry engineering workers. Their real contribution was a new spirit of aggression, largely exercised on the shop floor through the rapidly expanding T&GWU. These men contributed greatly to the underlying motive power behind Coventry's continual drive towards better piece work earnings and conditions.

Manchester did not have any counterparts to these Coventry immigrants. Immigration to Manchester in the late thirties had been roughly balanced by emigration, and in any case the munitions factories were not being built and taking on labour at anything like the Coventry rate. In addition, semi-skilled trade unionism was not solely the preserve of the T&GWU as it was in Coventry, where the NUGMW was unknown in engineering.² This was bound to have a stultifying effect on semi-

¹ LAB 10/380. 22 October, 1943.

² An NUGMW pamphlet of 1923 shows that at that point, the union had no members in any Coventry factory. The pamphlet gives the rates it negotiated at various factories for machine operators where it had members, and quotes rates for factories in Glasgow, Manchester and Newcastle. (NUGMW: Engineering Industry: Types of Machines Operated and Wages Paid. 1923. Nuffield College, Oxford, Library).

skilled shop stewards, because the NUGMW did not regard shop stewards as altogether an unmixed blessing, and safeguarded themselves by appointing them. These stewards were not therefore solely accountable to their members, and this was a brake on the day-to-day battles on piece work prices.

The second great wave of entrants to the munitions factories of the two towns, the women who began to inundate the factories from 1941 onwards, was quite similar in the two areas. One remark from the Coventry Conciliation Officer referring to their indiscipline has already been quoted, and the opinion of his Manchester colleague was very similar. He referred in 1943 to the cause of strikes as being the influx into the industry of those with "no traditions, no background and no sense of discipline".¹ These workers were about as militant as their sisters in Coventry, but the direction of their militancy was different, being not so single-minded in their determination to push up piece work prices. This was because they came into a different workshop situation, and adapted themselves to a different atmosphere.

Finally, there was an important local agreement of long standing in the Manchester district which meant that the Coventry custom of 'putting a job on the floor', which was an important tactic there, could not be evolved among the district's piece workers. This was the agreement commonly known as 'The Manchester Agreement', because it laid down peculiar conditions for piece work bargaining. This agreement was first signed in June 1918 and was slightly modified in April 1937. Its most important clause was clause five, which laid down that piece

¹LAB 10/260. Reports of Proceedings of North-Western Conference of the Ministry of Labour, 6 September, 1943.

work values should be determined by the individual worker concerned and the management, and then, failing agreement, by shop representatives and management. If the second stage failed to agree, then "The work in question shall then be declared as and done as day work". In other words, either side could 'declare' day rate was being worked.¹ This provided managements with the ability to force a worker to accept day rate if they thought that piecework prices were becoming too high. At the same time, if workers declared day rate in order to slow down production and coerce managements in that way, they were forcefully reminded of the large earnings difference which existed between day rate and piecework however poor. Thus, the general frame of reference was set by the day rate.

* * *

The Manchester Communists were very active in their attempts to step up production in the middle of the war. Of course, they were playing their part in a national campaign, but they went about it with more vigour than the Midlands district. On the first Sunday after the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Fairey shop stewards called a meeting of all shop stewards in the district to discuss the implementation of a production campaign, and attracted seventy one delegates from forty factories.² From then on until the end of the war, a group of

¹ LAB 10/257. Emmerson to I.R. Dept. (7 August, 1943). Memo of Agreement between the Manchester District Engineering Employers' Association and the Manchester District Joint Committee of Engineering and Kindred Trades (11 June, 1918; modified 26 April, 1937).

² LR, September, 1941, p. 141.

delegates from shop stewards' committees met once a month at the Thatched House pub in Piccadilly.¹ The pages of the Daily Worker bear witness to their zeal in carrying their campaign to the workshops. At the height of the production drive during the first three months of 1943, they sent in nine full-length reports on their work on the home front, compared to only one from the Midlands.²

All kinds of methods were used to boost production, but there was usually some attempt to link the battle in the factories with the battle at the front. At one factory, the stewards held an 'Africa Week' in support of the Lancashire Fusiliers in North Africa. During the week, red lights were fitted adjacent to every section, and a flashing red light went on when the production target for the shift (set by the Ministry of Aircraft Production) was not met. A women's section, light turning, failed to reach their target for two shifts, but achieved it on the third, and when the red light changed at the end of the shift, were applauded by a 'rousing cheer' from the heavy turners, all skilled men.³ At another factory, twenty meetings were held to devise slogans to be posted up to help output. A good deal of poetic ability was thus brought to light:

"Your Time to Aid Russia is from Buzzer to Buzzer"

"Ten Minutes for Tea, Not a Five O'Clock Spree"

"Wanted: Time and a Half, Not Half Time."⁴

But the winning slogan was "Absence makes the War Grow Longer".

Simultaneously with these drives, and inextricably bound up with them,

¹ E. Frow. 3 December, 1974.

² DW, 11 January; 2, 3, 10, 11, 15 February; 6, 9, 16 March, 1943 (Midlands: 10 March, 1943).

³ Ibid., 11 January, 1943.

⁴ Ibid., 16 March, 1943.

the continuous thrust towards increasing Party membership and influence continued. The beginning of 1943 saw a frenetic programme of CP propagandising around the local factories. A tour of factory gates sold eight thousand copies of a new CP paper, the East Manchester Workshop Clarion (a four page paper carrying a cartoon from the Daily Worker on each page). The same burst of activity brought fifteen dinner-time meetings in eight days, (eight in factories never contacted before, leading to the formation of two new factory groups) and 'kerb-stone classes' in Communist Philosophy, and a series of Sunday film shows with Russian films like 'Lenin in October'.¹ At the same time, numerous campaigns were started on issues of local importance: one in Moss Side concentrated on the difficulties experienced by mothers when children at a local school had to start walking a long distance for their midday meal when the ARP took over one of their buildings.²

Nevertheless, as every seasoned Party member would have recognised, it is important to see the limitations of the CP's work in the district. These limitations were no fault of the Party members themselves, but they do remind us that a high level of activity along the lines laid down did not always solve more deeply rooted problems. Production drives, for example, did not seem to have any more impact on industrial relations than they did in the rest of the country. In early 1943, for example, the Conciliation Officer was exasperated to find that a production week, in which the stewards had "played a very active part"

¹ Frank Allaun, "Some Propaganda Ideas", in Sharpen Our Weapons (1943) (M/S).

² Moss Side Starts a Local Campaign, in Party Organisation. Weapon for Victory (1943) (M/S).

had been followed by a go-slow by thousands of workers, resulting in a "serious" loss of production.¹ The stewards at this factory had evidently felt sufficiently confident to organise a production drive, but many Communists must have found themselves in much weaker positions. They might be working in unorganised factories, or factories in which Party groups had been set up relatively late and on a comparatively flimsy basis, such as those which were formed from the factory gate meetings mentioned earlier.

There is some evidence to suggest that although the CP expanded its influence in Manchester in the latter years of the war, it did not penetrate as deeply into the workshops as it did in Coventry. One important indication comes from a CP literature^{-selling} competition held over a six-month period during 1943. Lancashire failed to qualify for inclusion in the top three districts, largely because of its poor factory sales, whereas the Midlands did very well in this field, with AWA Baginton top of the national league, registering a total sale of 3,622 CP and non-CP publications.² Manchester was also much more thinly covered by factory papers. Although it had the East Manchester Workshop Clarion, it had only one other factory paper during 1943 (Vickers Armstrong's Factory News), which was joined by AC/DC, the organ of the Laurence Scott Electromotors shop stewards in 1944.³ Of course, this may not be an exhaustive survey (and one or two papers appeared right at the very end of the war), but it appears that the district was nowhere near as well-covered as Coventry. The local CP compensated for their relative lack of success in the factories by their work in the localities

¹LAB 10/379. 17, 23 April, 1943.

²Strengthen Our Organisation (1944) (M/S).

³I am grateful to Mr. Eddie Frow for showing me these papers.

(the Moss Side campaign on children's dinners for example) and in the Labour Party (during 1942, they sold 12,500 copies of The Case for Affiliation, far more than any other district).¹ But this is not our central concern, although it is of course impossible to seal off their success in these fields from their relative failure in the other; a contact made in the Labour Party might well also be an important shop steward (like Bill Abbott, Vice-President of Newton Heath Labour Party and shop steward at A.V. Roe and later convenor at Vickers Armstrong).²

The example of the Manchester CP reminds us quite forcefully that the growth of the CP during 1942 and '43 was not by any means solely or even mainly based on their industrial activity. The weakness of the local Party's work on the shop floor was apparent when compared to Coventry, yet their membership had expanded almost as much (and had stayed more stable at a time of high turnover). Many CPers remarked at the time that the basis of new members' recruitment was flimsy, because it revolved around enthusiasm for the role of the Red Army and the Soviet Union in the fight against fascism. Since industrial

¹Organise to Mobilise Millions (1943) (M/S).

²In making these points, it is important not to allow the comparisons to obscure the general trend. The Manchester CP was large and influential inside the factories, just as Communists were all over the country, even though they had not been outstandingly successful when looked at under a microscope. Two quotations from an interview with Eddie Frow remind us of these facts:

"Well, it's true to say that after the attack on the Soviet Union, there were some fabulous size CP meetings. I'll tell you the most striking thing I remember. There was once a Communist Party rally, and I remember one of our shop stewards at Vickers-Armstrongs. I met him out in the street, and I said to him "Are you going this afternoon?", and he said "Aye," and he pulled out a bloody great wad of notes. Now how much there was, I've no idea, but this was what he'd collected in the factory to be handed up at this meeting. It was certainly an astronomical sum of money...."

"We once had this meeting at the King's Hall, it'd hold six or seven thousand, and they had these areas roped off to hold six or seven hundred, one for Vickers Armstrong's, one for Metro-Vicks., one for this factory, one for that factory, and they'd organised contingents from these factories - they weren't coming from the factory obviously - but they'd bought their tickets in these factories, and they were coming...." (E. Frow, 3 December, 1974).

militancy was no longer a prerequisite for a prospective Party member, it was possible for the Manchester CP to compensate for their weakness on the shop floor by hyperactivity in the branches, Labour Party ward meetings and localities.

During 1943 and '44, that is, in the period of comparatively good trade union organisation and high demand for labour, the pattern of militancy in Manchester matched the Coventry model quite closely. Disputes over piece working arrangements and other questions drew threats of district wide strike action by the shop stewards. The CPers in particular were forced into a 'brinkmanship' tactic of bringing a large amount of force to bear on a problem to ensure a satisfactory solution, whilst trying to avoid having to actually take such action. By and large, they successfully teetered along the tightrope, and thereby avoided strikes breaking out which went beyond their control. Any atomic opposition which sprung up was not allowed to develop a molecular nature; oppositionists remained individuals rather than groups, as the CP remained firmly in control.

Discontent amongst Manchester's engineering workers focusing on the terms of piece working reached a peak during these months, and was especially strong in the well-organised and well-paid aircraft factories. In mid-1943, an example occurred at A.V. Roe's Woodford factory when the management invoked the Manchester Agreement and declared day rate on one section. The workers involved sat down at their machines, and they were backed by the shop stewards, the vast majority of whom were CPers.¹

¹LAB 10/380. 30 July, 1943.

The AEU DC intervened at this point, and called a special district meeting of shop stewards, which recommended a continuation of the strike, and promised their support. Accordingly, the Woodford stewards told their management that they could expect a district wide strike if the matter was not resolved before the end of the annual week's holiday, which was just about to be taken.¹ In the interim, the Conciliation Officer contacted the AEU Executive and asked them to agree to a Government inquiry binding on both sides. The EC accepted, and the inquiry found in favour of the workers, who were allowed to continue at their old times.²

The other dispute which was thought sufficiently important to draw another threatened district strike took place over the operation of the Relaxation Agreement. The cause of the threat shows that Manchester's stewards were still interested in the problem of dilution, which certainly did not arouse similar interest in Coventry at this stage of the War. The strike was caused by the introduction of two unskilled men on to coremaking at the foundry of Craven Bros. A meeting of shop stewards promised district action in support, but this was averted by the District Officials, who after a rough passage at a mass meeting persuaded the men to return to work to allow negotiations to begin. A Works Conference decided to remove the two unskilled men.³

The Conciliation Officer was understandably worried by the success of two threatened Manchester-wide strikes in less than two months,⁴ but the Communist shop stewards had chanced their arm about as far as they

¹LAB 10/380. 6 August, 1943.

²Ibid., 6 and 13 August, 1943.

³Ibid., 20 August, 1943.

⁴Ibid.

thought they could. Up to a point, the threat of large-scale stoppages reflected the growing strength of the stewards on the factory floor; they had felt unable to make a similar threat in 1941. At the same time, even supposing that all the district's stewards supported big strikes in 1943, it might have been difficult for them to have kept any strike solid outside of the well-organised factories. In fact, they would not, of course, have had the full support of all the district's stewards even if only for the reason that the CP's leadership would have been forced to exert pressure in the opposite direction, much as they had done in the Tyneside shipyard strike only a few months earlier.

The Communist shop stewards must have heaved a collective sigh of relief when their bluff was not called on the Craven Bros. dispute. The employers had suffered one defeat at their hands already through this tactic, and a second was quite surprising so soon afterwards. The Manchester employers had a reputation for their solidarity, which had shown itself from 1851 through to 1922. It was unlikely that they would continue to tolerate these threats, even if the Ministry of Labour would. The obvious way of bringing the shop stewards to heel was by calling their bluff. Thus far, the CP stewards had remained within the fold, but a large-scale stoppage would have meant the wrath of the Daily Worker and the New Propellor being vented upon them, not to mention that of Ernie Bevin and the Ministry apparatus.

As in Coventry, an employer's attempt to revert to day rate brought the threat of a local strike. Piece work once again showed how potent a cause of disputes it could be in both areas. It was to become more and more the key issue in Manchester as the war continued, although it coexisted in the minds of the stewards with the old concern over dilution.

The last two large strikes of the war were fought on piece work issues, and the stewards became more and more responsive to pressure from their members to resolve the whole nexus of problems surrounding piece working. Both strikes were in A.V. Roe's factories; as in Coventry and elsewhere, the aircraft industry's widespread use of piecework combined with a rapid rate of technological change stimulated frequent disputes.

The first episode occurred at the end of 1944, when war production was beginning to slacken off slightly, and employers were seeking to contain any late advances that workers might make before the return of peace time conditions. The strike started at the Woodford factory in October 1944, after well over a year's negotiations concerning the National Arbitration Award no. 326. The strikers demanded the retrospective payment of the difference between the amount they had actually been paid on piece work bonus without the award's £1 consolidated into the basic rate and what they should have been paid with the £1 consolidated. The company had conceded the principle with respect to jobs timed since the award, but refused to concede it on times agreed before the award (which were presumably the majority). When the award had been made, the company had adjusted all piece work values downward, to compensate for the award's increase. The stewards demanded that the old times be restored, and retrospective payment made.¹

One thousand five hundred production workers at Woodford took the initiative in striking, and they were soon joined by eight hundred at Newton Heath.² The Conciliation Officer blamed the 'strong Communist

¹Socialist Appeal, December, 1944.

²Ibid. LAB 34/59.

influence' at Woodford, and was soon confirmed in his view when the CP threatened to spread the dispute throughout the 30,000 workers employed by A.V. Roe in the North-West.¹ The strike continued to spread, despite the recommendation of the district officials and the AEU DC that it should end.² On the Friday night after the strike began, the officials addressed a mass meeting of strikers to try to secure a return, but their advice was rejected in favour of waiting to see the result of a meeting of the A.V. Roe combine committee which was taking place that night.³ At nine o'clock the next morning, the combine committee also recommended a return pending negotiations, which was accepted by the strikers.⁴

On the following Monday, a Works Conference was held, which reached an agreement on the basis of the company's acceptance of the consolidated rate and the union's agreement that times should be revised. The agreement did not cover the demand for retrospective payment.⁵ The Combine committee recommended this settlement to the strikers, factory by factory.⁶ The Woodford men "harboured some feeling" against it, and rejected the recommendation, demanding that the old times should be allowed to stand.⁷

¹LAB 10/493. 31 October, 1944.

²Manchester Guardian, 31 October, 1 November, 1944.

³Ibid., 4 November, 1944.

⁴LAB 10/493, 6 November, 1944. M.G., 7 November, 1944.

⁵SA, December, 1944.

⁶LAB 10/493. 6 November, 1944.

⁷Ibid., 9 November, 1944.

Under this new pressure, the combine committee reconsidered their position, and decided to back the Woodford men with a full combine strike if required. Siddall, the Divisional Organiser was confounded by their decision, but succeeded in wringing some further small concessions from the company.¹ He then returned to the combine committee with the new settlement, and a letter from the EC, "couched in very strong language", which told the combine committee to accept the agreement or return to national negotiations. The whole committee, including the Woodford delegates, decided to accept Siddall's new deal.²

However, the strike was not yet quite concluded because the Woodford stewards had some difficulty in persuading their members to accept their settlement. The Conciliation Officer confirmed that they made "a very strong effort to secure acceptance", but it was in vain. One worker at the mass meeting spoke vehemently and successfully against the stewards, and a motion to accept the offer was rejected. No decision was taken regarding strike action, because although the motion had been defeated, the stewards would not contemplate striking.³ Ultimately, the dispute was referred to arbitration.⁴

The strike provides several important insights into the relationship between the stewards and their members in Manchester. Once again, the stewards were pushed into threatening combine action, but they retreated (as the Coventry stewards did during the Humber strike)

¹LAB 10/493, 10, 18 November, 1944.

²Ibid., 24 November, 1944.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 29 November, 1944.

in the face of strong opposition from the Executive and district officials. The rank and file had shown a great deal of persistence in their militant stand against the management's interpretations of the award, and this had provided the motive force behind the combine committee's success in continually extracting better offers from the company. However, the CP stewards were eventually prepared to be pushed no further, and they refused to hear of strike action at the last mass meeting. One last point is worth making: the long process had given rise to at least one man who was prepared and able to swing the mass meeting at Woodford behind him, despite the strong opposition of the stewards. Clearly, flexibility in the face of strike action had been the best policy for the CP stewards in the A.V. Roe group, because it was evident that the rank and file were rather disenchanted with their leadership as soon as this flexibility was seen to have quite finite limits. As the Communists themselves appreciated so well, if the rank and file was behind a man, then that man could sway a meeting even though he was just an individual without a steward's card.

The A.V. Roe group of factories continued to be the storm centre in Manchester, with another important strike taking place throughout the combine in 1945 over the reductions in piece work earnings that were taking place as a consequence of the general contraction of war industry. Once again, the shop stewards were propelled into an extension of the dispute through the militancy of the rank and file, but they had learned the lesson of the 1944 strike, and this time they remained firmly ensconced in the driving seat. The stewards had formulated a set of proposals which they thought would appeal to the company almost as much as to the workers, and which revolved around the central idea of the abolition of piece work and its replacement by a flat rate for all workers based on piece work bonus of 100%. These

proposals were rejected by the management, and between Friday, March 23rd and Tuesday 27th, workers at the No. 1 shadow factory began to walk out. On the Wednesday afternoon, a mass meeting was held, and Washington, the Oldham District Secretary, persuaded them to return. However, their return was very short-lived, and the next day the whole factory was on strike. The combine committee now seized the initiative, and decided to call the rest of the factories out after the Easter holiday for two days only, the 5th and 6th April.¹

The mass meeting on the 6th April has been touched on earlier, in chap. 6 p.192, where the insistence of the strikers that war work was not being carried out at the factories was pointed out as an important argument used to defend their action. The steward who used this argument at the mass meeting in Piccadilly also used another argument which showed that the strikers were desperately concerned with the erosion of wartime standards. He reminded the strikers that "the sky was the limit" on piece work earnings at the time of Dunkirk, but that:

"We have to make some show now or we shall be right down at the bottom and living on a starvation wage as soon as peace is declared." ²

Another speaker rejected the whole idea of piece work, on the basis that it was impossible to time a man down to the last second, adding that the men in the forces would want to return to much better conditions than those which were then being forced on workers.³ It is clear that the A.V. Roe shop stewards thought that there was a good deal at stake in their battle to abolish piece work and to maintain standards, and yet they limited the duration of the strike to only two days, opting to return to work on day rate until their demands

¹SA, mid-April, 1945.

²MG, 7 April, 1945.

³Ibid.

were conceded. It does not seem likely that they forced the management to accept their terms, since nothing more was heard of what would have constituted a unique agreement in the aircraft industry at that time.

The redundancy question did not provoke any reaction in Manchester until 1947, which is outside our period, but it is clear that it took longer for the workers in the area to draw up the battle lines for a 'last ditch' stand against rackings. During the last months of war, there were three strikes for 100% trade unionism, but two of these occurred in smaller factories and did not connect with the dispute at A.V. Roe. In March, Mitchell Shackleton, Patricroft struck successfully to enforce 100% trade unionism, and Metro-Vickers took similarly successful action that August.¹ In November, another strike at Francis Shaw, Openshaw failed to force the company to take on only fully-paid-up trade unionists (a unique precedent would have been created had they won).² A lack of co-ordination was evident in the uneven timing and demands of these strikes when concerted action on one case (as occurred in Coventry over the Daimler and Humber disputes) might have yielded better results.

There was definitely an atmosphere of passivity in the area in the face of redundancies which has to be explained. The Manchester Guardian carried an interesting item towards the end of 1944, describing the run-down of an aircraft factory in the Manchester area, where between 1,000 and 1,500 workers were being made redundant. All contracts for the factory were to run out by March 1945, when it was to close. Complete closure represented an unusually serious blow to jobs; usually the great difficulty with organising to resist redundancies

¹LAB 34/60

²Ibid.

was the fact that some workers, usually a majority at any one time, would be assured of keeping their jobs, and would be less enthusiastic about striking than the potentially unemployed. In this case, the normal difficulty did not arise, yet their response was to "pull in their belts". The Manchester Guardian noted that there was a considerable falling off in the demand for luxury goods, and drink in the local pubs. Pubs were now open at all the legal hours, whereas they had previously had to close early to conserve supplies. As the Guardian approvingly continued: "The provident workers have been preparing for a rainy day". Their only sign of rebelliousness was a declared intention to present a petition to the Lord Mayor, but it is not clear whether even that was carried out.¹

It was pointed out earlier that Coventry's strikes against redundancy were exceptional, and it would not therefore be necessary to explain why other districts did not take similar action, but Manchester's combination of passivity in the late war years with militant district strikes in 1947 requires some specific treatment. The combination cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of the poor trade union organisation in the area, because we have seen that even well organised aircraft factories were not willing to set the ball rolling. It seems more likely that the key is to be found in the attitudes of the women who had been sucked in to the factories in the war years. If they did not want to stay in engineering after the war, then it would have been difficult for the male engineers to persuade them to make a stand over redundancies simply to safeguard the latter's organisation and conditions. When the women had gone, it may have

¹MG, 3 November, 1944.

proved possible and necessary for the men to fight alone.

The wartime survey quoted earlier on the attitudes of women towards post-war employment seems to bear out an interpretation along these lines. The survey showed that textile work was popular amongst Lancashire women. Textiles had the highest proportion of women nationally who wanted to stay on at work after the war (44%), together with engineering (also 44%). Where the women in the two industries differed was in what industry they wanted to work after the war. Engineering had easily the highest proportion of any industry (26%) who wished to leave their wartime employment, whereas textiles had one of the lowest (7%). The other main source of jobs in Lancashire was obviously considerably more popular with women than engineering. Textiles, where work was cleaner and the work community more congenial to women, created a positive pull away from the engineering factories.¹

Measured simply in terms of working days lost through strikes, Manchester was about as militant as Coventry during the war, but if a few large strikes (those involving the apprentices and A.V. Roe workers) are subtracted, then only a very few lost days remain. There was no groundswell of sectional militancy covering a large number of factories as there was in Coventry. Industrial disputes were especially conspicuous by their absence in the first eighteen months of war, when the district was almost completely strike-free. In these circumstances, the local CP turned its attention towards the preparations for the People's Convention, going so far as to neglect to report to the Daily Worker those small strikes that did take place, preferring to use their influence in the factories in the more overtly political direction.

¹INF 1/289 Survey on Attitudes of Women to Post-War Employment (n.d.)

The apprentices' strike transformed the industrial scene. The apprentices breathed new life into the local shop stewards' movement, and revived the idea of district action as a useful weapon. Soon after their impressive strike, an unofficial grouping of stewards recommended similar tactics to the sheet metal workers in their resistance to victimisation.

The low level of strike activity persisted throughout the war, but in a less extreme form as time went on and grievances accumulated. Stoppages began to occur over such issues as the introduction and operation of new bonus schemes as dilution sped up and the pressure on production increased. By and large, these disputes posed no great difficulties for the local stewards, because the problems involved were far from intractable. The low level of strike activity derived largely from poor trade union organisation, and although this was improved by the removal of the Ford factories from the list of trade union blackspots, the problem remained until well into the post war years. Strikes were concentrated in the largest group of factories in the country, the Avro group, where the stewards' leaders were mainly Communists, but the other CP factories (Metro-Vickers, Gardners) were much less strike prone. At A.V. Roe's factories, the stewards had developed a strong combine organisation, as well as good links with the stewards in the rest of Manchester, and they used these devices to bring outside force to bear to bring domestic disputes to a speedy conclusion. They were thus able to prevent the beginnings of any real opposition to their leadership.

This generally low level of militancy underpinned low piece work earnings. The 'Manchester Agreement', the diversity of local engineering and the lack of background in piece work bargaining of the new entrants to the industry all contributed to this. These factors

also worked against the Manchester CP implanting itself as firmly as its Coventry comrades in the engineering factories. The combination of poor organisation, a female workforce that was not particularly interested in staying in engineering, and relatively mediocre gains from wartime conditions, postponed the fight back against mass sackings until 1947.

How has Manchester's history helped towards an understanding of Coventry's? The outstanding difference between the two districts as far as the shop stewards' movement itself is concerned relates to the differing roles played by the semi-skilled. In Coventry, the semi-skilled workers of the middle and late 1930s had been recruited from immigrant workers from the depressed areas, with a background in piece work bargaining. These workers had been quickly organised into the trade unions and into gangs on the shop floor in the late thirties and the early months of the war. Their militancy made the piece work situation so acute in the city that the Ministry of Labour had to intervene with the Toolroom Agreement, which was soon turned into another weapon in the shop stewards' armoury.

In Manchester, there had been much less immigration from the depressed areas during the 1930s, for the simple reason that unemployment there remained high and rearmament factories far fewer than in Coventry. In addition, the Manchester Agreement limited the possibilities of increasing piece work earnings.

Consequently, the women who poured into the two cities' munitions factories from 1941 onwards came into two quite different types of workshop atmosphere. In Coventry, they were absorbed into the gangs and often into the only semi-skilled union, the T&GWU. They soon became adept at piece work bargaining, and where they remained outside of the unions, they caused the anti-strike shop stewards numerous

headaches in the latter part of the war by their unpredictable and 'undisciplined' militancy. In Manchester, the women came into a situation in which individual piece working was the rule and they therefore had to learn the techniques of piece work bargaining more slowly. They often found themselves in completely unorganised factories (quite a different situation from being unorganised in a semi-organised factory as in Coventry). When they were organised, it was either into the T&GWU or the G&MWU, a union which was not noted for its militancy. Another tentative explanation of the differences between the two bodies of women engineering workers may be advanced. Coventry drew women both from the surrounding area and from all over Britain, because it was an 'importing' area (to use the Ministry of Labour jargon), whereas Manchester was an 'exporting' area. In Lancashire, the women brought with them what may crudely be described as the passive shop floor tradition of the textile industries. Far from being a positive experience in terms of militancy, this may have actually been a tradition pulling in the opposite direction, but which did not exist among the Coventry women.

The contrast between the two bodies of semi-skilled workers runs throughout their wartime history with regard to strike propensity, wages and conditions gained during full wartime employment, and finally, in the level of the fight put up against sackings at the end of the war. These different experiences also generated different relationships with the political militants.

The Coventry CP had been very uninfluential before the war, but had hauled itself up by its bootstraps as soon as the twin factors of industrial militancy and popular outrage over inadequate air raid

precautions allowed them a foothold during 1940. They developed an unrivalled strength inside certain factories by a militancy which rested on piece work control rather than strike action. The strikes outside of these factories, often occurring among the unorganised, did not help any real political opposition to develop. In Manchester, the CP had been a much more influential body prior to the outbreak of war, but it did not really establish itself in the workshops as deeply or as extensively as in Coventry. The factory was not as central to the Manchester CP as it was to his Coventry counterpart, who did not have (or create) such potent rival attractions as the Labour Party ward, local campaigns on community issues, or the trade union branch to distract him. Nevertheless, the Manchester CP was even less troubled by any political opposition from the left than was the Coventry Party. In some respects, this was surprising, since Coventry's leading Communist 'showpiece' factories were practically strike free, whereas one of the equivalent groups of factories in Manchester, the A.V. Roe group, was the centre of strikes in the district. There were common factors in the behaviour of the two sets of Communists that explained their dominance within the left in the two areas. One was the good wages and conditions which had been built up in these factories through a high level of trade union organisation. High wages could be used to persuade workers that the strike weapon was unnecessary. Good trade union organisation was in itself important in that it created a situation in which this argument could be put with some hope of carrying the day. Where workers were unorganised in organised factories, the unorganised proved difficult to control.

However, the case of A.V. Roe shows that neither of these two factors guaranteed by themselves the means for the CP to restrain strikes. Sections of workers were still willing to strike to improve

the terms of piece working, and take up important and fundamental issues affecting the whole district. When they did this, and the Communist stewards were faced with a fait accompli, their sympathy with the nature of the strikes ensured that they adopted a helpful attitude. They threatened to extend the strikes across the district and throughout the combine and brought them to a rapid and satisfactory conclusion, just as their Coventry comrades had done. In this way, all the strikes were kept relatively trouble-free as far as relations between the strikers and the shop stewards were concerned. As soon as they were forced into a corner and had little choice but to actually oppose a strike, they had a rude shock. An individual swayed a mass meeting against them in one of their strongest factories. They never confronted the same embarrassing situation again, largely because they tried hard to avoid it, calling a 'safety valve' strike in 1945 to let off some steam building up over falling earnings.

It was the willingness of the CP shop stewards in these districts to bend with the wind that ensured that they were not broken. In isolation, high wages did not ensure strike-free factories, as Avro's showed, although it was obviously one important element in persuading workers not to strike. When Coventry stewards simply asked the unorganised not to strike, Avro stewards told their members to return in 1944, or (as happened more frequently) stewards acted in a similar way on the Clyde and Tyne, they ran into severe difficulties.

In the piece working districts, an unbending attitude on the part of the anti-strike stewards was much rarer than it was in the Northern heavy engineering areas. There can be little doubt but that this was closely related to their role in organising workers,

for which there had been much more opportunity in the light engineering areas, and even in Manchester, where the aircraft industry became quite important. It was also related to their position as piece work stewards. Piece work demanded the daily and even hourly fixing of bargains; it almost enforced regular contact between the shop steward and his members. There was much less scope for him to become merely a dues-collector, and to thereby allow some of his members to slip into the back of his mind. There was therefore much less danger that when these members struck work, his reaction could be closer to that of an outsider, more influenced by general political considerations than by the situation which had given rise to the strike.

* * *

CLYDESIDE.

"[The Clyde workers] are heroic fighters for their class, possessing a vitality invaluable to us, if we can guide it into the correct channels... in such soil the fungoid growth of Anarchism, ILPism and all such theories of the mentally inert grow.... The wall of class suspicion erected as a result of painful experience prevents the light from breaking in and exposing the weeds."

(Jack Owen, in the Daily Worker,
March 17, 1943.)

(1)

Clydeside

September 1939 - April 1943 .

By mid-1939, Clydeside was beginning to emerge from the throes of the Depression which had affected it so acutely throughout the inter-war years. During the late 1920s and '30s, the area's dependence on shipbuilding and marine and heavy engineering had been exposed as a severe weakness in a period of international industrial recession. Many shipyards and marine engineering works closed down completely; Beardmore's yard and marine engineering works at Dalmuir, for example, had been allowed to become derelict, with children chasing rabbits around the once busy slipway.¹ The North British Locomotive Co. was in the process of going out of business because its three factories with their annual capacity for 799 main line locomotives (their 1919 estimate) was largely unused.² At the same time, the relatively buoyant motor and electrical engineering industries persistently failed to take root in the area. The result had been the highest rate of unemployment in the British Isles outside of a few Welsh villages and some of the Tyne towns. In 1932, the average monthly rate of unemployment was 30.7%.³ Youth unemployment was especially high in certain districts: as late as February 1940, 14% of youths were unemployed in the Parkhead area, the second highest total in Britain after Sunderland.⁴

¹I. Hay, op.cit., p. 53

²W.R. Scott and J. Cunnison: The Industries of the Clyde Valley During the War (Oxford, 1924), p. 113.
Document by J.S. Crawford marked 29 June, 1942 (Beaverbrook D/67).

³M.P. Fogarty, op.cit., p. 33.

⁴LAB 19/81. Number of Juveniles on Register, 12 February, 1940.

Rearmament brought some signs of an economic revival, however. Beardmores began to re-equip their Dalmuir yard, the NBLoco Co. was awarded tank contracts, Rolls-Royce began building a huge aero-engine factory on the new industrial estate at Hillington (just outside Glasgow) and Howden's extended and reconditioned their plant.¹ By 1939, unemployment in Lanarkshire as a whole was down to 18.3%, and most of the Clyde was probably well below that figure.² Glasgow itself was beginning to expand; in 1938, the city had a population of 1,093,337, which represented an increase of 3.2% over its 1931 population.³

At least a part of the expansion of Glasgow had been the result of a small amount of immigration from the rest of Scotland. There had also been considerable changes going on in the housing and social structure of Clydeside. The old housing estates, which were largely owned by the major shipbuilding and engineering companies through holding companies gradually became less important as slum clearance programmes began in the late 1930s, and council estates became more common all along the Clyde. Religious differences in housing patterns broke down with the development of municipal housing, and a rather less religiously segregated working class community began to develop.⁴

Scotland, and particularly Clydeside, had provided the most important regional basis of support for the NUWM. Partly, because of the

¹ I. Hay, op. cit., p. 67; Beaverbrook D/67: Document by J.S. Crawford, loc. cit.; C.W. Hume: One Hundred Years of Howden Engineering. A Brief History, 1854-1954. (Glasgow, 1954), p. 34.

² Fogarty, op. cit., p. 27.

³ Ibid., p. 30.

⁴ R.D. Lobban: 'The Irish Community in Greenock in the Nineteenth Century': in Irish Geography, V, pp. 277-8. (Contains a number of interesting remarks on Twentieth Century developments.)

involvement of a relatively large group of unemployed in collective activity, the area was well known as one in which left-wing politics were deeply rooted in working class consciousness. It is impossible to do justice to this tradition in a short space; it is hoped to document it for one brief period in the following pages. A couple of points should be picked out, however. All the left wing groups had relatively large bodies of adherents here, as we have already seen: the CP, the Trotskyists, the Anarchists, the ILP all drew sustenance from the rich political soil of the Clyde. Indeed, there were several groups which existed nowhere else: Guy Aldred and Angelica Balabanova propagandised and published The Voice from Glasgow, whilst the Socialist Labour Party continued to function as a political tendency long after it had died elsewhere.

In February 1939, the Socialist Labour Party held a meeting in Glasgow, at which the audience were harangued for some time by a speaker. The Socialist drew attention to the impeccable orthodoxy of the diatribe:

"Holding close to the principle of the class struggle, the speaker disentangled in fine fashion the knotty problems and made it clear to the audience that they could do the same if they would only apply themselves to a diligent study of SLP literature, which would render them immune from (sic) the wiles and lures of reformers and labour fakers."

Perhaps this sort of lecture was predictable from sectarians of so long a pedigree, yet the audience numbered two hundred and stayed to discuss the speech.¹

The history of militancy on the Clyde during the war confirms the earlier inference that the disputations of the left wing groups were

¹The Socialist, March, 1939.

not as academic as they may have been in other areas. Indeed, it will be shown that the history of the left wing is indispensable to a history of the local shop stewards' movement.

The Clyde provides a number of important comparisons with Coventry, and, in fact, with the rest of the country. The area had an exceptionally large number of working days lost through strikes: 337,662 compared to 82,764 in Coventry. During 1940, the Clyde's shop stewards were mainly concerned with the same problem as their counterparts in the Midlands and elsewhere: victimisation. After the Essential Works Order, victimisation took on another guise in the form of transference. The transfer of skilled workers was the preoccupation of stewards in the area, playing the same role in engineers' nightmares as piece work in Coventry. To a certain extent, the importance of transfers (which most affected the skilled) is predictable in the sense that the tone of trade unionism in the marine engineering areas was set much more by the skilled men than it was in other districts. What is surprising is the structure of militancy which arose from this central grievance. Strikes were concentrated in three large factories until 1944, when the pattern disintegrated equally dramatically. An opposition to the leadership of the CP in the shop stewards' movement grew up within these fortresses of militancy, and achieved a good deal of success in eroding the CP's position. This constitutes the second major peculiarity of the Clyde, the relative decline of the Communists when viewed in the context of their steadily growing influence everywhere else.

The early months of the War allowed the local CP to entertain sanguine hopes about their progress as the War dragged on, and workers became war weary. It was immediately apparent that the tempo of the

class struggle had not abated in the district as a result of the outbreak of hostilities. Whilst the Conciliation Officers generally were reporting fairly stable situations, the Clyde Officer reported at the beginning of October 1939 that "It is possible to sense a growing measure of unrest amongst the workers and certain concrete evidences of this have been forthcoming."¹ There had already been a strike threatened at Beardmore's Parkhead Forge, and one actually broke out at the North British Locomotive Co.'s Springburn factory.² The CP was able to capitalise on the mood of unrest, by setting up what the Conciliation Officer called "an organisation not unlike the Clyde Workers' Committee of the last war".³ This committee sent out a circular to all branches asking them for contributions to funding the committee, whose main object was the defence of established working conditions, especially with regard to the Conditions of Employment Act. Several branches did vote money, but they were soon prevented from sending it by their Executives.⁴ Little more was heard of the Committee until the British Auxiliaries strike later in 1940.

An explanation of the committee's quiescence may well be the difference between its ostensible objects and the actual difficulties which began to present themselves on the shop floor. Two strikes in the spring of 1940 made it clear that the main issues in industrial

¹LAB 10/360. October 7, 1939.

²Ibid., September 16, 30, 1939.

³Ibid., December 23, 1939.

⁴LAB 10/361. January 6, 1940.

relations were to be the same as in Coventry: victimisation and the closely related drive for trade union organisation. The latter problem was less acute than in Coventry since the expansion of local industry was mainly in the form of the extension of existing plant rather than the building of a large number of new factories, and because of the preponderance of skilled men with a strong trade union tradition. Therefore, the question usually took the form of a movement towards a 100% union shop. A strike broke out at Albion Motors at the beginning of March over the employment of a 'non'.¹ Almost simultaneously, a strike broke out at Beardmore's Parkhead over what was to be the more important issue, when five fitters were sacked. Little seems to have come of these disputes at a district level, possibly because the factories concerned had a reputation for being well-organised, and capable of looking after themselves. When the district as a whole became concerned, it was with a smaller and less prominent factory. This strike broke out at the beginning of September 1940. The AEU DC felt it necessary to intervene on this occasion, largely because of the nature of the dispute and its background. The management of the British Auxiliaries Co. had dismissed three AEU convenors during 1940, and the Engineering Employers' Association were operating an embargo on workers from their factory because of the factory's reputation as a Communist stronghold. The last straw was the sacking of the CP convenor, Cunningham, only a few days after an unsuccessful strike to reinstate the previous

¹LAB 10/361. March 9, 1940.

convenor who had also been sacked.¹ The management claimed that Cunningham was dismissed because he had 'interfered' with a woman working at the factory, an 'interference' dismissed by the Daily Herald as nothing more than a 'jocular spar'.² The shop stewards dismissed the whole matter of the woman as irrelevant. Their first leaflet on the dismissal drew attention not only to the company's history, but also to the involvement of Government departments, as Cunningham had earlier turned down the offer of a lucrative job as instructor at a Government training centre.³ In all, then, there was a good deal at stake: the right of convenors to operate, and the right of workers to employment throughout the district, were both in contention. In addition, the shop stewards, and especially the CP stewards, suspected the interference of the Government in shop-floor industrial relations to be behind Cunningham's ^{slandering} victimisation.

The organisation of the dispute bore the mark of the CP. An appeal for funds was sent to every trade union branch in Britain, and regular mass meetings were held which were attended by the strikers' wives to boost the morale of the men.⁴ The AEU DC supported the strike, although it was under some pressure from the EC to end it in favour of a Works Conference.⁵ A further indication of the CP's intense interest in the dispute was the development of the earlier shop stewards' committee into the West of Scotland Shop Stewards' Consultative

¹LAB 10/361. September 28, 1940.

²Daily Herald, October 9, 1940.

³Ibid.

⁴LAB 10/361. October 26, 1940.

⁵Ibid.

Committee (WSSSC). It was formally set up after the April 1940 New Propellor conference, whose programme it adopted. Its first sign of life came with the outbreak of the British Auxiliaries strike. The committee had representatives from all the main factories, and was hailed by the Trotskyist Youth for Socialism as the successor to the Clyde Workers' Committee.¹

At the beginning of November, the WSSSC called a meeting of the district's shop stewards to ask the Conciliation Officer to step in. The stoppage had by then been going on for almost a month, with no signs of either side cracking, at a time when the average length of strikes in the district was one and a half days. Naturally, the Conciliation Officer refused to entertain an unofficial deputation, but the stewards relayed the request through the AEU DC, leaving the Conciliation Officer little choice.² Unfortunately for him the employers were adamant that there would have to be a return to work if negotiations were to take place. On the other hand, the mass meetings that were being held every Monday were reaffirming the determination of the strikers to stick out.³ On Monday 7th October, the convenor, Cunningham, even made a speech advising a return to work, but he was howled down from the floor.⁴ By the end of October, there were conflicting accounts of the state of morale of the strikers, and the chances of success. The Daily Worker insisted on the 26th that "There is no sign of wavering on the part of the men on strike", and headed an article on the strikes in Scotland with "Scottish

¹Youth for Socialism, November, 1940.

²LAB 10/361. November 9, 1940.

³LAB 10/124. Galbraith to Leggett, September 30, 1940.

⁴Ibid., Galbraith to Leggett, October 8, 1940.

Strikes May Spread".¹ At the end of the month, Galbraith reported on the other hand that some of the strikers were "very anxious to return", and some men began to return during the first week in October.²

The strike was hanging in the balance, because the district's shop stewards had been showing signs of giving material support to it, even though it was beginning to fold up. The strikers had won support through issuing a leaflet which was distributed all over the district together with collecting sheets. The leaflet is worth quoting in full, not only because of the response it evoked, but also because it throws some light on how strikers justified their action at this stage of the war:

British Auxiliaries Shop Stewards' Committee

Go To It.

We went to it - some of us enlisted and the others worked excessive overtime, etc. The management went to it and have disrupted every means we have in power for redress of any injustice. And they have encroached on our AEU status by taking up a dictatorial attitude in refusing to discuss our case when we had already resumed work in accordance with all legal procedure.

Our Case.

Our shop convenor has been sacked for his trade union activities. The men have taken an extended holiday pending his reinstatement.

We have been forced to take this action as this is our third convenor to be got rid of in four months. We want to take part in our country's war effort, and we are willing to work in any factory. The Masters' Federation has closed its doors to us, i.e., preventing us from being employed elsewhere.

Why are honest shop stewards being persecuted and victimised? Because they are maintaining trade union rights and conditions.

We appeal to you to send resolutions to Mr. Bevan (sic) demanding that this management be put in its place, and once and for all stopping all recurrences of this trouble elsewhere.

We need your financial aid immediately. Please Help.
Treasurer A. Turnbull. 3

¹DW, October 26, 1940.

²Daily Herald, November 6, 8, 1940.

³LAB 10/124. Loose copy of leaflet enclosed in file.

The appeal brought in some money, and the promise of industrial action by the WSSSC if the dispute was not satisfactorily settled.¹ It was thought by some at the Conciliation Department that the WSSSC could not initiate a district wide strike. A memorandum to Headquarters in London stated that they thought the Committee could make "a good show" at Beardmore, NBLoco, Rolls Royce and the Albion, but that the rest of the district would be unlikely to follow suit.² The Conciliation Department may have been slightly optimistic in its estimate of the possibilities, because there were disputes going on during the British Auxiliaries strikes which could easily be linked to it in the minds of the shop stewards. There was a strike at Rolls-Royce's foundry for the dismissal of a foreman who criticised the trade union, and one at Howden's over a worker who had contravened union rules. It may be that the Department was right, but they seemed to be ignoring the Howden's strike, as well as underestimating the effect of a concerted strike action at the factories they named.

In any case, the crucial determinant in the outcome of the strike proved to be not so much the ability of the CP to shore it up, but its will to do so. Whilst the WSSSC was making threatening noises, other members of the CP had been looking for a negotiated path out of the impasse. Three members of the AEU DC met representatives of the management in the presence of the Conciliation Officer.³ The deputation consisted of Sillars, Cloakie and Gray. Sillars led off for the DC, and castigated the employers for their attachment to procedure. Concluding his remarks, he said that there might be a way



¹ DW, October 18, 1940.

² LAB 10/126. Memo on British Auxiliaries Strike (n.d.).

³ DW, October 7, 1940.

out if Cunningham was reinstated after being formally suspended for one week. The other members of the delegation failed to agree with Sillars, and they had to have an adjournment to clarify their collective position, which was to withdraw Sillars' suggestion.¹

The first signs of the Communists' desire to be rid of the strike had been shown by Sillars, who was perhaps the leading Party member on the District Committee. Galbraith advanced the theory that they wanted to drop the strike because the National Committee of the AEU was to meet soon, and the CPers feared that their credentials would be withdrawn if they persisted in supporting a strike which the EC had told them to end. He added that he thought that the instruction to follow this line had come from outside of the district.²

Irrespective of the feelings of the CP on the matter, the strike had already begun to peter out. The critical moment which had been reached about the time when the WSSSC had pledged its support had been passed. They might have been able to resurrect the strike, but had suffered from indecision at the last minute. The dispute was settled by the intervention of David Kirkwood, M.P. at the invitation of the CP. He offered a document to the District Committee which gave him the right to negotiate on their behalf, and some Committeemen signed it. He negotiated a settlement with the employers which was that Cunningham should be reinstated for a fortnight after a return to work, and that he would find the ex-convenor work in a Royal Ordnance Factory. But the management were stiffened by the apparent desire of the strikers to settle, and they rejected the fortnight's

¹LAB 10/124. Memo from Galbraith to H.Q. (n.d.)

²LAB 10/126. November 15, 1940.

reinstatement. The strikers drifted back to work.¹

The strike had ended in abject defeat. The CP had been seen to wash their hands of the strike for ulterior motives, and Galbraith thought that they were "not exactly in very good odour" as a result.² Serious splits in the ranks of the left had already started to appear, and they were further deepened later in November.

The meeting of the WSSSC of 14th November had district strike action in support of the British Auxiliaries' strikers on the agenda. Obviously, the agenda had been overtaken by events, since the strike was settled, and there was a general return to work on Monday 16th. However, there were those who thought that there should be district strike action anyway, but in support of the national pay claim. There was "a very sharp cleavage of opinion" on the matter, but the leaders of the committee prevailed.³ The Daily Worker claimed that "... on the date suggested, it would be difficult for a united move to be made. It was therefore decided not to take a holiday for the time being."⁴ Galbraith, on the other hand, thought it not so much a minor tactical question, but more of a major political one, because he said that the leaders of the committee had argued in favour of using the official trade union machinery rather than strike action.⁵ Before following the fortunes of the Clydeside CP in the engineering factories any further, some attempt must be made to discover the

¹LAB 10/126. November 15, 1940.

²LAB 10/360. December 7, 1940.

³LAB 10/124. Galbraith to Leggett, November 20, 1940.

⁴DW, November 26, 1940.

⁵LAB 10/124. Galbraith to Leggett, November 26, 1940.

factories in which they were strong. The picture that emerges is vital to the analysis offered later.

British Auxiliaries was a factory which had had a CP convenor, and the Party had at first profited by the strike. Acknowledgements of receipts by the Daily Worker's Fighting Fund for August and September 1940 showed two contributions from the factory. The other main contributors were: Beardmore's Parkhead Forge (nine contributions), Rolls-Royce (three), North British Loco Queen's Park (one), Albion Motors (one).¹ Of these, Beardmore's was clearly the strongest CP factory, with the foundry and the Locomotive departments sending in their own contributions separately. The total subscribed by the whole factory to the fund in these two months was just over ten pounds. Apart from showing the extent of CP activity at Beardmore's, the Fighting Fund contributions also show the main industrial strongholds for the Party, coinciding as they do with the Conciliation Department's picture of where they could initiate strike action in support of the British Auxiliaries' strikers.

As we shall see, the CP was in a difficult position in Scotland by the early months of 1940, because of campaigns against them from various directions, but there is a noticeable change in their attitude in industry even before these campaigns really began to take effect. They adopted a much more 'moderate' tone of voice in industrial matters. At the beginning of January 1941, the WSSSC called a meeting of all engineering and shipbuilding shop stewards to

¹DW, August 5, 9, 13, 21, September 4, 6, 11, 27, 30. In addition, there were reports to the Daily Worker from Beardmore Parkhead (August 30, October 4), 'Glasgow Loco Workers' (September 13), Rolls-Royce (September 13).

discuss the national applications for wage advances in these industries. In Scotland, where wages had never been high, the inflation of 1940 had eroded real wages to an alarming extent, which was only disguised by the long hours of overtime being worked. It is not surprising, then, that the meeting attracted two thousand shop stewards. They might be expected to be in militant mood, but if they were, the Communist speeches did not connect with their feeling. The Conciliation Officer was so struck by the moderation of the speeches that he erroneously reported to London that the CP had not spoken at all at the meeting.¹ During the following week, he discovered that in fact, six of the seven speakers had been CPers, and he explained his mistake in terms of the fact that they had been "eminently reasonable" in their approach.² Later in the month, the negotiations led to an award of 3/6 on plain time rates for skilled men when Galbraith thought that the minimum acceptable to the rank and file would be 5/-, but the WSSSC did nothing, possibly because subscriptions to the Committee had declined "almost to the vanishing point."³

The Communists in the district were already receiving a battering in the AEU elections. In the district ballot for AEU President, the CP candidate polled only about one quarter of the 1700 votes cast, against the balance which went to an 'old-style' trade unionist.⁴ In the New Year, they had another setback when Sillars, their candidate for the National Committee, failed to be re-elected.⁵

¹LAB 10/362. January 11, 1941.

²Ibid., January 18, 1941.

³Ibid., January 18, 25, 1941.

⁴LAB 10/361. December 7, 1940.

⁵LAB 10/362. January 18, 1941.

There were good reasons for the CP's declining support, quite apart from the criticism they had brought on their heads due to their handling of the British Auxiliaries strike. Of course, the CP came in for some criticism from the local press for organising the Scottish People's Convention, but this was no more than the rest of the CPGB had to put up with. What was distinctive about Scotland was the hyper-sensitivity of the Scottish TUC to any suggestion that the left was organising effectively in its unions. The STUC opposed the Scottish People's Convention, and tried to cut the ground from beneath the WSSSC's feet.¹ At the beginning of 1941, the STUC circularised its member unions asking them whether they thought the WSSSC detrimental to the cause of trade unionism. Not surprisingly, given the way the question was posed, it was answered in the affirmative by all except three union offices, two of which had not heard of the committee, and one which failed to return the questionnaire. Taking this as a mandate, the STUC then circularised all unions again advising them to take disciplinary action against those shop stewards who were not acting in accordance with rule.²

The left was not only under direct attack from above, but subject to some ideological pressure from below organised by the Government. In the late summer of 1940, the Ministry of Information, conscious of the strength of Communist ideas on the Clyde, conducted a campaign to counter communism in industry in the West of Scotland. The scale of the campaign is not clear, but there was only one full-time organiser who sent in reports, one William Roberts.

¹Glasgow Evening News, September 27, 1940.

²LAB 10/362, February 22, 1941.

Roberts was helped by numerous assistants and informants, however, and his campaign is interesting not only in itself, but also for what it reveals about the sub-political roots of anti-communism in local working class consciousness. At the same time, Roberts has to be taken with more than a pinch of salt: after all, his job security was directly related to his success.

Roberts organised informal discussions amongst shipyard and ordnance factory workers, gave film shows in factory canteens, talks in tenement kitchens, and even organised 'study Circles' to discuss Russia and other topics.¹ Naturally, he gave full descriptions of his more successful meetings. In May 1941, he held a meeting at Clydebank, where he noted that the CP's defeatism had been gaining ground at the Royal Ordnance Factory. The first question came from a CPer, who asked him what he thought of the Hess affair. Roberts realised that this was very much a leading question which might involve him in defending the government against the charge of neo-Nazism (a line argued, amongst other places, in the May edition of World News and Views), and invited the questioner to give his own views. The CPer rose to the bait and put the Party line. When he had finished, Roberts produced a copy of World News and Views, threw it over to him, and said "Then it was you who would write this article?" His trick had the desired effect, because the audience turned on the Communist for simply reiterating the Party journal's views. One of the audience shouted out "You bloody babbling parrot" and another humourist followed this with: "Hey, you, you're just

¹INF 1/673. Progress Reports April 15-May 16; June 1-June 15, 1941.

like Tennyson's brook - you chatter on for ever."¹ At another meeting, again attended by workers from the ROF Dalmuir, another element in popular anti-Communism came out when the Communists were criticised for not doing as the pacifists did, opting out of the war altogether. They were accused vehemently of reaping the maximum benefit from the war themselves through good wages, overtime and so on. Roberts thought the meeting "a good one indeed".² His campaign had the air of a personal crusade, but his judgement about the CP's position in May 1941 was so emphatic that it must have had some basis in reality:

"I cannot help feeling that if the Ministry of Information or the Labour Party or any other group seize this moment the CP will be practically knocked out." ³ (emphasis original)

Roberts' judgement on the CP's position was, of course, far too optimistic. To 'practically knock out' the CP on the Clyde would have been a difficult task indeed. However, it is clear that they were in a very weak position at this point. Unfortunately for them, they were also unable to capitalise on the apprentices' strikes of March 1941.

It would be difficult to guess from a reading of Roberts's reports that a major industrial dispute was continuing during February and

¹INF 1/673. Progress Reports April 15-May 16; June 1-June 15, 1941.
²"Further Notes on Communist Activities in Clydebank", May 24, June 18, 1941.

²Ibid., June 18, 1941.

³Report, April 24, 1941.

March 1941. Clearly he did not think that the apprentices' strike seriously affected the position of the CP in local industry. This was despite the fact that when the apprentices' movement had begun to revive under wartime conditions, the YCL had formed its leadership. On March 17 1940, delegates from thirty-five factories responded to a call from an 'organising committee' for a meeting to discuss apprentices' problems. The organising committee (which became the Clyde Apprentices Committee) comprised nine delegates from local shipyards and engineering factories, eight of whom were members of the YCL.¹ Yet, at the end of a largely successful strike, the CP had not visibly improved its position amongst the Clyde shop stewards. The reasons for their failure to derive much comfort from the strikes are at first sight difficult to see. Why this should have been the case has to be the central question asked in the course of our account of the dispute.

The Clyde apprentices prepared assiduously for their battle with the employers. From their meeting in early 1940 onwards, they propagandised for their demands, which were:

- 1) 100% wage increases for all apprentices from the first to the fourth years.
- 2) The full district rate less five shillings for the first six months of the final year, after which the full journeyman's rate should apply.
- 3) A half day's technical training per week, in the employer's time.
- 4) A fuller all round training in the workshops.
- 5) No victimisation of the apprentices elected as delegates. 2

The demands allow us to understand the background to the apprentices' disappointment with the results of the national pay award for 1940.

¹INF 1/673, April 24, 1941.

²SA, June 1941. These demands were adopted by the Edinburgh apprentices in the interests of unity. (LAB 10/422. Leaflet issued by the Edinburgh Apprentices Committee, January 1941).

The adults had only received 3s. 6d., but the boys only received a proportion of this, ranging from tenpence-halfpenny for the first year apprentices to 1s. 7d. for fifth year lads. The Clyde Apprentices' Committee took the matter up in an agitational broadsheet which became a printed four page paper, the Clyde Apprentices' Mag. Meanwhile, they set up apprentices' committees in the factories, trying to obtain the support of the adult shop stewards wherever possible.¹

At the beginning of February, they were able to link up with apprentices from the rest of Scotland, when they attended a conference held to discuss strikes then taking place in Edinburgh. The Edinburgh lads were out in sympathy with striking apprentices at Henry Robb's Leith shipyard, whose representatives had been sacked whilst presenting the management with wage and other demands.² The Clyde lads promised strike action in support, from Monday 10th February.³ In the event, they were overtaken by the AEU officials, who had succeeded in obtaining a return to work by the Leith strikers.⁴

The ending of the Leith strike was an important formative experience for the Scottish apprentices which seriously prejudiced them against the AEU officials. The official in question, at a mass meeting of the Henry Robb strikers, had, as the Conciliation Officer put it:

"... - probably due to excessive zeal - made a very pointed attack on the Chairman of the apprentices'

¹Clyde Apprentices Mag., No. 1.

²LAB 10/422, February 5, 1941.

³LAB 10/362, February 15, 1941.

⁴LAB 10/422 February 5, 7 (subject: Eng. and Shipbldg. Apps.' Cttee).

committee and criticised strongly those who were 'stupid enough' to be lead (sic) away by the advice of the Communists."

This speech led to a vote against a resumption of work, although the officials managed to persuade some lads to return on the following day, and the strike disintegrated.¹

On the next occasion, the apprentices showed considerable hostility towards the trade union officials. On February 28th, apprentices at a Kilmarnock factory stopped work for the Clyde demands, and they were supported a few days later by lads in some of the Edinburgh factories and yards. At the beginning of the second week in March, Clyde apprentices started to come out, and by 15th March, there were six thousand of their number on strike.² The Conciliation Officer reported that:

"They had adopted an attitude of refusing to have anything to do with trade unions and of insisting on being allowed to put their.... own case... the reason for this attitude was, as one of them remarked, 'disillusionment'. They now assert that they can gain more for themselves." 3

According to the Ministry of Information's informants, the apprentices were in a state of confusion because they did not know whether the trade union officials or the Apprentices' Committee was leading them.⁴

Whatever the feeling of the striking apprentices themselves was, their committee was quite clear in its attitude to the officials, voting unanimously to reject the latter's offer to negotiate for them.

¹LAB 10/422, February 7 (subject: Messrs. Henry Robb, Leith).

²LAB 10/362, March 15, 1941.

³Ibid.

⁴INF 1/673. Report February 17-March 10.

Less than thirty percent of the strikers were members of a union, and the Committee claimed that therefore it was the only body with a legitimate claim to represent the lads. They maintained their independent attitude when they were asked by a Government Court of Inquiry (set up immediately the dispute spread to the Clyde) to recommend a return to work if national negotiations were immediately started between the unions and the employers. The Apprentices' Committee initially refused to recommend a return unless they were represented on the negotiations. However, the officials strongly opposed apprentice representation. The Court succeeded in extracting a promise that the apprentices would return by promising that they would review the settlement agreed between the unions and employers. In addition, the Court agreed to recommend to the unions that they accept some apprentice representation.¹ Having secured these undertakings from the Court, the Committee was prepared to recommend a return of work. The Clyde strikers duly returned on Thursday 17th March.²

When the negotiations began, the officials refused to allow the apprentices to attend. Nevertheless, the final settlement was reported by the Conciliation Officer to have been 'on the whole well received', and that the short time taken (less than a fortnight after the strike had started on the Clyde) was especially appreciated.³

The settlement agreed by the employers and unions in national negotiations and rubber-stamped by the Court of Inquiry was quite favourable to the apprentices. Wages were to fluctuate with those of

¹LAB 10/362, March 15, 22, 1941.

²LAB 10/362, March 22, 1941.

³Ibid., March 29, 1941.

the adult journeymen, and in a fixed proportion to them. First-year apprentices received 25% of the adult district rate plus national bonus, ranging up to 60% for the fifth-years. For the fifth-year apprentices, previously receiving 31s/ 3d. per week, the increase amounted to about 14s/ 9d. There was still some discontent, because even fifth-years were still well away from receiving the full district rate, and in Lancashire, 25% of the adult rate would actually mean a reduction for first-years.¹ It was this last grievance which sparked off the strikes in Lancashire.² Nevertheless, substantial advances had been won on the basic rate which would be reflected in increased piece work bonus and overtime payments. Moreover, they had been won in a remarkably short time.

Yet the CP itself does not appear to have gained very much from the strike, in terms of its influence in the shop stewards' movement. This was largely because the apprentices had refused to have anything to do with the unions as such. This refusal made it more difficult for any steward, as a lay official of the union, to actively support the strikers. The situation was thus quite different to that obtaining in 1937, when one of the main demands had been for trade union recognition, and the full-time officials had therefore allowed and encouraged the stewards to support the apprentices. In 1941, the CP stewards must therefore have found the going much harder when trying to argue with other stewards and their members that the apprentices should be supported. Quite apart from the whole 'Imperialist War'

¹Inman, p. 334, note (1).

²Inman does not distinguish between the original wave of strikes (mainly in Scotland), and the second wave (mainly in Lancashire) which followed the Court's ruling. (see pp. 333-4).

impediment, they also had to try to explain the apparently anti-union attitude of the apprentices. In addition, the CP stewards had been deprived of the Daily Worker, their traditional vehicle for propagandising for strikes.

Under these circumstances, the CP stewards had been unable to reap much benefit from the apprentices' strike. The reports of both Roberts and the Conciliation Officer contain virtually no mention of the Communist stewards' activities in this period, in sharp contrast to their frequent remarks and long paragraphs of 1940. At this point, immediately before Hitler's invasion of the USSR, it is worth summarising the argument so far, and drawing out some comparisons between the position of the shop stewards' movement on the Clyde and in Coventry. The Scottish stewards had to deal with essentially the same central difficulty as their counterparts in the Midlands, that is, the victimisation of shop stewards. On the other hand, they did not suffer from the mushroom growth of munitions factories that was occurring in Coventry, whose new workers had to be speedily and comprehensively organised if the town was not to become a haven for 'nons'. The only Coventry-style factory was Rolls-Royce Hillington, which was organised by Communists during 1940. The district's stewards had a more solid base to build on for creating an unofficial body to fight the victimisations that existed in Coventry. There are signs that Clydeside trade unionists were willing to take advantage of their comparatively good organisation through strikes which were singularly aggressive in terms of their demands. Needless to say, these strikes were at most factory-wide; and there were no district strikes over the important range of issues that had been raised by the factory stoppages.

This was not because there had not been any serious discussion of district action, because there had been during the British Auxiliaries' strike. But the strike had been lost, in contrast to its equivalent, the Standard Aero dispute in Coventry. The CP, under heavy pressure from the Executive, chose to bury the strike when some thought that it was still alive. They had been under pressure from the officials, and from a Government political campaign, but this did not excuse them in the eyes of some of the shop stewards involved in the WSSSC. The Communists were rather red-faced (and began to act as if they were) because they had left their own comrades in the lurch.

Serious political opposition to the leadership of the CP amongst a certain group of shop stewards dates from about this time. The number of shop stewards who were seriously interested in left-wing political alternatives to the CP was probably not above a few dozen, at least in the first instance, but it was a significant development. Of course, the Trotskyists and their old companions the ILPers had been voicing their doubts about the CP for some time, and in strident tones, but they do not seem to have found a very wide audience. Now, they certainly had an audience, if they could only connect with it and carry it along behind them. As Roberts had remarked, there were splits within the ranks of the Party already, there were disagreements within the WSSSC (some of whose members had been disappointed in their hopes of reviving the Clyde Workers' Committee) and there were soon to be deep divisions on the AEU DC. If William Roberts had possessed a crystal ball, he might have been slightly more cautious in making his remark about the possibility of destroying the CP; the erosion of their influence by the Trotskyists and their fellow-travellers did not exactly gladden the hearts of his employers.

* * *

As in Coventry, there was no change in the tendency for the number of working days lost through strikes to increase after the CP's change of line on the nature of the War. On the contrary, there were more days lost as the War wore on. The remarkable feature of strike activity on the Clyde was the marked concentration of these strikes in three major factories. Beardmore's Parkhead Forge, Rolls-Royce Hillington, and the North British Locomotive Co.'s factory at Queen's Park. In 1941, these factories accounted for nine strikes of the twenty-seven along the Clyde that year, but 29,205 of 31,799 days lost. In 1942 and 1943, this imbalance persisted. In 1942, the three factories accounted for 28,694 days of 33,099 (15 of 35 strikes), and in 1943, for 108,860 of 114,449 (15 of 29 strikes). Thus, they accounted for between a third and a half of the strikes, but a considerably higher proportion (over 80%) of the total number of days lost. If we were able to take into account less well-recorded sanctions such as overtime embargoes (a favourite tactic at Beardmore's; see table) then the already prominent position of these plants would probably be increased.

The causes of strikes on the Clyde were substantially different from the causes in Coventry. The Clyde had a higher proportion of days lost through disputes on disciplinary questions (including the rights of shop stewards to operate). Just over 40% of the total number of days lost in the area were on these questions compared to just over 12% in Coventry, although too much should not be inferred here, since the Clyde figures include the Albion Motors strike of 1944, during which 107,000 days were lost. The main difference arose in the figures for strikes in the general area of wages. Most strikes in the Scottish centre concerned base rates, the introduction of piece working systems, and lieu and merit rates. In the Coventry district, most wages disputes directly concerned the timing of jobs, as may be seen from table:

Table 6 21

OVERTIME EMBARGOES IN BEARDMORE PARKHEAD

<u>DURATION</u>	<u>UNION/DEPARTMENT</u>	<u>CAUSE</u>
13.1.40.	United Pattenmakers Ass.	excessive overtime
13.7.40-?	all	wage claim one dept.
22.2.41-19.4.41	B'makers	wages
19.4.41	all	delay in providing canteen
26.4.41.	B'makers (bullet- proof dept.)	delay in negotiations
26.4.41.	Cranemen, Slingers	for lieu rate
31.5.41	Electricians	for piece work- related bonus
"	"	reimposed; bonus too low
7.6.41-28.6.41	Labourers	for lieu rate
5.8.41	Electricians	bonus dispute
"	Bricklayers	"
"	Labourers	"
27.6.42	Maintenance	bonus dispute
26.9.42-28.11.42.	Steel fdry	for production bonus.
30.7.43	M/c shops	for fair distribution of overtime
28.1.44	Part of Steel Fdry.	demarcation
14.4.44 (reported as having started some months before) - 21.4.44.	Maintenance, Ordnance and Heavy m/c shops	for production bonus
14.4.44-21.4.44.	Electricians	overtime arrangements
21.4.44-12.5.44	Fdry Labourers	for Sunday overtime
28.4.44-9.5.44	Foundry	overtime
2.5.44	Bricklayers Labourers	?
4.8.44	Heavy m/c shops	piece-work
15.9.44	Heavy m/c shops	reimposition previous ban

Source: Conciliation Officers' Reports.

*Date of commencement given when duration unknown.

How does this pattern relate to the three main factories on the Clyde? How 'orthodox' were they in relation to the rest of the district? The most orthodox factory was Beardmore's Parkhead. Here, there were no strikes directly concerned with the timing of piece work jobs, although there were disputes on issues like the way in which bonuses were to be calculated, and so on. At the North British Loco., Queen's Park, there were again very few disputes concerning piece work times. Only 572 days of 19,787 between 1941 and 1945 were lost through this type of strike, and the three that did occur were amongst Blacksmiths and Boilermakers, numerically small craft groups with long histories of piece-working. Rolls-Royce was quite different; here, the national propensity towards piece work disputes in the aircraft factories was reproduced, with over 10% (6,891 of 55,891) of days lost deriving

from piece work strikes.¹

Leaving Rolls-Royce aside for one moment, what was it that made the other two factories so strike-prone?² To understand the real reasons for their strikes, which occurred on a whole range of issues, we must look beyond strikes as an indicator and towards issues that bubbled just under the surface. It is a commonplace of labour history and industrial relations that strikers' demands do not always faithfully reflect their grievances. Nor is their immediate 'cause' always, or even usually, what lies behind them. The Conciliation Officer offered two main causes of friction at these factories that allow us to understand how deep-seated and long-term grievances built up there, fanning the everyday sparks of workshop friction into the flames of strike action. Firstly, they contained an unusually high proportion of skilled men for the district, and were unusually well-paid.³ Consequently, they were liable to feel the impact of transfers within the district more acutely than other skilled men. Imagine a typical example. A boilermaker, blacksmith or coppersmith at one of these factories might be uprooted from his mates and familiar work routines and transferred to a shipyard, where such men were desperately needed. He would have to brush up on unfamiliar aspects of his craft to

¹The NBLoco is an interesting case, because a large body of skilled piece workers existed there (Hinton, p. 88). During the Second World War, these workers were paid in groups, in a system apparently resembling the Coventry gang system. But the exceptionally high earnings of the skilled piece workers had not been won through strikes - most strikes occurred among time workers trying to catch up. Thus, in some respects, the NBLoco factories resembled the highest-paid Coventry factories. (See LAB 10/363, 25 July, 1943, where the system of group piece work is referred to).

²For further information on these factories, see Appendix.

³LAB 10/363, October 31, 1942.

establish himself with a 'squad' and to get the maximum amount of overtime to make his money up, since the chances were that he would be on plain time rates. Finally, he would have his income tax assessed on the previous six months earnings, thereby further diminishing his already considerably lighter pay packet. There was another important cause of strikes which arose out of the high earnings of piece workers within these factories. Other skilled workers such as millwrights, maintenance electricians, and unskilled labourers fell behind because they were paid plain time rates.¹ Naturally, this gave rise to demands for better lieu rates for the skilled, and production bonuses for the unskilled. Both of these issues caused direct action themselves, but their importance went beyond the strikes that they actually caused. They underlay many other disputes, but more importantly, they were acute forms of district problems. The whole of Clydeside was a relatively skilled area, and transfers concerned everyone there, just as the problem of lieu rates did. The difference between Beardmores, NBLoco and the rest of the district was quantitative, not qualitative. Two possibilities co-existed: either the strike-prone factories would lead the rest, through a consciousness of the essential community of interest, or the two plants would become isolated as a result of the very deep form the problems took there.

The causes of strikes at Rolls-Royce Hillington were rather different, and it is worthwhile making a slight digression into the position of women in these factories to help us come to grips with the

¹LAB 10/363, October 31, 1942.

problem. Beardmore's Parkhead and the NBLoco were men's factories. Much of the work was very heavy, and was considered unsuitable for women not only by the management, but also by the men who were reluctant to see jobs which had been traditionally exclusively male taken over by women, even temporarily. It is also undoubtedly true that they genuinely wished to protect women from having to do this type of work. For whatever motives, they did not encourage women on to certain jobs. At the NBLoco in July 1942, for example, the Communist shop stewards in the Tank Erecting shop threatened to strike if women were not removed; they claimed that they were 'not suitable' and that they would bring the bonus down.¹ This case reached the level of threatened strike action, probably because earnings were threatened, but we can also detect a degree of 'male chauvinism' in their response.

In the NBLoco and Beardmore's, women did not constitute a large element in the workforce because of the heavy nature of the work. At Beardmores, the light machining areas were in any case only a relatively small part of the factory, and this was also true, though to a lesser extent at the NBLoco. Since the women were generally employed in these areas, many skilled men (like those in the NBLoco Tank Erecting Shop) could continue to work almost without seeing a woman in the course of their working day. This was definitely not true of Rolls-Royce Hillington, where less than 5% of the workforce of 25,000 were skilled males.²

¹LAB 10/363. July 25, 1943.

²Report by a Court of Inquiry concerning a Dispute at an Engineering Undertaking in Scotland, Comnd. 6474, 1943, para. 11.

Neither Beardmore's nor the NBLoco had any important women's strikes, but at Rolls-Royce, the women were to the fore in several disputes, culminating in the 1943 explosion over grading. Their different position in the workshop community was one factor in this, but there is another important explanation. We have seen how in Coventry the women (amongst whom there was a high proportion of young 'mobile' girls from Scotland and the North-East) looked for their trade union membership to yield them quick and concrete results, and their 'immobile' counterparts at home showed similar traits. The shop stewards at Rolls, led by the CP, organised the women into the T&GWU during 1940,¹ and they immediately brought up the fact that the Relaxation Agreement was not being properly applied to give them the men's rates. It was this grievance that went into procedure in early 1941 and re-emerged at the beginning of 1943 when the women grew tired of waiting. Rolls was quite exceptional in this sense as far as the West of Scotland was concerned. Scottish women in general were inadequately organised because the AEU convenors made strenuous efforts to keep the T&GWU out of their factories.² In some cases, they were even prepared to actively hinder attempts to organise them, hoping to recruit them into the AEU when that union dropped its ban on female membership. The practice of women paying the AEU convenor a penny a week to represent them became widespread over the next two years.³

¹In October 1940, the Daily Worker had stated that the strike of foundry workers there was "Unique in that three unions of skilled workers are fighting for the right of the TGWU to organise the women in this particular department." (DW, October 22, 1940).

²John Campbell argued against the Scottish convenors in a Daily Worker article of July 22, 1940.

³LAB 10/363. June 6, 1942. The Conciliation Officer noted that this system "prevailed" in the West of Scotland.

All of these factories were large. Beardmore's and the NBLoco Queen's Park both employed around 10,000 and Rolls-Royce employed 25,000 at its peak. It should also be pointed out that large numbers of workers outside these factories were employed by the same firms: Beardmore managed the ROFs at Dalmuir and Linwood, the NBLoco had another large sister factory across the Clyde at Polmadie, and Rolls-Royce had dispersal factories at Kirkintilloch and elsewhere. Beardmore in particular had always been looked to by Clyde workers for a lead. During the First World War and the 1937 apprentices' strike, the action of the shop stewards there had been crucial. Finally, all these factories had Communist convenors in mid-1941, although this changed over the next two years.

Having described the main bases of support for the CP, which were also the most militant factories, a brief outline of the small and scattered membership of the oppositional groups should be given. Of course, there was at this point no real comparison between the forces of the two sets of 'leftists' on the Clyde. One had a large body of stewards and District Committeemen, and the other had only relatively few adherents, sown in ones and twos around the workshops. The ILP, of course, had a rather large membership, but neglected to organise them industrially and they therefore remained a rather amorphous group.

Probably the best way to find out where these groups had active members is by reading their papers and journals, and locating articles which seem to have been written by someone with an intimate knowledge of the factory's internal affairs. The New Leader contained no information of this kind, as it was much less concerned with industrial matters than its counterparts on the left. The ILP's shop stewards' pamphlets published in 1943 did contain this sort of material though, and included articles from all of the three strike-prone factories.

The Socialist Appeal was no less well served, and had in-depth articles from Beardmore and Rolls-Royce Hillington over a year before the ILP's pamphlets appeared.¹ The WIL branches on the Clyde were also the largest donors to the Socialist Appeal's Fighting Fund. The Anarchists do not seem to have had a lot of industrial strength at this time, although they later produced a pamphlet on the ROF at Alexandria, and they did have their bookshop and local headquarters in Glasgow.²

These political militants were swimming against the stream throughout the war, but their progress became steady after mid-1941, as sections of the rank and file began to incline more and more to views which at least allowed those of the militants as tenable.

Mr. Galbraith, the Conciliation Officer, was a very acute observer of shifts of sentiment amongst the rank and file, and his reports to the Ministry allow us some important insights into the repercussions of the CP's change in line, and how the extreme left was able to capitalise on them. At the end of October 1941, he reported:

"A considerable body of the rank and file in the workshops seem to resent the invocation to do more from the very men who, not so long ago, were advocating a policy of indifference as increased production was dangerous to the workers. Many of the rank and file cannot understand how it is no longer dangerous and are asking embarrassing questions. The answer normally given is to say that the organised power of the workers can provide the necessary safeguards. But this explanation existed previously and is not very convincing. Accordingly, the workers who previously were all out for production are resentful and inclined to be perverse, whilst

¹SA, December 1941 (on Rolls), June 1942 (on Beardmore's).

²Ibid., July, 1942.

those who lent an ear to the Left-Wing propaganda in the past are now unsettled. This seems to be one of the factors in creating the present difficult mood of so many of the workers in this area." 1

He went on to say that the reason given by the CP themselves for the "perverse" mood of many workers at the time, Trotskyism, was "rather funny".² The loss of influence which the CP experienced at the end of 1941 amongst a stratum of militants and shop stewards accelerated at the beginning of 1942.

Galbraith himself believed that the disaffection with the CP line was far from being limited to a small group. He thought that it was deeply rooted in the attitudes of the Clydeside workers towards the appropriate relationships between employers and men. So insistent was he on this point, and so graphic in his exposition of it, that it is worth quoting him again. At the end of January 1942, he wrote:

"The rank and file of the workers do not seem to be very much stirred about this production question. They grouse and complain, murmur and mutter, but the impulse behind this attitude seems to be the ordinary one which makes the Clyde employee inclined to grouse about his employer as a matter of habit." 3

Several months later, he showed why and how the CP was losing some of its old supporters:

"They (the CP - RC) are now emphatic in their insistence upon uninterrupted work at the highest standard of intensity. For this reason they are rather suspect and have lost any influence which they had; in fact, they have stirred up a considerable

¹LAB 10/362. October 25, 1941.

²Ibid.

³LAB 10/363. January 31, 1942.

measure of suspicion amongst those who were previously willing to follow their leadership, although far from being converted to their doctrines. This is particularly noticeable in the case of those trade unionists - and there are many of them - who have associations with the ILP..."¹

The remarks on the CP's influence are interesting, because they help us to see that although opposition to the CP had not yet taken an organisational form, some left-wing trade unionists were breaking away from the CP in terms of the way that they were thinking.

Joint Production Committees, when they were raised by the CP, pushed this process further. The introduction of JPCs encountered a good deal of opposition on the Clyde (which it usually did not in other areas). In March 1942, Galbraith had remarked that "a considerable number" of the Glasgow District Committee of the AEU were opposed to the Committees because they would enable the employers to intensify exploitation when peace returned. The oppositionists were often young, and "most of them far to the Left".²

It is already possible at this point, then, in March 1942, to see that the Communist Party was beginning to lose some of its influence amongst a stratum of workers. This had not yet reached the stage of left-wing oppositionists being able to lead the disaffected stratum, but that stratum definitely existed. What type of worker was involved? At the end of July and the beginning of August 1942, Galbraith supplied several indications. He remarked that Beardmore's reputation as the centre of trouble had been 'belied' lately, but added that there was a certain amount of strike activity

¹LAB 10/363, May 2, 1942.

²Ibid., March 28, 1942.

there, despite the new line of the 'previous agitators'. He went on to say that these erstwhile agitators:

"... are being described by the rank and file as dictators because they simply insist that whatever happens work must be continued." ¹

The location of the discontent with the Communists is significant, because it gives rise to the suspicion that this feeling derived from the skilled men's view of the nature of trade unionism. Galbraith confirmed this suspicion in his next report to Headquarters. Reference was made to the 'frictions' which were occurring in the district, and it is worthwhile quoting him again:

"It is quite evident that there is a considerable body of opinion in these (frictions) which rather resents the present tendency towards intensified co-operation between employer and worker. They belong to the old school for the most part - the school who thought it the duty of the Trade Unions to extract as much as possible from the employers, and they take the view that even in wartime this should be the policy of the organisations. They are taking the place of the Communists in leading any group which has a grievance and in encouraging this (sic) to take action, normally apart from the trade unions, to get it removed." ²

Galbraith thought, then, that the type of worker involved in disputes was what he had called on a later occasion (and in a similar connection), the worker with an "ASE attitude".³ Signs of discontent with the CP were proliferating, then, but there was no indication that the extreme left was making any headway, with the important exception of their forming a bloc on the AEU DC.

¹LAB 10/363. July 25, 1942.

²Ibid., August 1, 1942.

³Ibid., August 22, 1942.

During the summer of 1942, there was an instance of CP stewards losing their cards through a JPC dispute. A disagreement arose at Beardmore's Parkhead between the majority of the stewards and a minority who were opposed to the proposed JPC. The tension originated at the end of 1941, when the shop stewards' committee held a meeting to discuss increasing production. Many stewards stayed away, leaving the field open to the CP, who were in any case in a two-thirds majority on the committee. They passed a motion to hold a mass meeting, which in turn decided that a ballot vote should be taken on the question of a JPC. One thousand five hundred voted for, and seven hundred against. The Socialist Appeal claimed that shop stewards who had supported the JPC were being thrown out by their members in some areas. The factory won its JPC, but the newly-formed All Trades Works Committee disintegrated under the pressure of the dispute. The Socialist Appeal claimed that the committee had been destroyed by the CP because they had failed to gain control of it.¹ Their judgement seems likely to have been blurred by sectarianism in this detail, but it was definitely the case that the JPC's inauguration and the All Trades Works Committee's demise were closely associated.

In any event, the CP was unable to prevent the continued outbreak of sectional strikes at Beardmore's or the other strike-prone factories. Through their involvement in the acrimonious JPC debates and by leading sectional strikes wherever possible, the Trotskyists began to gain support. In August 1942, Galbraith reported that:

"To this disturbing element (the Trotskyists - RC)
all the malcontents of one kind and another have

¹SA, June, 1942.

attached themselves, and it is this section which is, in the main, responsible for stirring up pettifogging bother wherever circumstances favour this..."¹

As a result of heated debates amongst the shop stewards and District Committeemen, arising out of two relatively minor strikes at the North British Locomotive Queen's Park, the Trotskyists were able to form a revived Clyde Workers' Committee. Prospects then arose for going beyond "stirring up pettifogging bother".

The first strike occurred over the management's insistence that piece work earnings would be reduced when the factory reverted to locomotive building after having been on aircraft work. Originally, the shop stewards' committee had argued at a mass meeting against strike action, but their arguments were rejected. Stiffened by the obviously militant feelings of their members, the shop stewards prevented local officials from speaking to the men at a further mass meeting. The Conciliation Officer thought that the strike had now become a "clear cut battle between the official and unofficial elements". If so, then the battle was won by the official elements. The AEU DC asked the shop stewards to call a strikers' meeting. At the meeting, the officials, District Committeemen and Galbraith addressed the strikers and talked them into a vote for a return to work.²

During the strike, Galbraith had made an interesting remark about the "vendetta" which had developed between the shop stewards' committee at the NBLoco, whose leadership was ex-Communist, and the AEU DC, which

¹ LAB 10/363. August 8, 1942.

² Ibid., October 31, November 14, 1942.

was of course still under CP control.¹ The strike had confirmed these "renegades" in their views, and another dispute at this factory resulted in their initiating a campaign in the district to remove the CP from its position on the AEU DC.

The strike was a stay-in strike of Boilermakers, who objected to new bonus payment arrangements. It started at the end of November 1942, and continued into mid-December, until the Conciliation Officer initiated legal action against the strikers, which brought the stoppage to an end.² It was felt that the DC had done nothing to support the NBLoco men in either of these battles. A group of stewards and convenors accordingly produced a leaflet which was circularised in the district condemning the CP's role, and calling for a good turnout at the next Quarterly meeting of shop stewards, which was to elect two of the four shop steward delegates to the DC. It was signed by two convenors, Gray and Menzies, and by an ex-convenor and senior steward at Beardmore Parkhead, Doherty. These men were also District Committeemen.³ Enraged by their action, the Communists proposed a motion that these three should be suspended from holding all office for twelve months, which was upheld by thirteen votes to eleven. According to the Socialist Appeal, a deputation of shop stewards attended the next meeting of the DC to protest at being deprived of the services of their convenor, and some Communist shop stewards took issue with their comrade Sillars.⁴

¹LAB 10/363. November 7, 1942.

²LAB 10/364. January 2, 1943.

³WIL Industrial Bulletin, May 1943 (Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Tarbuck Collection, Folder 2).

⁴SA, January, February, 1943.

On 10th February 1943, a letter appeared in the Socialist Appeal stating that a meeting had been held in the Clyde district called by the shop stewards' committee of the NBLoco, to discuss the fining of the ninety boilermakers who had struck work there. Delegates from seventeen factories attended the meeting, and the delegate from the fined boilermakers stated that there was a "strong possibility" that the men would refuse to pay the fines if they thought that support would be forthcoming from other factories. A further meeting was called for the following Sunday (meeting day during wartime) to hear reports from the other factories. A feeling was expressed by the delegates that there was a need for an organisation like the Clyde Workers' Committee of the First War to provide a lead in the area.¹

* * *

¹SA, January, February, 1943.

(2)
Clydeside

The Revived Clyde Workers' Committee

It might be argued that this section devotes an inordinate amount of attention to a relatively small group of shop stewards when we consider the oppositionists who went to make up the Clyde Workers' Committee (CWC), but there are several reasons for studying this admittedly small group. The first is that they are important from a comparative point of view, since a similarly coherent opposition to the CP amongst shop stewards did not develop elsewhere. Secondly, these stewards exerted an influence out of all proportion to their size: by 1944, although disappointed by their experiences on the shop floor, they were able to take over the AEU District Committee. Finally, their influence troubled a number of important contemporaries. Galbraith was very much concerned with their activities, and the CP equally so. In March 1943, Jack Owen visited the Clyde to write a series of articles for the Daily Worker. The Anarchist War Commentary (itself certainly not an unequivocal supporter of the CWC) ascribed this visit to the development of the Committee.¹ That their view was not far fetched can be illustrated by one of Owen's reflections on Clydeside politics:

"(The Clyde workers) are heroic fighters for their class, possessing a vitality invaluable to us, if we can guide it into the correct channels.... in such soil the fungoid growth of Anarchism, ILPism and² all such theories of the mentally inert grow."

The New Propellor was to become even more heated over the "agents of Hitler" active in the important strike at Rolls-Royce Hillington at the end of the year.

Before outlining the origins of the CWC, it is necessary to briefly touch upon the history of the extreme left-wing groups whose members revived the Committee.³ The main groups concerned were the Trotskyist Workers' International League (WIL) and the Independent Labour Party (ILP).

¹ WC, April 1943.

² DW, 17 March 1943.

³ The following section is an outline of a longer account of the history of these groups (twenty-two pages) which will be available from myself.

The micro-history of the various tiny Trotskyist grouplets between their foundation in the early 1930s and the outbreak of the Second World War has not yet been written, and it is not proposed to attempt this here. It is sufficient to note just a few points.

All of these groups were tiny, numbering only dozens; by September 1939 the two largest groups, the Workers' International League and the Revolutionary Socialist League numbered only thirty and eighty respectively. Nevertheless, the group which most interests us (because of its importance during the war), the WIL, published a duplicated agitational pamphlet entitled Youth for Socialism at irregular intervals from September 1938 onwards as well as its already established theoretical journal Workers' International News. These papers were published without any help from the Fourth International, which the WIL (unlike the RSL) had refused to join.

Up until the invasion of the Soviet Union, both the WIL and the RSL were in a difficult position because of their insistence on a 'revolutionary defeatist' line on the war. However, the WIL was already laying some important foundations for its later industrial work, by sending out its members from London with instructions to find work in munitions factories and to win stewards cards as quickly as possible. In Scotland, where the group already had a small base, WIL workers were encouraged to stay on.¹

The WIL started to make real headway from June 1941 onwards.

¹ Interview with Jack Williams, 3 November 1972.

Their paper, now called Socialist Appeal, attracted quite a wide circulation in the absence of the Daily Worker (18-20,000 was claimed to be the average paid sale in 1943).¹ By that year, membership was stated to stand at 250; the overwhelming majority of these members, an internal document of late 1942 claimed, were trade unionists, and most of these were members of the AEU.² This membership was localised, as the table below shows:

TABLE 32:

TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SOCIALIST APPEAL'S FUNDS BETWEEN OCTOBER 1941 AND OCTOBER 1945.

Glasgow:	£66.6s.4d.
Newcastle:	£20.3s.2d.
Coventry:	£13.9s.8d.
Manchester:	£ 1.17s.1d.

Note: These figures should not be taken as the actual totals received, as no contributions were acknowledged between July 1942 and November 1943.

As the above table suggests, the number of members even in Glasgow was quite small. At the same time, the organisation was well placed to intervene in industrial affairs, because WIL workers were organised into factory groups wherever a few of them worked together, as a result of an internal initiative of late 1942.³

All in all, the outlook for the WIL was relatively good by late 1943, and this was partly because, like the CP, it was now much more in line with popular attitudes towards the war. The new line was that

¹ J. Higgins: "Ten Years for the Locust. British Trotskyism 1938-1948", in International Socialism 14, Autumn 1963. (Reprinted by Swansea International Socialists, n.d.), note 5.

² J. Higgins, op.cit., p.4. "Organisational Report of the Control Committee" November 1942. (Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.)

³ Industrial Committee: "Building Factory Groups" (Directive to all Locals) (n.d., probably late 1942.) (Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.)

Russia had to be defended, but that the British ruling class would have to be forced to do this even partially. The only satisfactory way of defending British or Russian workers from Nazism was a worker's state based on worker's control in the factories. The appropriate 'transitional demands' designed to wrest workers from the political grasp of the British ruling class and towards a revolutionary worker's party included "worker's control of production to end chaos"¹. Strikes were to be supported and JPCs opposed.

The WIL's desire to help the Soviet Union, and their determination to support strikes both helped them to build amongst a small stratum of shop stewards who were at once sympathetic to the idea that the war was an anti-fascist crusade and to the view that workers had to defend themselves, by all means necessary, against their own ruling classes' attempts to take advantage. One such type of shop steward was the ILPer.

Little time need be spent on the role of the ILP amongst shop stewards (even in Scotland, where it was strongest). Although it has been estimated that the ILP grew to about two thousand members by the end of 1943, it did not interest itself as an organisation in the shop stewards except between October 1942 and November 1943². The ILP's Industrial Committee held a series of meetings on worker's control in Bradford and Birmingham in the autumn of 1941, and these were followed by further meetings in Glasgow and Motherwell in December 1942³. However, these gatherings were not intended to be solely for engineering stewards. It was the 'Total Time' strike of October 1942 which caused the ILP to publish a series of cheap and interesting pamphlets directed at militant shop stewards in the engineering and shipbuilding industries.⁴

¹ SA, October 1941.

² This estimate was given to me by Peter Thwaites of the LSE, who derived it from a sight of an (at present) unavailable internal ILP document.

³ New Leader, September 13 1941; December 26, 1942.

⁴ They cost one penny each.

The first ILP pamphlet printed a programme on its front page:

- 1. Maintain trade union practices.
- 2. Restore right of works assembly and literature distribution.
- 3. Shop steward control of deferments, transference and dismissals.
- 4. Equal pay for the job.
- 5. Independent trade unions and shop stewards - NOT whips for bosses.
- 6. For worker's control of production.¹

Inside, the pamphlet argued for a national link up of shop stewards. This theme was to become important in all of these publications, and certainly meant that the ILP stewards were amenable to a national organisation of shop stewards such as that set up by the WIL (the Militant Workers' Federation, of which more below).

The problem for the ILP stewards seems to have been securing an adequate circulation for their cheap and readable booklets; the last one contained an appeal for money on the last page.² Yet there was a deeper reason for the end of this series: the collapse of the Clyde Workers' Committee a month before the next edition was due for publication. This was a fatal blow for them, as indeed it was for the Trotskyist WIL, whose alliance with the RSL to form the Revolutionary Communist Party in early 1944 brought only minimal gains. A good deal of the extreme left's hopes had been pinned on the Clyde Workers' Committee. Ultimately, they proved to have been in vain.

* * * *

The Clyde Workers' Committee "proclaimed itself revived" in May 1943. Like the CWC of the First War, delegates did not have to represent anyone but themselves, but the aim was the affiliation of shop stewards committees. It has not been possible to discover the size of the CWC. Some of the members are listed below, but these are only those actually mentioned in contemporary documents, as definitely sitting on the Committee. There

¹ ILP: Engineers in Action (December 1942.)

² ILP: The Lessons of Barrow. (n.d.)

were at least three shop stewards from the NBLoco Queen's Park. These were the three men who had been deeply concerned in the two strikes there. Galbraith remarked on their influence on the shop stewards' committee, and although their political affiliations are obscure, they were referred to in a WIL internal document as 'our members'.¹ Doherty, the ex-convenor at Beardmore's Parkhead Forge, and departmental convenor there until he was suspended from office for twelve months, was another member. He had been a signatory of the document calling for a good turnout at the shop stewards' quarterly meeting to remove the CP shop steward delegates to the DC.² There were also three shop stewards from Rolls-Royce Hillington, who later led the strike there on women's grading.³ Roy Tearse was elected secretary. Tearse was the industrial organiser of the WIL, based in Glasgow. He was an ex-shop steward from De Havilland's Edgware, excused from military service for medical reasons.⁴ It is almost certain that this does not constitute an exhaustive list of the CWC's membership, but some conclusions may be drawn from what we do know. Not only was there obviously a good deal of experience and ability available, but the committee was built on the solid foundations of the three most militant factories on the Clyde. The CWC's stewards were in the right places to make contact with strikers, and to try to develop their implicit rejection of the CP's policies into an explicit one.

¹WIL Industrial Bulletin, May 1943 (Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick).

²SA, January, February, 1943.

³NP, November, 1943.

⁴DW, May 6, 1944. Daily Herald, May 3, 1944.

The WIL had played a leading part in reviving the CWC but it was by no means simply another hat which they donned for their Sunday meetings. Serious debates took place. We can see this in action during the first important meeting which they called to try to link up with militants in the rest of the country. The CWC invited all stewards who could gain delegation to a meeting to decide on a common programme and united action to take place at the ILP rooms in Dundas Street on June 5th and 6th. There were about thirty delegates present, from Newcastle, Barrow, the Midlands and Yorkshire, in addition to the Committee itself. Reports were given on the situation in these areas, and a consensus reached on the need for a national federation of workers' committees along similar lines to the CWC. Accordingly, each district was to delegate one of its number to a central committee, which was to call a national conference. In this way, the Militant Workers' Federation was set up.¹

So far, the meeting had been relatively quiet, but there was a debate over one important question. The ILPers present argued that the organisation should be limited to engineering, but the WIL members opposed them, as they were in favour of a more catholic body. They wanted the CWC and the Militant Workers' Federation to include all workers from all industries; they thought that the first CWC had suffered from syndicalism and a lack of class political orientation, and that the ILPers were in danger of imitating these mistakes by limiting the appeal of the new organisation.²

The WIL delegates were wildly optimistic in their assessment of

¹SA, Mid-June, 1943.

²Ibid.

the possibilities. The CWC was as yet an embryonic organisation, with no more than a toehold in a few Clydeside factories. The CP was still in control of the vital bodies like the AEU DC and the shop stewards' committees. By taking on tasks that were ridiculously out of proportion to their strength, they jeopardised their chances of success in their original tasks on the Clyde. A programme was adopted which was suitable for industry in general, but which skimmed over issues of vital importance to Clyde engineering workers. Its details were as follows:

- 1) The co-ordination of all militant tu activity
- 2) Annulment of all anti-working class legislation
- 3) Every shop a closed shop
- 4) Workers' control of transfers
- 5a) A higher standard of life for all workers
- 5b) A better standard of wages and allowances for workers in the forces
- 6) A national confederation of workers' committees
- 7) Workers' control of industry ¹

The CWC never publicly issued any other programme. The general programme which it had was clearly quite inadequate for a localised committee based on one industry. What, for example, was the meaning of item 4? "Workers' control of transfers" was clearly a long way off, since they were unilaterally determined by the National Service Officer in collaboration with other Government officials. What was required in this situation was an adequate procedure to restrain the unbridled power of these officials, which included shop steward consultation. The details of such a procedure would have been well worth the effort of working out for shop stewards active in the three factories where transfers were a burning issue.

At the time, however, optimism was in the air as far as the left

¹SA, Mid-June, 1943.

wing stewards were concerned. The CWC had been founded on defeats (the NBLoco strike and the suspension of the three District Committeemen) but the left showed signs of increased activity in the area, and some little success. Whilst the Trotskyists had been sunk deep in their efforts to breath life into the CWC, the Anarchists had been busy arranging some meetings which were a useful corollary to the organisational emphasis of the former. They built up a series of weekly political discussion meetings, in which all the groups to the left of the CP participated (and which many individual CPers tentatively visited), called the Open Forum. Audiences often numbered up to four hundred, and discussion was lively on a whole range of topics of interest to Socialists.¹ For the first time since the formation of the Communist Party, it was possible for left wingers concerned with developing socialist ideas in opposition to those of the CP itself to attend sizeable public meetings without attaching themselves to any specific faction.

The oppositional stewards were also making concrete gains in their efforts to loosen the hold of the CP on the AEU District Committee. At the quarterly meeting of shop stewards held in early 1943 which stewards anxious to dislodge the CP shop steward representatives on the DC had been urged to attend, Tom Sillars lost his place, and the other CP delegate, McLaren (steward at Beardmore's Parkhead) was only elected as the fourth steward.²

¹ A 'Workers' Open Forum' existed in Glasgow in 1936 (Regeneración, August 2, 1936). SA, November 1943, contains an account of such a large meeting, addressed by Ted Grant of the WIL. The meeting was chaired by Alec Rioch, described as "a Clydeside militant and former member of the CP," and "many shades of opinion were represented..."

² WIL Industrial Bulletin, May 1943.

The CWC had been built on the basis of the three most militant factories, and the opposition to the CP on the AEU DC, but most of the grist to the agitational mill of the oppositional elements both inside and outside of the CWC proved rather different. The strikes at Rolls-Royce, Barr and Stroud and the Clyde apprentices, all involved a considerable proportion of non-union workers, as many contemporary Coventry strikes did. These strikes half involved the three militant factories, and half not. The Rolls strike clearly did, the Barr and Stroud equally clearly did not, and the apprentices' strike occurred in these factories, as well as in others. It is worthwhile noting that the opposition to the CP had their greatest success in the two Rolls-Royce strikes, where they were able to actually lead the strikers out of the gates, and probably the least success in the Barr and Stroud strike, where they largely came from outside. Leading a strike in a stewards' own factory in the face of violent opposition was one thing, but introducing oneself to a group of female Glaswegian pickets on a wartime winter's evening was obviously another.

The latter half of 1943 saw the beginnings of effective organisation by the CWC on the shop floor at Rolls-Royce. In July, a mass meeting voted for strike action there over the reduction of a piece work time. The shop stewards' committee ignored the mass meeting's decision, and sought a third Works Conference on the matter with management. On 2nd August, a thousand workers voted to come out on strike, and that Friday the rest of the factory voted to come out on the following Monday. On Saturday, 6th August A. McElroy, the convenor and prominent Communist, put a motion on the shop stewards' committee that the strikers be supported financially by the rest of the factory, but the motion was defeated in favour of one recommending a return to work.

McElroy then announced his resignation from the CP. When the decision was made known to a mass meeting of strikers the same day, it was booed. Craigie Hill, the departmental convenor, denounced the recommendation as "a scandal" and called on the factory's workers to replace the CPers on the committee.¹ The strike ended, but five CP shop stewards lost their cards.² The Trotskyists claimed that the CP were "on the retreat" in the factory as a result of the incident.³ A leading CP steward later wrote to the Socialist Appeal denying that they were on the retreat, citing as evidence the fact that CP speakers had offered to speak in any part of the factory in defence of their anti-strike policy, but that they had not been taken up on their offer.⁴ It does not seem to have occurred to the steward that nobody wished to hear the policy defended, nor that he had not refuted the main thrust of the Trotskyists' interpretation of events.

This incident was an overture to the much more important strike which took place that Autumn over women's grading, but it shows that the rank and file in the factory were beginning to have serious doubts about the Communist shop stewards. It has already been pointed out that women's wages were a sore point at this factory, and there had been a large number of hours spent in conference rooms trying to hammer out a solution. Eventually, the matter went to Central Conference, and a basic rate of 29/- was awarded to women with a certain degree of skill, as opposed to the national basic of 25/-,

¹SA, Mid-August, 1943.

²Ibid., October, 1943.

³Ibid., Mid-August, 1943.

⁴Ibid., September, 1943.

for unskilled women.¹ The women were satisfied with the decision until they discovered that no less than eighty percent of them were entitled to only the 25/-.² On 24th October, women started to come out section by section, and during the next two days the rest of the factory followed suit.³ Once the strike had started, the majority of the shop stewards' negotiating committee decided to support the strike, despite the opposition of Wal Hannington,⁴ who had travelled up from London to replace the local official. The majority of the shop stewards' committee continued to adhere to their original attitude of opposing the strike.⁵

Accordingly, the shop stewards proposed a return to work to a mass meeting held the following Monday, but only three hundred of the five thousand present voted in favour of their recommendation.⁶ The New Propellor attributed this fact to the pernicious influence of the CWC stewards, who had held the meetings which had decided on striking, had led them out, and who produced leaflets attacking the officials and the majority of the shop stewards for having passively accepted the agreement. The New Propellor also accused the leading CWC steward of having held his own separate mass meeting, where he tried to set up a separate strike committee.⁷

By 9th November, it was becoming clear that Galbraith was becoming increasingly disturbed about the repercussions that the Rolls-Royce

¹LAB 10/364. November 5, 1943.

²SA, November, 1943.

³LAB 10/364. November 5, 1943.

⁴NP, November, 1943.

⁵LAB 10/364. November 5, 1943.

⁶Ibid.

⁷NP, December, 1943.

strike was having in the district. Just after the main stoppage had begun, women at the adjacent Aeroplastics factory had also stopped work in support of the Rolls-Royce strikers.¹ On 9th November, Galbraith had to report in a special letter to the London Headquarters of the Ministry that women at the Coventry Gauge and Tool's Glasgow factory had also come out in support, and that women at Barr and Stroud's and the NBLoco had voted to do the same in response to the CWC's leaflet A Message to all Clydeside Workers.² That they did not actually do so was only due to the fact that the main strike was brought to a speedy conclusion.

The Conciliation Officer, searching hard for a way to end the dispute suggested a means of achieving this end to the shop stewards, which they adopted: a ballot vote instead of a show of hands at a mass meeting. The shop stewards Galbraith was dealing with were enthusiastic about the idea, and in fact asked him to have the ballot papers produced. The secret ballot is a device normally opposed by shop stewards because it allows workers to vote without having to explain their decision to their workmates, but in this case the majority of stewards were willing to use it in order to end the strike. It certainly had the desired effect because the ballot showed (in a poll of less than 25%) that 3,522 were against the strike and only 967 in favour.³

However, this was still not entirely the end of the matter, because there was further trouble at the small Rolls-Royce factories at Thornliebank and Alexandra Parade. The women at these factories

¹LAB 10/364. November 5, 1943.

²LAB 10/281. Galbraith to Gould, November 9, 1943.

³LAB 10/364. November 12, 1943.

were demanding higher grading than they had been given, and struck work. There were attempts to get sympathetic action at the main Hillington factory, but only one section of one hundred women stopped work in their support.¹

What part had the CWC played in the dispute? Galbraith agreed with the New Propellor that they had led it: "a relatively small number" recognisable by their leaflets, had succeeded in "bringing about a most serious interruption of work". He hastened to add of course that the Conciliation Department had played its part to "overcome the temporary control of the position which this unofficial minority had secured..."² Leading strikes at a factory level was essential if the CWC was to have any real impact, but in itself it was only the pre-condition of leading the local oppositional elements out of their isolation and towards the construction of a viable alternative to the CP. In this case, they had made some indication of their willingness and ability to go beyond factory strikes. Firstly, they had persuaded the Conciliation Officer that sympathetic action in the rest of the district was a real possibility, although the speedy conclusion of the strike left little time to bring this about.³ Secondly, they had been able to lead one small group of women out in sympathy with their sisters at the smaller factories.

The dispute itself went to arbitration, and the result was felt to be unsatisfactory, but the women had succeeded in stimulating an "acute interest" in the whole area of women's wages.⁴ One result was the strike at Barr and Stroud's for an increase on the basic rate.

¹LAB 10/364.. November 12, 1943.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

The women at Barr and Stroud's were 75% unorganised, and earned only twelve shillings on the basic rate, about half the rate at Rolls-Royce Hillington. They demanded fourteen shillings to make their rate up to twenty-six shillings, and were offered eight shillings for time workers and seven for piece. Two thousand women struck work, but the shop stewards' committee split right down the middle on whether or not to support them. The AEU Divisional Organiser, Allan, pointed out that since there was no two thirds majority in favour of striking, there could be no strike.¹

From the beginning, the dispute was a battle royal between the leaders of the strike and the CWC on the one side and the CP and the officials on the other. Neither of the convenors were members of a political party, the CP convenor having been deposed some time previously. The strikers consistently excluded the local and national officials from their mass meetings, but the officials concentrated on ensuring that the strike did not spread to the rest of the factory. They were supported by the CP, who also had some women members following Party policy on what to do when forced to strike: coming out and arguing for a return on the picket lines. One Miss Higgins was reported as saying to the Glasgow Evening Citizen "Isn't it a shame that we are on strike in the middle of a War?" Miss Higgins was of course only echoing the Party line, but the AEU convenor, Charlie Menzies, pulled her up sharply by pointing out that the CP opposed strikes now, but had supported them at the time of Dunkirk.²

At first, it seemed likely that the strike would be extended to

¹WC, January, 1944.

²Ibid.

the rest of the factory, because four hundred men came out. In fact, however, this did not really represent a strengthening of the strike, because those left in were a hard core of anti-strikers. Galbraith was pleased that the extension had occurred for this very reason.¹ The hard core could only be hissed and shouted at as they passed through the picket lines; the men strikers could not argue with them during the long wartime hours of work.

Nevertheless, this paradox was not immediately apparent, and the morale of the strikers was initially boosted by the active support of the four hundred men. There were hopes that the rest of the district would come out. One shop steward was quoted as saying that they must "empty the river". Monetary support was certainly available from other factories: £48 was received from Albion Motors, £58 from the Beardmore factories, and £100 from Vickers Barrow.² Galbraith even thought it possible that the strike would spread into a national one. He was therefore particularly worried by the high level of involvement of the extreme left in the dispute, singling out Roy Tearse of the WIL and CWC for special mention in dispatches.³

It was not long before it became clear that the existing position had reached stalemate. The management, with a masterly sense of timing, offered the convenors negotiations within forty-eight hours of a return to work. Charlie Menzies reluctantly advised acceptance:

"This is one of the rottenest jobs I have ever had to do, to recommend you to return to work on the basis of negotiations. I cannot offer you anything except

¹WC, mid-January, 1944.

²Ibid.

³LAB 10/445. January 7, 14, 21, 28, 1944.

negotiations... We took into consideration the fact that we have not had the support of the male workers in toto, nor have we had the support of the workers on the Clyde." 1

Obviously, Menzies did not consider the financial support they had received to be the kind of support required. When negotiations took place, the women gained an eight shilling per week increase for time and piece workers alike.²

Galbraith had expected, like Charlie Menzies, that the strike would escalate. When it did not, and the strike ended, he recorded his satisfaction with the outcome. He considered that little had been won over and above the management's original offer, and that the failure of the "unofficial elements" would prevent the matter arising again.³ He clearly thought that to the extent that the CWC had successfully latched on to the women's movement for higher wages, they had lost their momentum, because the Barr and Stroud strike was considered a failure.

These strikes taken together represented an important setback for the CWC. As Harry McShane wrote in the Daily Worker with regard to their support for the apprentices' strike of 1944: "Despite bombastic promises they have never led a successful strike".⁴ As McShane had so pointedly argued, their bark had been much worse than their bite. The Rolls-Royce strike had been promising, because it did have a good deal of effect in the district by stimulating an interest in women's wages and by showing (if only in a very small way)

¹WC, February, 1944.

²LAB 10/445, January 28, 1944.

³Ibid., January 14, 28, 1944.

⁴DW, March 28, 1944.

that sympathetic action was obtainable even in the face of determined opposition. The Barr and Stroud strike again raised great expectations without realising them. In so far as the campaign on women's wages, (and the idea of district action as a weapon in that campaign) was sunk, the CWC went down with it, as Galbraith had predicted. In the next two important disputes, those of the apprentices and the Albion Motors workers, the CWC remained very much in the background.

The CWC had tried to extend the fight over women's wages beyond the factories of origin and into the district. But their main difficulty in achieving their aim was the fact that the women in the other factories were in a quite different position to those who went on strike. The atmosphere at Beardmores and NBLoco has already been remarked upon, and it remains only to add that with the CP working against solidarity action, there was virtually no chance of the CWC breaking down the residual craft conservatism in the centres of militancy. The campaign foundered on this rock of craftism, because without the support of these factories, there could be no district support worthy of the name.

Nor was it possible for the members of the Committee to retreat to the citadels of militancy of 1941-3 and live to fight another day, because these factories had lost their primacy in terms of domestic strikes. It must be remembered that Rolls-Royce and the NBLoco had suffered two disappointing strikes each, whilst Beardmore Parkhead became isolated. In February 1943, the Beardmore shop stewards and local officials had negotiated a special agreement with the company and the Ministry of Labour, whereby the factory gained a uniquely privileged position with regard to transfers. The agreement gave a Government subsidy for workers transferred to lower-paid factories

on the Clyde.¹ The Conciliation Office was understandably pleased with the agreement, because it removed the other potential cause of district-wide strikes, by making Beardmore, the best paid and most important factory, a special case.² If the Beardmore stewards had taken the agreement to other stewards in the district and suggested a campaign to get similar agreements in other factories, the tactic might have backfired on the Ministry, but they did not. The CWC was only just being formed at that time, and the majority of stewards there were no doubt pleased enough to have the agreement safely signed and sealed.

The Beardmore shop stewards seem to have allowed themselves to slip into a comfortable complacency. They had not been perhaps as militant as they might have been about the transfer issue, but their conservatism soon began to infect their internal affairs. Fifteen months after the transfer agreement, the management succeeded in establishing, after only three weeks, that shop stewards who represented members in more than one department did not have the right to move freely between them.³ This represented an important inroad into stewards' rights. "The right to see" had been established at Parkhead during the First World War, and it was now lost without a fight.⁴

¹LAB 10/364. January 16, 1943.

²Ibid., February 20, 1943.

³LAB 10/455. July 14, August 4, 1944.

⁴See Hinton, pp. 155-6 for the withdrawal of this right by Sir William Beardmore in February 1916. One thousand of the Parkhead engineers came out on strike in response at that time.

Beardmore's Parkhead was, of course, only one of the three most militant factories, but it was the most important one. All of these factories declined in militancy in 1944 after the setbacks of the previous year, so that already by the time of the Barr and Stroud dispute, there was a relative lack of domestic aggression in these factories, which boded ill for the development of district action led by them. The number of days lost through strikes increased in the district in 1944, but declined in the three factories. Only 3,940 days were lost in ten strikes, of 138,489 lost in sixteen throughout the area. It is also clear that their average size had greatly decreased: a disintegration of large scale departmental and factory strikes into small scale sectional disputes was taking place. The average number of days lost through strikes at Rolls-Royce, NBLoco and Beardmore's declined from an average 4,276 in the previous three years to an average 394 in 1944. The trend in the district ran in the diametrically opposite direction, with 8,656 days lost per strike as opposed to 1,985 in 1941-43.

This, then, is the background to the decline of the Clyde Workers' Committee. The factories in which these workers were stewards no longer constituted fertile soil for the growth of their type of opposition. Without strikes, and the increased tempo of workers' trade union activity, discussion and thought that they brought, the agitators were left high and dry. Moreover, where they had intervened in strikes, they had achieved some limited success in one, and none at all in the next one. For a small organisation, this was not a bad record, but they had taken on the mantle of the Clyde Workers' Committee, and they were judged by harsh yardsticks. The committee

had been founded on defeat, but defeat was an unappetising staple diet. More disgruntled militants might move towards them, but they needed to break out from these limited circles, if they were to influence the thousands of workers who had been recruited by the Clyde branches of the CP after July 1941. The CWC only had any real future to the extent that it was founded on a local trade union movement that was confident and well organised. It could operate in this context, and play its part in extending and deepening existing gains and workshop controls. When the local movement was itself weakened at vital points, and they were unable (quite understandably) to transcend these difficulties, they were finished as the heirs to the CWC's tradition.

The CWC continued to meet, but their declining influence was illustrated by the Clyde apprentices' strike of 1944. The strike was led by the Tyne apprentices, and was in support of a demand that the "Bevin ballot" scheme for calling up young engineering workers for national service in the mines be withdrawn. The Clyde apprentices were in contact with their counterparts on the Tyne, and served notice on 13th March, that unless the call-up of three Tyneside apprentices was withdrawn, then they would strike in concert as from 28th March.¹ The strike gathered momentum on the Clyde more slowly than on the Tyne: six thousand apprentices were out in the North-East on 28th March, and the strike spread over the next two days, but March 30th saw only 35% of the Clyde apprentices out (4,800).² Galbraith suggested that the strike was far from solid, and added that in at least two establishments, apprentices had only stopped work for

¹LAB 10/451. March 13, 1944.

²Ibid., March 28, 29, 1944.

two to three hours.¹

One reason for the strike's lack of cohesion was the firm opposition of the AEU and Confederation DCs. The only concrete support for the strikers came from some members of the Open Forum, who ran what they called the "Solidarity Press", and who printed the apprentices' leaflets for them free. These men were identified by the Conciliation Officer as being "philosophic anarchists" who had split with the CP on the issue of the nature of the war.² It is easily understandable, given their political philosophy, that they should want to be involved. The apprentices showed what they regarded as ideal qualities of militancy: many of them were non-unionists, and they exhibited a good deal of hostility towards the trade union officials. Nevertheless, the WIL was active amongst the Tyne apprentices and was therefore all the more conspicuous by its inactivity on the Clyde.

The strike soon showed signs of disintegrating. By April 1st, John Brown's apprentices had decided to return to work, a number of individual firms in the East End had returned, and the 'mass meeting' of apprentices on Glasgow Green on March 31st had been a flop.³ Three days later, only 3,087 apprentices were still on strike, and the dispute would have ended had it not been for the victimisation of some lads at John Brown's.⁴

The apprentices' strike had shown that the Clyde Workers' Committee had, temporarily at least, given way to the Anarchists as the leaders of the opposition. It had also shown that the CP was still in control of the District Committee, and capable of using its influence at

¹LAB 10/451. March 30, 1944.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., April 11, 1944.

⁴Ibid., April 4, 5, 10, 1944.

John Brown's to secure a resumption of work.

During April, these circumstances changed considerably, when the CP majority on the AEU District Committee was deposed.¹ The oppositional left had always been active in trying to crack the CP hegemony on the district bodies, and had moved steadily towards success since 1941, but now they had at last arrived. Perhaps the decisive factor was the failure of the CWC, and a consequent turn towards the official machinery of the union. This is speculation, but it did not in fact represent an advance over the type of organisation that the CWC had tried to be. Politically, it represented a retreat. The AEU DC was, needless to say, an important body in the union's machinery, but this self-evident strength was also its weakness, in that it could be subject to strong pressure from the Executive, from which groups of shop stewards were relatively immune. The Executive had never interfered with the CWC, for example. Ultimately, the power of the shop stewards rested in the workshops; they could carry out strike action, pursue more limited sanctions, conduct collections and so on which, if well prepared, could all be protected from the 'outside influence' of the EC in London.

The Albion Motors strike of 1944 pointed up both aspects of this argument, because it showed how the DC could be restricted by the Executive, and how acutely the lack of district shop steward support was felt in a major strike. The strike was the outcome of a complex

¹SA, May 1944. Soon after the political balance on the committee had changed, a motion was carried protesting against the arrest of Roy Tearse for his part in the apprentices' strike (ibid.)

of related grievances: the refusal of the company to allow a Works Conference on one particular Premium Bonus time, their insistence that an overtime ban would have to be lifted before any negotiation could take place, and finally, the fact that they had kept the convenor waiting for a full four hours before granting him an audience.¹ The strike began on Monday 29th August, and the shop stewards stressed the crucial nature of the dispute to their members. They told them that they were defending working conditions established during the war not just on their own behalf, but for the whole working class. They sent delegates all over the country to gain support, printing leaflets for the purpose.² The DC supported the strike from the start, the first strike to have been supported by that body since the beginning of the war, but the EC would have none of it.³

After the strike had been on for a week, the EC instructed the DC to arrange a mass meeting to ensure a return. A motion was carried to simply communicate the EC's instruction to the stewards, without further comment.⁴ The EC reiterated its original instruction to the EC, but the shop stewards sidestepped their intention by arguing to the DC (who accepted their contention) that since more than one union was involved, then these unions would also have to be invited to send speakers.⁵ The meeting was thus further delayed.

Meanwhile, the company was beginning to crumble. They lifted their requirement for the overtime ban to be ended before negotiations

¹LAB 10/445. September 1, 8, 1944.

²WC, mid-September, 1944.

³LAB 10/445. September 8, 1944.

⁴Ibid., September 15, 1944.

⁵Ibid., September 22, 1944.

could be started.¹ Two more mass meetings were held over the next six weeks. At the first, a District Committeeman proposed that only the improvement of premium bonus times within a fortnight of a return would be an acceptable basis for an end to the strike, and this was accepted. The second meeting reaffirmed their decision.² By now, the strikers were having to take street collections to alleviate the financial hardship which was afflicting many of them.³ At what was to be the last mass meeting, the Executive again instructed the DC and the strikers that the strike must be ended. The convenor agreed with the EC speaker, saying that financial hardship was making the strike's continuation impossible. The EC's motion was put, and the motion adjudged carried by one vote.⁴

The District Committee had done its best to support the strike, but it could not organise the sort of support that the Albion men and women needed. Since the EC was pressurising them so forcefully, it was all they could do to encourage the strikers to stand firm. District strike action or a district levy was out of the question, and would probably have led to their suspension, as it had in the case of the Barrow DC the previous year. In the absence of a district shop stewards' organisation, they could not even conduct systematic and regular workshop collections to help those suffering extreme financial hardship.

¹LAB 10/445, September 22, 1944.

²Ibid., September 29, 1944.

³Ibid., October 13, 1944.

⁴Ibid., October 20, 1944.

The Albion strike had been presented by the stewards as a strike in defence of the working class advances made during the war, and had been a failure. The trade union movement on the Clyde had been looking on the strike as a test case, and did not recover sufficiently over the next year or so to fight redundancies. Determined action against redundancies on the lines of the Coventry strikes was the exception rather than the rule, so it is perhaps not surprising that there was less resistance on the Clyde than in Coventry. Nevertheless, there was a striking contrast between the Clyde's earlier militancy and the rather tired response to the problems posed by the advent of peace. In September 1945, Galbraith noted that shop stewards were making representations to MPs about the working of redundancy procedures, but that the rank and file were not really behind them in this because they were confident of better working conditions in the post-war period.¹ Their confidence in the newly elected Labour Government was shared by their brothers in Coventry rather less than wholeheartedly as they were at that moment locked in battle with the local employers over sackings.

The history of the Clyde shop stewards during the war has a quite distinctive hue to it. It is not so much the history of a locality pure and simple, rather it is the history of an especially class-conscious section of the working class, looked to by militants in the rest of the country as the pace-setters. An awareness of this fact coloured the Clyde's shop stewards' view of themselves; when the Albion stewards told their members that they would have to

¹LAB 10/534. September 7, 1945.

struggle to maintain their working conditions, they reminded them that they would be doing so on behalf of the entire working class. When the Humber shop stewards made a statement, they drew attention to the employers' attempts to depress Coventry's standards to those of the rest of Britain. The Clyde men frequently referred to their historical patrimony and especially to the cherished history of the Clyde Workers' Committee of the First War. In their past, they found a uniquely apposite justification for what might otherwise be called their slightly inflated view of their own importance. Almost every leaflet they produced contained some reference to the district's traditions, especially to the old CWC. By contrast, the Coventry stewards never used their past as a touchstone; it was as if the almost complete destruction of parts of their city was reflected in their consciousness, and they were wholly immersed in looking forward to its reconstruction on entirely new foundations.

Although the comparisons drawn in these pages are mainly structural, these structures reflected and themselves conditioned the different textures and nuances of human relations in the workshops of these two very different towns. The Clyde stewards self-consciously forging forward on numerous important national questions, their Coventry counterparts fighting hourly skirmishes with rate-fixers. Naturally, this is an over-simplification, but is none the less rooted in the collective mentalities of the two local movements.

In the first eighteen months of the war, Coventry had been afflicted with an epidemic of victimisations, centring on one important dispute at the Standard Aero, involving a Communist convenor. The strike had been successfully concluded after the threatened intervention of the district's shop stewards, marshalled by the leading

shop stewards' committee in the district. The Communists had temporarily wrested control of the AEU DC from the hands of the right wing, but they soon had to relinquish their semi-accidental ascendancy. On the Clyde, the district trade union organisations, from the Clyde DC of the AEU to the unofficial and recently set up West of Scotland Shop Stewards' Co-ordinating Committee, were in the hands of the Communists in 1940. Their position was quickly called into question by the British Auxiliaries strike. This dispute, like the Standard Aero strike in Coventry, was concerned with the victimisation of a Communist convenor, which was the bête noir of the Clyde shop stewards as well as that of their Coventry brothers. The British Auxiliaries strike was lost, partly because it had been abandoned by the CP for exterior reasons. The CP thus suffered a considerable loss of face among a small but important group of shop stewards who had looked to them to lead a district fight back on victimisations.

The performance of the Scottish Communists was all the more disappointing to the other left wing stewards when viewed against the backdrop of a generally militant response to wartime problems during 1940, an extremely quiet year for industrial relations in the rest of the country. The Clyde had comparatively good trade union organisation, especially amongst the relatively numerous and important skilled men in the district, and a number of factory strikes showed there was a basis for aggressive action on a more generalised scale. The Coventry stewards did not have these advantages in terms of trade union organisation; indeed, industrial expansion there was such that they might have been excused for concentrating exclusively on factory matters and the recruitment of workers into the unions.

During the early part of the war, the concerns of shop stewards in both districts had been quite similar. A certain concern with the

victimisation question continued, of course (it is a constant motif of shop steward history), but shop stewards both in Coventry and on the Clyde were able to take up other matters as gradually improved trade union membership made victimisation less likely. In Coventry, the issue which gave rise to the highest proportion of strike action was that of piece work times, whilst on the Clyde, the main issues were the transference of skilled men from the highest paid factories and women's wages. Both in Coventry and on the Clyde, the main Communist factories in the district were the best paid, and probably the best organised in terms of trade union membership. There was one important difference between the two groups of factories, however. In Coventry, the CP factories were the least strike-prone, whereas on the Clyde, they were the most strike-prone. Indeed, in terms of working days lost, the contrast is quite startling.

This situation, combined with the precocious level of 'ultra-left' political culture on the Clyde, gave rise to an opposition to the leadership of the CP in the local shop stewards' movement. A series of debates around major issues (the British Auxiliaries strike, JPCs, the NBLoco strike) allowed this initially incoherent grouping to establish a collective identity, and to claim the heritage of the Clyde Workers' Committee.

The Clydeside oppositionists were able to draw on a shift in workers' understanding of the Communists' role in industrial relations which does not seem to have taken place in such a clear way in Coventry. The Clyde was exceptional in this respect, and it is not therefore necessary to advance a specific explanation for Coventry's lack of a similar shift. Nevertheless, there were powerful forces which militated strongly in the opposite direction

in the Midland town. Workers there had been recruited to trade unionism by CPers to a much greater extent than they had elsewhere; their whole conception of the meaning of trade unionism was thus shaped by the Communists, and one indirect reflection of this fact was the veritable stampede into the ranks of the local Party immediately after the entry of the USSR into the war.

The revived Clyde Workers' Committee was founded on the basis of support in the three main CP factories, but this basis was removed from under them almost as soon as the Committee was founded. During 1943, some serious setbacks were inflicted on the shop stewards (some of which resulted in the crystallisation of the opposition in the first place) in these factories which consequently lost their primacy. The CWC was active around two major strikes, both of which concerned women's basic rates. The first, at Rolls-Royce, occurred where they were strong, and were in a position to lead the strike. The second, at Barr and Stroud's, was lost, not through anything that could be described as their fault, but because the strike was not solid in Barr and Stroud's itself. As we saw in the case of the Standard Aero strike in Coventry in 1940, it was very hard to actually achieve concrete sympathetic action in support of a partial strike, even when the CP was supporting strikes. There were also additional general difficulties involved with agitating around strikes at this time. Many of them involved non-unionists, like similar (but much smaller and more fragmentary) strikes in Coventry. Women had been systematically excluded from trade union membership by a small group of AEU convenors with an ASE mentality towards females in the workshop. These workers tended to be extremely volatile, in that it was hard to predict when they would act, and equally hard

to tell when they had burned themselves out. Both the Rolls-Royce and the Barr and Stroud strikes ended soon after they had stopped attracting more strikers to their cause. They lacked not only the loyalty to the stultifying strictures of trade union discipline urged on them by the Communists; they also lacked experience of striking and of resisting the ideological and material pressures exerted upon them to return. It is doubtful whether an opposition could have been built on these foundations, even had the strikes been successful. Certainly, nothing came of them in Coventry, although this must partly be accounted for by the fact that they took place outside of the main centres of industrial-political life. In any event, the ground was cut from beneath the CWC, and it collapsed, leaving the field open to the Anarchists of the Open Forum during the apprentices' strike of 1944.

However, the extreme left was not entirely finished, even if the CWC was. They had been attempting to shatter the dominance exercised by the CP over the district's trade union bodies for at least three years, and they succeeded in taking over the AEU DC in 1944. Superficially, this gain might seem to more than compensate them for their earlier loss, but the Albion Motors strike showed that it did not. Pressurised by local and national officialdom, the DC could do little for the strikers except offer them their moral support and their leadership. Only a district organisation of shop stewards could have organised the large scale financial support and strike action which they really required. Paradoxically, it was the existence of a Communist Divisional Organiser which ensured that the strike would not drum up the necessary support in the district. Sillars could nip any nascent organisation in the bud, but in Coventry the

existence of a District Committee and AEU local officials dominated by the right allowed and even drove the CP to organise to a much higher level until their action, too, was cut short by the national executives.

* * *

APPENDIXBeardmore Parkhead, NBLoco Queen's Park and Rolls-Royce Hillington.

Note: Since these three groups of factories were so important, it is worthwhile giving some more details about them. Rolls-Royce Hillington was a huge new aero-engine factory built at the end of 1939, and beginning production in early 1940 on a new industrial estate just outside of Glasgow. At its peak, it employed nearly 25,000 workers; by the end of October 1943, only 4½% of these workers were skilled men, and 39% of the workforce were women. The CP played a considerable role in organising the factory. (Report by a Court of Inquiry Concerning a Dispute at an Engineering Undertaking in Scotland (Cmd 6474, October 1943, para. II), DW, October 22, 1940). Beardmore's Parkhead was a much older establishment, built during the late Nineteenth Century. At the end of 1928, it covered a total area of 200 acres, with the West Works employed on steel production and the East Works on locomotive, ordnance and marine engineering work. The machinery was capable of machining castings up to sixty tons in weight, and there was only one light machine shop, 'M' shop. In the armour finishing shops, there was a whole range of heavy machinery for 'special machining jobs of a large, difficult and awkward character'. During the Second War, much of the work there was marine engineering and tank construction. Beardmore's total Scottish workforce was about thirty thousand, including the Dalmuir works and shipyard and the ROF at Linwood, which it managed from 1941. (Hinton, pp. 117-120, 167-9; Daily Telegraph, October 29, 30, 31, 1928; Lab 10/445, 28 April 1944.) The North British Locomotive Co. was an amalgamation of three companies, with three factories: the Atlas Works, Queen's Park and Hyde Park. In 1913, they employed 8,437 workers. By the end of the First War, they were mainly employed on

aircraft work, with 1,781 women workers. Between the wars, they were the largest locomotive manufacturers in Europe, with a paid-up capital of £2,250,000, but were very much hampered by their failure to diversify and their lack of standardisation of components. Their rate of introduction of new machinery was called 'slow' by a 1928 Government Committee. During the Second World War, they were mainly employed on tank and locomotive manufacture. Their type of work, like Beardmore's, was considered unsuitable for large-scale dilution. (W.R. Scott and J. Cunnison: The Industries of the Clyde Valley During the War, (Oxford, 1924), p. 113; Committee on Industry and Trade: Survey of Metal Industries (HMSO, 1928), p. 182; LAB 10/363, 25 July 1943; LAB 10/360, 17 August, 1940).

TYNESIDE

The Tyne, like the Clyde, had suffered acutely during the inter-war years from its heavy dependence on the declining shipbuilding and marine engineering industries. Newcastle, the equivalent of Glasgow as the commercial and industrial kingpin of the river, was generally speaking marginally better off than Glasgow in terms of its rate of unemployment in the early 1930s. It had a monthly average of 26.7% in 1932, compared to Glasgow's 30.7%.¹ Some of the Tyne towns, and especially the renowned Jarrow, fared especially badly. In the summer of 1932, Jarrow registered the almost incredible rate of 80% of the total insured population as unemployed.² The only hope for the young men was to move out of the area, which they showed themselves much more willing to do than their Scottish counterparts. During 1935 and 1936, nearly 50,000 people transferred out of the area under the Government Transference Scheme, and although some of these people returned, the area was drained of young workers.³ Thus Gateshead, for example, lost 6.1% of its 1931 population by 1938, although Newcastle recorded a slight increase in its numbers, of 1.8%, to take it to 286,255.⁴

However, Newcastle's increase was only just over half that of Glasgow's in the same period. This was partly because Tyneside was relatively poorly placed to take advantage of the rearmament orders which were helping the Clyde. Only Vickers Armstrong was being awarded munitions contracts, whereas Beardmores, NBLoco and Rolls Royce all had Government orders.⁵ Moreover, the area had been almost completely

¹M.P. Fogarty, op.cit., pp. 31-33.

²E. Wilkinson: The Town That Was Murdered, (1939), p. 155.

³Report of the Commissioner for the Special Areas (England and Wales), February 1936, p. 34. November 1936, p. 24.

⁴M.P. Fogarty, op.cit., pp. 26-30.

⁵Report of the Commissioner etc., September 1937, p. 18.

unsuccessful in attracting new industry from private or Government sources. At the end of 1938, the Commissioner for the Special Areas reported that although four new (and very small) new factories had been opened on Tyneside, the same number had also closed down.¹

An illustration of the lack of success experienced by the Government in attracting industry comes from their attempt to develop the derelict Gateshead-Tynebank area. The Government commissioned a special report from a surveyor, who reported that "the area as a whole presents an extraordinary and almost incredible picture of desolation", and that the only hope was to try to make the site "a little less likely to repel industry". It took until March 1938 for the Commissioner for the Depressed Area to arrange for the site to be developed, but by the following year, it had been decided that the area could be reclaimed, but that no provision could be made for factories there.²

By 1938, there was some glimmer of a revival in the local industrial scene, with a slight decline in the number transferring out of the area. Some Admiralty contracts were beginning to flow in, but amongst young workers especially, prospects of work were still not good. Newcastle, Jarrow and North Shields all had over 6% youth unemployment in February 1940; this represented the worst situation in Britain with the exception of some Clydeside towns, Sunderland and Liverpool.³

¹ Report of the Commissioner etc., September 1938, p. 23.

² LAB 8/206. Report by Sir Alexander Gibb and Partners, July 1936, and documents dated September 10, 1936, March 29, 1938 and May 3, 1939 from the Commissioner to the Ministry of Labour in London. Another interesting file on a related topic is LAB 8/205, 'Inducements for Industry to set up in Depressed Areas', makes it clear that some areas were more or less written off as hopeless in terms of the prospects of attracting industry.

³ LAB 19/81. Number of Juveniles in Register, 12 February, 1940.

During the First World War, the Tyneside engineers had been relatively passive. From being one of the most combative areas in the fight for 'local autonomy' before 1914, the North-East had little more than the status of a backwater in the important national disputes. The inter-war experience of large-scale unemployment in the Tyne shipbuilding and marine engineering communities evidently did nothing to dispel this relative backwardness in the first half of the Second War. There was one specific reason which we have already seen in operation in the case of Manchester: relative freedom from the heavy bombing inflicted on the aircraft production centres of the South. The Conciliation Officer thought this was an important consideration in the workers' minds when he recorded that there had been no strikes in the engineering industry on the Tyne up to September 1941.¹ The district remained completely strike free until March 1941, when the apprentices at Swan Hunter's yard came out for one day only in support of the Clyde lads' demand for a larger share of the adult national pay award of five shillings.

The attitude of the Tyneside engineers and shipyard tradesmen epitomised one aspect of British workers' view of the war effort, in that they were willing to make tremendous sacrifices for the sake of production. It is impossible to document this with any pretensions to comparative rigour, but the local papers often carried articles describing prodigious feats of endurance by local workers. Of course, this may partly be attributable to the political views of these papers, but even if this was the case, the influence of the papers themselves cannot be entirely discounted. Here is one example from the Journal

¹LAB 10/386, September 14, 1940.

and North Mail for 25th February 1943 (note the date: shipyard men were used to working overtime in the warm and light summer evenings, but were not accustomed to long hours in the winter). The article is headed: Yard Men Worked Until They Dropped, and deals with the gargantuan capacity for work of one gang of Boilermakers, who fitted out an aircraft carrier's boilers in three weeks, a job which normally took three months at least. All seven thousand tubes had to be carried from the quayside to the boiler rooms of the ship at anchor by lighter. The men worked through shifts, and "they lost count of the days and did not know whether it was daylight or dark on deck." (emphasis original) Every third or fourth day, they worked a thirty-six hour shift, stopping only for meal breaks. When they finished, many of the men fell asleep on the quayside.¹ The example comes from 1943, when much of the edge had rubbed off the "Go To It" atmosphere of the immediate post-Dunkirk period, and tiredness and irritability were creeping in.

It was difficult for the Communists to flourish in this type of industrial climate. The Conciliation Officer reported that the left's activities were "not representative of more than a few individuals" (June 1940), that the CP was "not over-popular in this area" (March 1941), or that "Little progress has been made so far by the Left" (November 1941).² The second half of 1940 saw a good deal of activity on the part of the local Communists, but without any great return in so far as the shop stewards were concerned. In July, a Labour Monthly

¹Newcastle Journal and North Mail, February 25, 1943.

²LAB 10/386, June 8, 1940; LAB 10/387, March 1, November 15, 1941.

readers' group was set up in Newcastle,¹ and in November, a "representative gathering of friends from industry" heard Harry Pollitt speak, and contributed £20 to People's Convention funds.² There was also a good deal of activity in shop steward circles. At the end of October, a quarterly meeting of AEU shop stewards passed a resolution demanding a People's Government,³ and at the beginning of December the Vickers Armstrong shop stewards, Elswick, demanded the release of Mason, the interned Sheffield shop steward.⁴

All this activity was quite creditable in CP terms, but it was still relatively limited. There were no major strikes to latch on to as there were in Coventry and the Clyde, nor was any great success registered in organising support for the People's Convention (only one signature was gained from an engineering trade unionist, compared to three each from Manchester and Glasgow).⁵ In the field of Air Raid Precautions, the CP stewards evidently made no impact despite a large local campaign. The Northumberland and Durham ARP Co-ordinating Committee comprised, among other bodies, six lodges of the Durham Miners Association, five railway trade union branches, two Trades Councils, and the CP District Committee, but not one branch of an engineering union.⁶

The general picture of the CP's influence in the factories tends

¹LM, July 1940, p. 412.

²DW, November 26, 1940.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., December 6, 1940.

⁵NP, October, 1940.

⁶DW, August 26, 1940.

to confirm the impression of a lack of penetration in local industry. Contributions to the Daily Worker Fighting Fund were few and far between: the survey of contributions showed 10/- from Newcastle engineers, and £1 from Vickers Armstrong, but nothing else.¹ Vickers was clearly the most important factory for the CP; there had been an interview with a 'prominent' shop steward there after the Quarterly meeting had demanded a People's Government, and it had been they who had demanded Mason's release.² Nevertheless, strength in this factory, the largest munitions factory by far in the area, was important because of the leading role it had always had in the district.

* * *

Towards the end of 1941 and in the first nine months of 1942 there were some small signs that the memory of the strike weapon had not been completely erased from workers' memories. Three small strikes, accounting for just seven hundred and five working days lost, took place on domestic issues. In October 1942, however, a strike broke out which altered the terms on which industrial relations were carried on nationally as well as locally. As the Anarchist War Commentary put it, the Second Front was opened at home.³

¹DW, August 5, 20, 1940.

²Ibid., October 30, 1940.

³WC, mid-October, 1942.

The strike only concerned engineering workers indirectly, because the marine engineering works and 'inside' departments were not generally involved, and only shipyard engineers came out. Nevertheless, the strike was important to industrial relations in the engineering sector, because of the impact it had on local views of the Communist Party, and because of the close relations which had always necessarily existed between the workers in the two main parts of the shipbuilding industry.

The stoppage arose from an apparently trivial issue, that did not fundamentally affect the material interests of the shipyard workers, but reflected their accumulated frustration with their wages and the conduct of their officials. The national pay claims had consistently yielded less than expected, and the employers were now asking, for clerical reasons, that the day taken as the end of the pay week be changed from Tuesday to Sunday. This would mean that on the first week of the new system, two days pay would be lost. The two days were to be repaid gradually, over several weeks, but the workers at Redheads, South Shields, overthrew the decision of their yard committee to accept the new arrangement, and struck work. The employers offered to defer the introduction of the new system to allow negotiations, but on the following Monday, the whole of the Tyne stopped work.¹

The CSEU District Committee had opposed the strike and had pleaded with shop stewards not to take extensive strike action, but the men were in fighting mood. The CSEU District Committee and the Communist Party consistently made every effort to ensure a rapid return to work. The CP was anxious to establish its new line decisively. This was

¹SA, October, 1942.

the first major strike since both the lifting of the ban on the Daily Worker and the rehabilitation of Harry Pollitt. Pollitt travelled up to the Tyneside and contacted every steward in or close to the CP and asked them not to strike. These stewards (fifty in number, according to their leaflet) issued a leaflet complaining that they were not allowed to attend the mass meetings of stewards which were running the strike, although this was denied by the strike committee. The Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Stewards National Committee issued a leaflet condemning the strike and urging a return.¹

The CP, then, was not only not following its later tendency to strike with workers and to argue on the picket lines, but was conducting a campaign for a return with every weapon at its disposal. Their energy in putting their point of view forward ensured that it was well known. The Socialist Appeal stated that: "As a result of this campaign the shipyard workers became more and more hostile to the Stalinists... the workers threatened to throw the leading Stalinist shop steward into the Tyne when he tried to address a meeting."² Whether or not this was true, it certainly seems to have been the case that the CP suffered a severe setback through opposing the strike so vociferously. After eight days on strike, with no concessions from the employers, the Strike Committee called for a return to work. They added that they were all prepared to stand for re-election as stewards, and called on all other stewards to hold meetings for the same purpose. Even the Daily Worker admitted that a number of CP shop stewards lost

¹ Political Statement of the Central Committee (of the WIL), November 1942 (Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick).

² SA, October, 1942. One reason for workers' hostility was the fact that some CPers refused to strike. (ibid.)

their cards, although the strike committee (on which the WIL apparently had some influence)¹ was entirely re-elected. The Daily Worker called on the District Committees to reinstate these stewards, but they did not.² The Socialist Appeal claimed that a 'strong bloc' left the CP, and the influence of the rest was "almost wholly shattered."³

The 'Total Time' strike, as it came to be called, had been at once an unnerving and formative experience for the CP nationally as well as locally. In later disputes, they were much more careful to take a more sympathetic attitude towards the workers involved, and to avoid strident denunciations which only brought them hostility. One factor which had influenced their view of the total time affair was the apparent triviality of the issue, but later strikes on the Tyne occurred on the quite fundamental questions of trade unionism and the boundaries of the workshop frontiers of control. During 1943 and 1944, well over ninety percent of the working days lost through strikes concerned these matters. In 1943, the most important stoppage, that at Swan Hunter's, took place, with over ten thousand working days lost. In the following year, there was a brief strike for the removal of a management spy at Reyrolle's electrical engineering works at Hebburn.

The Communists found themselves in an embarrassing situation when confronted with this sort of stoppage. They had always stressed that one of the major rights for which workers were fighting the war

¹Political Statement of the Central Committee, November 1942.

²DW, October 15, 1942.

³SA, October, 1942.

was the right to have effective trade unions which encompassed all workers, just as they had always stressed the importance of this in restraining the 'Bosstriches' from taking advantage of the workers' reluctance to strike by extending their authority in the shops. On wages questions, there was more room for discussion both about amounts and on tactics, but there was a good deal less room for manoeuvre on these more basic difficulties.

Non-trade unionism was seen as an important question on the Tyne, because the engineering shops were still dominated by craftsmen and apprentices who were sticklers on these matters and determined to eliminate the backsliders who had had some excuse in the depression years, but who were now earning enough to be able to afford their contributions. Equally, control of their working lives was crucial to the old-style engineers, and an issue which they could be expected to take a strong stand on. The men were now asserting themselves in these directions, and although they were, as it were, a whole stage behind their Clydeside counterparts in establishing these principles, they were no less determined to do so.

This craftism was one reason for the very low strike rate on the Tyne. The marine engineering shops on the Tyne and the Clyde alike, were very quiet as far as strikes were concerned. This was largely because of the very low rates of dilution. Compare the rate with that in aircraft:

Table 23 Women as % of the Total Workforce:¹

<u>Years:</u> <u>1939</u>	<u>'40</u>	<u>'41</u>	<u>'42</u>	<u>'43</u>	<u>'44</u>	<u>'45</u>
(a)2.1	2.5	4.8	9.1	14.7	15.8	12.9
(b)9.5	13.0	23.0	31.9	36.6	36.5	31.8

a) Marine Engineering b) Aircraft

¹P. Inman, op.cit., p. 80.

Less dilution meant, of course, less piece work and less disruption of jobs through technological change, and this is linked to the low strike rates in marine engineering in both areas. Even on the Clyde, only 6,268 days were lost in the industry, of some three hundred thousand days for the whole period of the war.

As the above figures show, the number of women working in the marine engineering industry was low both in comparison to the aircraft industry, and in absolute terms. Sixteen women amongst one hundred skilled engineers and their labourers must have felt very much on the defensive, almost as intruders. In general, as Mark Benney and J.T. Murphy pointed out, men were on their best behaviour in these circumstances in such matters as remembering not to swear and pouring out tea in the right order, but even Murphy (in a London factory) had to admit that there was a certain reluctance to help the women learn the trade.¹ There was some hostility to women's introduction into the workshop even in these Southern factories, and, as we have seen on the Clyde, this could lead to some action against the women's employment in certain departments. On the Tyne, where the surplus of 'mobile' women (women without families) was relatively high and the amount of additional skilled labour required relatively low, dilution was largely carried out via apprentices, and it seems quite likely that the Tyneside women were an even smaller part of the factory population than they were on the Clyde. Perhaps it is this which accounts for their general lack of militancy outside of the Rolls-Royce and Barr and Stroud strikes, where they were the overwhelming majority of the workforce.

¹J.T. Murphy, op.cit., p. 52.

Women shop stewards were recognised comparatively late on the Tyne.¹ The first woman shop steward to be given a card by the Tyne District Committee was a veteran of the women's section of the National Unemployed Workers Movement, Mrs. R.A. Dixon, a Labour Party member of fifty who was sufficiently self-confident to address a mass meeting at a Tyneside marine engineering works immediately after her recognition as shop steward. It probably required a woman of Mrs. Dixon's age, experience and perhaps marital status to stand up to the Tyne engineers.² It is interesting to see that she became a steward six weeks after the New Year, and that by then the Coventry District Committee had recognised five women shop stewards.³ There was another side to the nature of the women's involvement in shop floor trade unionism, however, and this came out during the Swan Hunter strike: they were the most enthusiastic advocates of 100% trade unionism. Positive towers of strength, they supported the strike enthusiastically, forming a formidable section of the picket line. It seems that the women had not suffered overmuch from their position in the workshops, but on the contrary, had taken up the trade union question even more vigourously than the men who had started the strike.⁴

¹We find an example of the North-Eastern male chauvinism in the NUGMW Journal (May 1944, p. 139), where the District Organiser actually argued against bringing light industry into the Tyneside area, because it would create employment for women. What was needed, he argued, was heavy industry, which created jobs for men. Thus, the article allowed the interpretation that the writer disapproved of women's employment per se!

²Newcastle Journal and North Mail, February 10, 1943.

³Coventry AEU DC, February 14, 1943.

⁴SA, March, 1943.

Probably the most important strike after the "Total Time" and apprentices disputes, that at Swan Hunter for the removal of five 'nons', started at the end of January 1943. Although the 'only' demand was for the removal of the non-unionists, there was another underlying cause: a tightening-up of workshop discipline, which the Socialist Appeal called "increased regimentation".¹ On January 25th, over two hundred fitters and skilled machinists stopped work, and by the following day, they were followed out by the rest of the 'inside' and 'outside' departments, bringing the whole of Swan Hunter to a standstill. The support of the shipyard tradesmen and labourers inspired the Socialist Appeal to say that the strike showed promise of being "the most determined defence of trade union rights since the outbreak of war." (emphasis original). The factory had been a trade union blackspot for a number of years, and the action was regarded as a test case by other workers on the Tyne.²

The strikers had the perspective of several weeks of hard struggle in front of them. The strike committee warned them that the dispute would not be quickly resolved, and that they would find a good deal of opposition to their stoppage. The press and the Communist Party would be against them, they pointed out.³ Their resolve was to see them through five payless weeks.

The stoppage was run very efficiently. The unofficial support of the Tyne DC of the AEU was secured, and a levy was imposed on all members. Other District Committees all over the country were asked

¹SA, March, 1943.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

for their support by the strike committee (the DC was careful to avoid doing this themselves for fear of Executive discipline). The strike committee's warning regarding the CP turned out to be very apposite, because MacEwan, the local CP organiser, produced a leaflet saying:

"... stoppages of work in these circumstances are assisting fascism and weakening trade unionism."

The leaflet does not appear to have weakened the resolve of the Swan workers, who stayed out for another month after the leaflet was distributed.¹

In general, the CP's attitude was rather less aggressive than it had been during the shipyard strike of 1942. The Socialist Appeal's correspondent reported that:

"The activities of the Stalinists in this struggle have been less evident than in the... dispute of October. The CP have no desire to further antagonise workers in the district and bring about a depletion in their already diminishing ranks." 2

If there were any Communist stewards who were hostile, then they suppressed their views at a meeting of the district's shop stewards held on February 27th, one month after the beginning of the strike. Full support was unanimously expressed and the employers were served with notice of district strike action. A mass meeting of all shop stewards was called for March 6th, at which detailed plans were to be laid.³ In the interim, the Journal and North Mail began to take an interest in the dispute, printing, on the 1st of March, a letter from the men against whom the strike was directed. The men said that when

¹SA, March, 1943.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

approached by a steward on the day before the strike to ask if they were members of the AEU, they had replied that they were not. They stated that they were members of the G&MWU but the steward had approached the G&MWU to expel them, as they were lapsed members of the AEU. The letter went on:

"We wish to state that we are not against trade unions, but are against shop steward dictatorship. These shop stewards have even overruled their own officials by not putting the case through the proper channels. We are at work and are doing our duty by our country for the men at sea and in the forces, not squabbling over trade unionism." 1

There is just the faintest suggestion here of the hidden hand of an official - possibly the Conciliation Officer, both in the reference to procedure, and in the timing of the publication of the letter, on the same day as a mass meeting was due to take place. In any event, the strikers were unimpressed and voted to continue their action. But on March 5th, the day before the district shop stewards' meeting was to be held, another letter was published in the Journal and North Mail stating that the 'nons' were willing to meet trade union and Government officials to resolve the difficulties surrounding the question of their trade union membership. The officials mentioned persuaded the men to pay their AEU arrears later that day.² Once again, the Conciliation and trade union officials had exerted an influence on the 'nons', an influence which they chose to use in one way at the end of February, and in another less than one week later. They were waiting to see whether the district's shop stewards would hold firm, and decided not to chance their arm at the last minute.

¹Newcastle Journal and North Mail, March 1, 1943.

²Ibid., March 5 and 6, 1943.

The strike was an unqualified victory for the Swan workers. On the following day, they voted by a majority of twenty-two to accept the men's statement as the basis for a return, although there was a strong minority who wanted the men's applications to rejoin the AEU accepted first.¹ Clearly, the strikers had not lost any spirit over their five weeks out.

One of the features of the dispute which has already been noted is the stern refusal of the engineers to listen to the CP's leaflets, and we can see this again in the next large strike in the district. The dispute occurred at the large electrical switchgear works of Reyrolle, South Shields, where the workers felt that a spy had been planted by the management on the shop floor. They based their view on the fact that a man at the works had been charged with theft of company property, and fined £9. It is clear that the Reyrolle workers did not consider the "borrowing" of material as anything like as serious an offence as either the management or the magistrate, as they asserted their 'moral economy' by paying the man's fine from the proceeds of a 'whip-round'. Having disposed of the fine problem, they decided to go to the root of the matter by exercising some workshop discipline. They sat down at their machines and refused to work until the spy was removed. The 'sit-down' tactic was an effective one, because the factory had never had a strike before, and it was easier to police the stoppage efficiently from the inside than may have proved possible by pickets. Only three members of the CP continued working, according to the Socialist Appeal. At a mass meeting, Temple, the convenor, who was a CP sympathiser, tried to persuade the workers to return to their work, but the latter had the bit between their teeth

¹SA, March, 1943.

and refused. The following day, the man was sacked.¹ The factory's first strike, as is so often the case, whetted the appetite, and the Reyrolle apprentices (one of the largest bodies of lads on the Tyne) were to play their part in the district apprentices' strike which broke out only a few weeks later.

What was the industrial-political situation by this point, immediately prior to the apprentices' strike? Naturally, the CP was the largest and most influential grouping on the left wing. Although they had suffered some serious blows during the strikes up to 1944, they still constituted a strong faction on the AEU DC, marshalled by Bill Craigs, the Jarrow No.2 branch secretary. Perhaps rather more importantly, they were strong on the shop stewards' committee at Vickers Armstrong's Elswick works. Vickers seems to have had comparatively good wages and conditions for the district: in July 1943, the management there refused to pay out on some piece work jobs because of the excessively high earnings²; a year later, the shop stewards there set a precedent by obtaining a penny an hour 'obstruction money' for engineers working on torpedo tubes.³ The shop stewards at Vickers Armstrong produced a paper, called Gun, from 1944 onwards. This factory followed the classical pattern of large factories in which the CP was important: it was free from strikes, it appears to have had good piece work earnings, and the shop stewards had a factory paper. On the other hand, the CP's influence in the engineering factories of the district was not always up to the Vickers' standard. Generally, their influence was not strong: in a CP literature-selling competition held

¹SA, March, 1944.

²AEU Monthly Journal, July, 1943.

³Ibid., June, 1944.

in 1943, the North-East Coast came fourth, but not by reason of its factory sales. The only industrial sales deemed worthy of note by CP headquarters were amongst the miners and the Gateshead railwaymen.¹ Neither were they outstandingly successful on the Newcastle Trades Council; as the Council's historians have recently noted, their numerical presence was low and their influence difficult to detect.²

Compared to the CP, the extreme left was very weak in industry. The WIL had evidently had some influence in the 'Total Time' strike, suggesting that they had members working in the shipyards, but they had only a microscopic presence in the engineering factories. Nevertheless, they did have some members with a good deal of knowledge of the local industrial scene and the important militants. Heaton Lee, for example, was a mining engineer from South Africa who joined the local CP on his arrival in the North-East, and who soon became one of their leading speakers in the 'Imperialist War' period.³ After July 1941, Lee publicly joined the WIL, taking an impressive knowledge of the local CP with him. Another WIL member in a similar position vis-a-vis the ILP was T. Dan Smith, who was appointed ILP Organiser in the North-East whilst a clandestine member of the WIL. Smith was soon able to strike up relationships with a group of militant ILPers whom he influenced along Trotskyist lines whilst 'recruiting' for the ILP.⁴

¹Strengthen Our Organisation (M/S), p. 11.

²J.F. Clarke and T.P. McDermott: The Newcastle and District Trades Council, 1873-1973. A Centenary History (Newcastle, 1973), pp. 36-37. The authors offer some useful comments on the problems involved in determining the size of the Communist presence on trade union bodies generally. (p. 36ff.)

³Lee was following an 'entrism' tactic. He had become a Trotskyist in South Africa, and had emigrated to Britain just before the war, together with a number of other South African Trotskyists. (Interview with Jack Williams, 7 September 1971).

⁴T/Dan Smith: An Autobiography (1970), p. 30. Mr. Peter Thwaites of the London School of Economics kindly filled out Smith's own brief reference to his early history for me.

Amongst his contacts was the ILP North-East Industrial Organiser Jack Johnstone, who joined the RCP along with a number of other ILP officials in 1945.

In a district that was generally speaking the preserve of the right wing, neither Trotskyists nor Communists flourished. Having said this, it undoubtedly remained true that the Communist Party was easily the most influential of the left groups, as indeed it was nationally. As far as the WIL was concerned, no amount of energy nor good contacts could begin to make up for this. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that it was the WIL who made the greatest gains from the apprentices' strike of 1944.

The apprentices' strike was probably the most important strike of the War. As the Government documents frequently pointed out, it was the first large strike directed directly at changing Government policy. It failed to change policy with regard to drafting apprentices into the mines, but it did stimulate Bevin into applying new repressive legislation (Regulation 1AA) designed to prevent a recurrence of a similar large scale stoppage led by 'subversives'.

Because of its importance, it is worth investigating the background to the dispute on the Tyne. The area played a leading role in the apprentices 1944 action, the first time that the lads there had taken the initiative nationally. In 1937, the Clyde apprentices had constituted the national leadership, as they did again in 1941. On both occasions, the North-East had shown little inclination to take action on a similar scale. Why were the roles reversed in 1944?

Tyneside, of course, had been a centre of juvenile unemployment during the late 1930s, and remained so right up until the outbreak of War because of the lack of possibilities for alternative employment in the area. The local engineering and shipbuilding employers were not slow to exploit the situation; apprentices could be paid low time rates and thereby induced to work long hours of overtime. They could also be useful in other ways. In June 1940, for example, the Daily Worker took up the case of a body of lads from a 'large arms firm' who whilst at the Technical College receiving instruction, performed rough turning operations for their company free of charge.¹ During 1940 and 1941, the employers began to expand the apprentice population tremendously. One firm had swelled the ranks of its apprentices from four to seventy two in the first months of 1941, for example.²

A similar tendency to use apprentice labour was discernible on the Clyde, but it was more marked on the Tyne. The central problem, for the employers, as they explained to the Ministry of Labour, was that it was 'impossible' to employ women on a number of skilled machining jobs,³ because they considered the peculiar skills required, combined with the manual strength needed, to be beyond women, or, indeed, journeymen transferred from other areas. The only answer that they could think of was the use of existing apprentices, who had some idea of the methods involved.⁴ The Ministry of Labour recommended that

¹DW, June 17, 1940.

²LAB 8/405. Minutes of a meeting between North East Coast Marine Engine Builders and Ship Repairers, and Ministry of Labour Officials, May 17, 1941.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

they follow a determined policy of 'dilution' by means of apprentices, since the number of skilled men required was much lower than it was in the West of Scotland, and the problem was therefore amenable to solution in this way.¹ Here we can see the beginnings of an important difference in labour policy which was to make transference a major problem on the Clyde, and apprentices an equivalent difficulty on the Tyne.

The only drawback that the employers could see was that the apprentices were 'disgruntled'. One manager complained:

"It is not a bit of use taking a job to them with the old price, they just turn their back on the lathe and are not giving the output." ²

Increasingly, as the employers used the apprentices on production and therefore neglected their training, the lads asserted themselves by forcing up piece work earnings. At the beginning of May 1943, the Journal and North Mail explained that the young engineering workers were discontented because they felt that they were becoming nothing more than skilled machine operators.³ It has been explained that the problem was most acute for the apprentices in the North-East, where a deliberate policy was followed, but apprentices nationally became more important to production as the war continued and manpower became more of a problem. They took advantage of this as the national wages figures show. Between January and July 1943, youths in marine engineering leapt from earning 112.2% over their earnings in October 1938 to 147%, when the adult male increases were 60.3% and 77% respectively.⁴

¹ LAB 8/405 Minutes of a meeting between N.E. Coast Marine Engine Builders and Ship Repairers, and Ministry of Labour Officials, May 8, 1941.

² Ibid.

³ Newcastle Journal and North Mail, May 4, 1943.

⁴ Ministry of Labour Gazette, February, August, 1943.

By the beginning of the following year (when boys started at the beginning of the war were now seasoned fourth-year apprentices), they had shown that they were not to be trifled with.

Ernest Bevin announced the pit ballot scheme in the House of Commons on 2 December 1943. In order to expedite the production of coal, young workers from the shipbuilding and engineering industries who had either reached the age of twenty or who had completed their apprenticeships were to be conscripted, and sent to work in the mines. The unfortunate ones were to be chosen by means of a 'ballot', from which approximately one in ten would be selected. If chosen, it was still possible for either the lads or their employers to apply for exemption, but it was made perfectly clear that there would be very few exemptions granted.¹

During January 1944, the Tyneside apprentices, only about 10% of whom were members of a trade union, began to join a body called the Tyne Apprentices Guild, which was organising in resistance to the Bevin scheme. Both the local MPs and the Conciliation Officer considered that the TAG was capable of effective action, as they all stressed to Bevin himself.² The Guild was run by three youths: C. Hepplewhite, an apprentice fitter from the North East Marine Engineering Co., Wallsend (chairman); J.C. Brown, an apprentice plater from the Middle Docks and Engineering Co., South Shields, and J.W. Davy, from the Wallsend Slipway Co. (Secretary).³ The Conciliation

¹H.M.D. Parker, op.cit., p. 465.

²LAB 10/451. Memos. of January 11, 12, 20. Emmerson to Sir G. Ince, February 8, Emmerson to H.Q., February 9, 1944.

³Emmerson to H.Q., February 14, 1944.

Officer had excellent information on these important leaders. That on the first two described them as having 'no political inclinations' but Davy was rather different:

"Has strong political views - fluent speaker - strong personality - has had Communist views since age 14 - recently expelled from the CP on account of his activities in connection with the Apprentices Guild." 1

Bill Davy was in fact in close contact with the Trotskyists Heaton Lee and Ann Keen at this time.²

Irrespective of the views of their leaders, the mass of Tyneside apprentices were determined, as were their counterparts on the Clyde-side, not to go down the pits. In this, they naturally had the overwhelming support of their parents, who feared for their sons' safety as well as their comfort in the pits.³ Many of them knew what the young apprentices would face, having lived adjacent to mining areas.

The determination of the apprentices themselves not to submit to the scheme was shown by the fact that the first lad to be called up for mining duties, one Martin (who did not in fact work in ship-building, but for an electrical contractor) was immediately defended. Members of the TAG called at all the Labour Exchanges along the Tyne and informed the managers that unless Martin's call-up was cancelled, there would be a strike on 14 March. Similar notices were received by a number of factory and yard staff.⁴ The Ministry of Labour had, in fact, decided when Martin's case was brought up, that he might be

¹ Emmerson to HQ, February 14, 1944.

² Information from Bill Davy, 3 June, 1973.

³ House of Commons Debates, 399, 5s, p. 1134, Statement of Buchanan (MP, Gorbals).

⁴ LAB 10/451. March 9, 1944.

eligible for deferment, but they chose not to disclose this to the apprentices, who had decided to lobby their MPs on the question.¹ It was decided to allow them to do so, but when the Ministry was asked by one of the MPs concerned, Ritson, as to what he was to say to the boys, he was told to tell them:

"Go home and go back to work. The right way to handle this is to take it up through your union officials... (it was) emphasised that above all things the Minister would want to avoid any appearance that these apprentices were being given any recognition whatsoever. Mr. Ritson took the point very cordially." 2

The Ministry of Labour, then, knowing that Martin was to have his call-up deferred, decided to allow the lads to go through what they presumably hoped would be the sobering experience of an unsuccessful lobby. In fact, the Ministry was following a policy of 'wait and see'. They were anxious not to give the impression that they were giving in on Martin,³ and wanted to see what the reaction of the TAG would be, since the news of his possible deferment could be released later. In the meantime, enquiries could be made regarding the leaders of the lads, as well as the mood of the rank and file. On 16th March, Ministry of Labour Headquarters wrote to Emmerson, the Conciliation Officer:

"... it appears that it would be extremely useful to find out exactly who is at the back of the Clydeside Apprentices Committee and the Tyneside Apprentices Committee. One gets the impression that

¹ LAB 10/451. March 9, 1944.

² Ibid., March 11, 1944.

³ Ibid., March 17, 1944.

there must be an adult mind here, and it seems to me that your means of investigation might be able to get to the bottom of the matter." 1

Four days later, Emmerson began filing reports on TAG meetings from J.L. Wilcock, local officer of the Ministry of Intelligence.²

In the meantime, 14th March, the day of the threatened strike, had passed off without incident, largely because of the confusion around Martin's deferment. On 11th March, Martin had received notice of the cancellation of his call-up, but this was later withdrawn.³ The apprentices were obviously caught out. They thought that they had won a victory, but in fact, they soon found that they had not, and that the strike date had passed.

Two days before the strike had been due to start, Martin's case had already ceased to be the immediate issue. It appears that the TAG, thinking that Martin had won, decided to take up the cases of three eighteen-year-old lads who had been called up. They contacted the Clydeside apprentices on the matter, and agreed to set a new date, 28th March, for a co-ordinated strike. Three days before the strike was due to start, the TAG began to marshal their forces. They held a mass meeting (which was something of a flop, since only about two hundred turned up); and issued their first bulletin, in which they called for speakers, workers and couriers to help run the dispute.⁴ But, by this time, the opposition, too, was organising. The District

¹LAB 10/451; March 17, 1944.; Low to Emmerson, March 16, 1944.

²LAB 10/451, March 20, 1944.

³Ibid., March 17, 1944.

⁴Ibid., March 27, note signed 'WB'.

Officials were doing 'everything possible' to set up a Junior Workers' Committee as a rival to the TAG.¹ This body managed to make the strike less solid than it might have been over the next week.

On 7th March, the TAG sent a letter to Bevin, drafted by Jock Haston and Bill Davy and typed by Ann Keen, threatening strike action if the Government did not introduce legislation to eliminate the anomaly whereby lads under twenty could be conscripted.² During the next three weeks, the TAG prepared for a full-scale strike, whilst their opponents had some difficulty in opposing the idea of strike action. The main impediment to the development of any opposition to the TAG was the fact that the lads resolutely refused to allow anyone to attend their meetings (even in the workshops) unless they were apprentices themselves. Thus, when the CP's local organiser McEwan, and another Communist, Waters, tried to speak on one occasion, they were ruled out of order by the chairman.³ The apprentices were therefore effectively sealed off from outside influences. Just before the strike began, the District officials hit on the way to undermine the influence of the TAG; they formed an AEU Junior Workers Committee for the purpose of enrolling apprentices in the union, and taking up appeals against conscription via the official machinery. A young apprentice called William Kennedy was the secretary of the Committee, and he toured the yards and factories during the strike trying to persuade the lads not to stop work. Accordingly, Davy decided to

¹LAB 10/451, March 27, note signed 'WB'.

²SA. Report on trial of Haston, Lee and Keen, July 1944.

³LAB 10/451, March 22, 1944.

leave the TAG and to oppose Kennedy's policy from within the Junior Workers' Committee.¹

On 27th March, the apprentices lobbied Parliament again, but failing to gain any satisfaction, the lads struck work as agreed on the following day. Apprentices on the Clyde, Tyne and Huddersfield stopped work, but the strike was never 100% solid in any of these areas.²

The first day of the strike found about 6,000 apprentices out on the Tyne, of which 3,473 were in shipbuilding and 2,560 were in engineering. This left 'a considerable number' still at work. The most important bodies of strikers were at Vickers Armstrong's yard (789), Swan Hunter yard and works (1,370), Reyrolle (564), Wallsend Slipway (350), and Parson's (270).³ On Tuesday, the strike spread, and another 1200 came out, including 731 from engineering.⁴ On the Wednesday, the Clyde Conciliation Officer reported about 7,000 out there, although in two instances, lads had been out but had returned within hours. He suggested that the strike was not at all solid in the West of Scotland.⁵ From the strikers' point of view, the Tyne was more reliable than the Clyde, and even the Newcastle Journal and North Mail admitted that the strike involved the majority of the lads on the Tyne.⁶

¹LAB 10/451, March 27, 1944.

²Ibid., March 28, 1944. Newcastle Journal and North Mail, March 28, 30, 1944.

³LAB 10/451. March 28, 1944.

⁴Ibid., March 29, 1944.

⁵Ibid., Clyde Conciliation Officer's memo., March 29, 1944.

⁶Newcastle Journal and North Mail, March 29, 1944.

By April 1, the strike was already beginning to come under pressure from two directions. Firstly, the Ministry of Labour was pursuing a policy of calling up apprentices for medical examination prior to conscription into the services, and one hundred and fifty had been called up by April 1st.¹ Secondly, the Junior Workers' Committee was beginning to find its feet.² Kennedy had been touring the Yards and shops trying to keep lads in where the strike showed signs of spreading. At Vickers Armstrong, for example, the strike was about fifty percent effective, and Kennedy, realising the importance of Vickers to the rest of the district, visited No.22 shop to persuade the large number of apprentices working in it to stay at work. His success in doing so was splashed all over the front page of the Journal and North Mail's 3rd. April edition, together with the information that he had been equally effective at CA Parsons.³

There was little that the TAG could do to defy these twin threats of the call-up and the JWC. Under the tutelage of the Trotskyists, they issued leaflets to the lads (Fight the Pit Compulsion Plot), to the miners and to other workers. They also organised picketing to try to spread the stoppage, and set up committees to deal with such questions as entertainments, picketing and so on. At the same time, the Trotskyists carried on collections via the Militant Workers' Federation. By this time, however, the Trotskyists had become an embarrassment to the lads. The national papers had taken up their

¹LAB 10/451, April 1, 1944.

²Newcastle Journal and North Mail, April 1, 1944.

³Ibid., April 3, 1944.

involvement, and publicised the police raids on the RCP's offices throughout the country. Lurid stories detailing their exploits, stressing their extremism and mis-spelling their names abounded in the popular press.¹

By the end of the week, another significant hole appeared in the strikers' ranks, which had always looked rather ragged outside of the Tyne. By the end of the week, the strike had ended on the Clyde when the John Brown's lads had returned; some lads had returned only to come out again when they found that some of their number were to be victimised. The failure of the Clyde strike to ever really take root induced the Huddersfield lads to decide to return. This left the Tyneside isolated. Ironically, they did not decide to return until the following week because their telegrams to the Clyde (and, of course, the replies) were being intercepted and delayed by the Post Office, and they were not inclined to believe the newspaper reports.² The last of the strikers straggled back to work on April 12th, a fortnight after they had come out, having gained absolutely nothing. The strength of the lads' feeling against going down the pits persisted, although the back of collective resistance had been broken; up to the end of May, 285 lads failed to comply with their call up instructions, and thirty two of these were eventually imprisoned rather than submit.³

The whole dispute was conducted on a different plane from previous strikes: the involvement of the extreme left and the Government in a

¹Newcastle Journal and North Mail, April 1; Daily Mail, April 6, Sunday Express, April 2, Morning Advertiser, April 8, Daily Dispatch, April 6. Apart from the first mentioned paper, none of these articles added anything of any real interest to the story of the strike itself.

²LAB 10/451.

³House of Commons Debates, 399, 5s, p. 1135.

fight of fundamental importance to the terms of the battles on the Home Front which both sides realised lay ahead raised the stakes in the tournament. No previous strikers had challenged the right of the Government to direct labour as it saw fit. Neither had any previous strike in engineering even remotely impinged on the Government's problems in the other troublesome industry, coal-mining. If the apprentices had won even the most minimal concessions, it would have been that much harder for them to solve their labour problems (which partially derived from the labour shortage) in the most strike-prone industry. For these reasons, Bevin was determined that the ground should be cut from beneath the RCP's feet, that the strikes in engineering and the pits should be defeated, and that legislation should be introduced to prevent a repetition of this brief but unnerving crisis.

By the end of the apprentices' strike, the Ministry of Labour had sufficient material available to prosecute the members of the RCP who had been closely involved with the dispute. MI5 had conducted raids on Davy's house at Wallsend, the RCP headquarters for the North-East (a house in Walker) and the London Headquarters, to gather information. Jock Haston (organising secretary), Roy Tearse (industrial organiser), Heaton Lee (North-East area organiser) and Ann Keen were charged with conspiracy to cause an illegal dispute, inciting such a dispute, and furthering it, under the 1875 Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act and the 1927 Trades Disputes Act. The main problem for the prosecution was to prove that the accused had been involved in the strike after it began; they could produce the TAG's leaflets (which Haston admitted drafting, although he denied that the political sentiments expressed in them were entirely his own), but had they been active in spreading the strike either on the Tyne or elsewhere? Davy insisted

that none of them had attended any mass meetings, and none of the other witnesses disagreed with him, although one, James Lloyd, said that Tearse had helped explain how to organise a strike. The four were found guilty of furthering the dispute, but innocent of the other charges. Tearse and Lee were sentenced to twelve months each, Haston to six, and Keen to thirteen days. Ann Keen was immediately released, and was able to tour the country speaking in defence of the other three.¹

Defence Committees were set up under the auspices of the Anti-Labour Laws Victims Defence Committee, a body which involved Jimmy Maxton, Aneurin Bevan, and a number of other sympathetic left wingers. In September 1944, the sentences were quashed on appeal, on the grounds that a dispute not in progress could not be furthered.² Needless to say, the result of the appeal was hailed as a Victory for Labour, as the RCP leaflet put it, a victory quite clearly won through the successful agitation of the defence committees.

The Newcastle Defence Committee was understandably the most active of all. Just after the sentences had been handed down, Ann Keen spoke in Newcastle, with Bill Davy and Jimmy Maxton. Len Harrison of the ILP chaired the meeting, and four hundred trade unionists attended.³

The RCP locally had been active in the victims' defence, and could reflect with satisfaction on the outcome. But defence of their members from judicial victimisation was one thing, but as they themselves

¹SA, July 1944.

²Ibid., September, 1944.

³Ibid., mid-July, 1944.

realised, the defence of the working class from large scale redundancies was quite another. The local branches of the RCP were relatively active and well-connected in the local trade union movement: their paper sales were good (thirty per member per fortnight), they were able to send in exclusive reports from the convenor of a Vickers-Armstrong factory, the Walker Naval Yard, and Northern Coachbuilders (who had adopted the RCP's policy on redundancies as their own), and in 1945, they recruited five leading ILPers, including Ken Johnstone, Divisional Industrial Organiser.¹

To some extent, the health of the RCP rested on the relatively poor standing of the CP in the area. In January 1945, when RCPers were selling the Socialist Appeal to a queue of workers outside the magistrates court waiting to attend the hearing of some Boilermakers prosecuted for an illegal strike, one of them took the paper and walked down the queue saying:

"Read the only paper that has given you a true write up brothers. This is the policy of the workers, not that disgusting slip of pink paper that the Communist Party are distributing. You remember, brothers, that they were the party that scabbed on us during the Total Time strike." ²

Naturally, such reports have to be taken with rather more than a pinch of salt, but it seems quite possible that some feeling against the

¹SA, mid-October 1944, February, June 1945. RCP Party Organiser, March, 1946. This journal gave the average paper sale in early 1946 as 36.6, compared to the highest branch, (Nottingham) which sold fifty per member per fortnight. The RCP claimed that "The outstanding youth leaders of that struggle are now in the RCP or are sympathetic to it." (SA, mid-August, 1945.)

²SA, January, 1945.

CP did persist because of their role in the 'total time' dispute. By and large, however, it was not the extreme left but the right wing who benefited from the discomfiture of the CP. Jack Bowman, the AEU District Secretary, was well in touch with affairs at Vickers-Armstrongs, Elswick, the CP stronghold, both through his earlier work there and his association with the ex-convenor and President of the AEU Jack Little.¹ Bowman was extremely careful not to allow the CP to take over the District Committee, and although a group of Vickers shop stewards in No.17 shop protested at the Government's intervention in Greece in 1944², this was about as far as they were able to go in that factory or on the DC. Under these circumstances, the CP, although they had a strong minority faction on the District Committee and in Vickers-Armstrongs, did not operate at a very high level of efficiency. At the beginning of 1943, for example, the Fighting Fund set the districts' quotas to be met which varied according to the size of the membership. Tyneside fulfilled only 9% of its quota, compared to Lancashire's 37.5%, Scotland's 35.62% and the Midlands 26.61%.³ Something must have been wrong: possibly an inactive membership, possibly a hostile response from non-Party workers, probably a combination of the two. The recent recruits to the ranks of the CP had not been hardened by the 'Imperialist War' experience, and could easily become discouraged.

In any event, the local branches of the CP were certainly no more able to put up a fight against redundancies than were Communists in most of the other main engineering centres. The majority of workers

¹Interview with Jack Bowman, 7 March, 1971.

²DW, December 18, 1944.

³DW, January 22, 1943.

feared unemployment at the end of the war, as a Ministry of Supply inspector reported after a tour of the local factories in 1943. The point was, how were they prepared to resist it? Like workers throughout the rest of the country, they simply did not believe that the Government would allow the misery of the Thirties to be reimposed, in the face of massive working class political pressure in the opposite direction. As far as resistance through strikes was concerned along the lines of Albion Motors or the Humber, there was no equivalent upsurge here. The underlying cause may well have been the fact that the habits and traditions of militancy had been neither established nor reinvigorated in the area. Wartime militancy was probably the sine qua non of a fight against redundancies at the end of the war.

Tyneside had been remarkable in a trade union sense only for its lack of militancy, in which it contrasted sharply with the Clyde. At the same time, those outbursts of strike action which had occurred were well-supported by the shop stewards of the district, partly, no doubt, because they took up an issue of vital importance to all trade unionists: the collective enforcement of trade union membership. The general passivity of the district is easily explained by reference to the industrial structure of Tyneside, where marine engineering was much more important than the munitions sector. There was, if we discount for a moment Vickers-Armstrong's Elswick, no real equivalent to the group of huge munitions works which were to be found on the Clyde (Beardmore, Albion, Rolls-Royce, NBLoco), with their dilutees on piece work. Marine engineering remained a backwater, with a consistently low rate of technological change and consequently

slow rate of destruction of the old skills. Time work remained for a large body of craftsmen the predominant method of wage payment, with all the gentle working rhythms, the craftsmanlike pauses to assess knotty technical problems and the generally easy workshop ambience which was the antithesis of the frenetic Coventry piece work shop. The roots of militancy often lie in the nature of work, and in the marine engineering shops, there was perhaps less to complain about in this direction. There were also fewer women to assert themselves as they did on the Clyde and Coventry: the Tyne was still a man's district in a sense that was not even true of the Clyde, where Rolls-Royce alone had challenged all that.

The decision by the Ministry of Labour and the North-Eastern employers to use apprentice labour to carry out as much dilution as was possible determined to a considerable extent the type of labour problems which they later faced. The apprentices proved a group of dilutees who did not recognise the label: they were craftsmen in the making, and when they found their training thrust to one side in the scurry for wartime output, they too thrust aside constraints and forced up piece work earnings even higher than their mates in the aircraft industry. They made up for their inexperience by a combination of youthful combativity and craft pride deflected into wage militancy. When they brought about the strike which must rate as in many ways the most important of the war, they did not however carry any section of the shop stewards' movement with them. The stewards largely regarded the apprentices' cause as being worthy of some sympathy, but basically the result of a misunderstanding of the Government's intentions. The mainstream of shop floor trade unionism was not prepared to help the lads.

It might, perhaps rather unkindly, be said of the Tyneside shop stewards, that like the Bourbons, they had learned nothing and forgotten nothing. They had been restored to the centre of the industrial stage, but one might be forgiven for imagining that they were following the not very ambitious paths laid down by their First World War predecessors.

Since the Tyne was such a non-militant area, how was it that an opposition of some influence developed there, just as it had on the Clyde? Before answering the question, a preliminary qualification should first be made. The Tyneside Trotskyists were not as influential as their Clydeside counterparts. On the Clyde, they had established themselves as the leaders of a semi-permanent shop stewards' committee, and had led strikes from the inside. They were well-based in the centres of militancy, and were eventually able to take over the AEU District Committee. The Tyneside WIL-RCP did not rise to even these heights. It simply managed to develop itself into a group capable of servicing the apprentices strike quite efficiently, and of maintaining a respectable presence in the local trade union movement. There were, on the other hand, some reasons for the fact that the CP had a significant body of critics to its left in both areas. Firstly, the Communists had played a less significant role in organising workers in to the trade unions on the Tyne than it had in Scotland, and engineers were not therefore predisposed to listen to their arguments. Secondly, the protection of the people from air-raids both inside and outside of the workshops was rather less significant in these areas than it was in the Midlands or London. In fact, this was just as well for the North-Eastern CPers, who had not in any case made a great deal of impact on local ARP organisations, least of all amongst the shop stewards.

There were also some quite specific reasons for the modest but significant growth of the extreme left. The most obvious of these was the CP's rigid opposition to the 'Total Time' strike. This was perhaps simply unfortunate for the local CP in that their area happened to have the first really large dispute of the war, but it was a blunder which they found it hard to live down. Another factor was the good connections which the WIL was able to make in the trade union movement through the well-known Heaton Lee and Dan Smith: the Total Time strike Committee, the Apprentices' Guild, the Walker Naval Yard Committee, were all impressive associates to have.

In general terms, however, the Tyne was an inhospitable area for left wingers of any tendency. One of the reasons for the Trotskyists' influence might in fact be found in this general weakness, in that there was rather less left wing opposition than elsewhere; this was certainly one reason for their influence within the local ILP, in which their energy and commitment helped them actually breath life into a moribund organisation. The right wing was well established, and very little occurred to loosen their hold during the war. They were sufficiently flexible to accommodate the Swan Hunter strike, and the apprentices could have little impact on the official machinery since only one in ten of them was in the union. Inside the union machinery, the apprentices would have been a powerful force for change, given their much strengthened position on the shop floor and their willingness to strike.

The problem here, even more than on the Clyde (where the right wing was less important) is to investigate the activities of the right wing. Unlike the leftists, these men were not open agitators with their own papers and leaflets as well as policemen and Ministry of Information officials reporting their every action. Because of

its very nature, the history of their activity is difficult to reconstruct; its might showed through during the apprentices' strike, when they were forced out to openly argue in the factories and the branches. Before and after their temporary surfacing in this dispute, they remained fairly well under cover. The subterranean history of this 'silent majority' remains to be written.

* * *

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this thesis, three important sets of assumptions were explicitly stated, because of their importance to the direction of the research, the organisation of the text, and, not least, the content of our arguments. The assumptions all related to the tensions that were considered to exist between different groups of people: between shop stewards on the one hand and national executives and district committees on the other, between shop stewards and their members, and between Communist engineering workers and the national and international leadership of the CPGB. The purpose of our work was said to be to discover how these tensions developed and worked themselves out in practice, and to find the main determinants involved in their resolution. The aim of this conclusion is to suggest some answers to these questions based on the evidence adduced in the body of the thesis (though not in the same order as in the preceding chapters).

The first problematic relationship mentioned in the introduction was that between shop stewards and the national executives and district committees. How and why did this relationship change in the period 1935-46? In establishing the size of the gap between the stewards and their executives, the obvious comparison to make must be with the period between about the turn of the century and the onset of mass unemployment soon after the end of the First World War. It would be difficult to argue that the dimensions of the gap were not much smaller in our period than they had been in these years: suspicion of the executives was not widespread amongst members of the engineering unions (as it had been between 1898 and 1918), nor was there any move in any district towards 'local autonomy' or anything analogous to it during the 1930s, nor did any national shop stewards' movement emerge in the Second World War as it had in the First. This was despite the growing number of shop stewards elected from all types of engineering worker (both skilled and unskilled), the ascent of Communists to prominent positions amongst these stewards, and the 'downward' pressure of the Government on executives to oppose unofficial strikes and unconstitutional action. The reasons for the differences

between the two periods are many and varied. One interesting line of explanation has to do with the view taken by the Communist Party of the necessary direction of trade union work, when compared to that of earlier organisations like the Clyde Workers' Committee. Communists were not working as oppositionists within their trade unions, but simply as an organised part of the rank and file. The editorial of the first number of the CP paper for engineering, The Conveyor, put it nicely:

"The Conveyor is not an 'opposition' paper. The object of this paper is to express the desires of the rank and file..." (The Conveyor, no. 1, Jan. 1937.)

Thus, even before the Second World War, the rank and file papers had rejected the idea of organising against the executives on a continuous basis outside of the union structure, and this attitude changed little even during the 'Capitalist War' phase.

Yet the fundamental reason for the more harmonious relationship existing between shop stewards and their executives during the Second World War related not to such considerations as the views of the left-wingers amongst them, but rather to the way workers as a whole saw the war itself. To the vast majority of working people in Britain, the Second War was, to the very end, a genuine and necessary fight against Nazism and Fascism, whereas by the end of the First War, a minority of workers had become willing to question the need for the war to continue at all. It is against this background that relationships between shop stewards and their executives must be seen. The feeling was "we're all in this together", and the main fear was that employers might not do their share. The trade union executives were felt to be helping to ensure that there was in fact some equality of sacrifice by participating in top-level committees and so on.

This feeling on the part of working people derived to a considerable extent from the nature of the Government's labour policy during the 1939-45 war. Key to the difference between the labour policies pursued in the two wars was the simple fact of Ernie Bevin's direct appointment to the War Cabinet in 1940. Bevin's strategy revolved around the central

proposition that the trade union leaders were the crucial 'moderating influence', and that they should not become too isolated from their members as a consequence of their support for the war effort. This in turn required that the material conditions inside the factories should not give working people too much cause for complaint: canteens, nurseries, concerts, a whole range of facilities accompanied the necessary compulsive legislation (again much more favourable to workers than in the First War: compare the Essential Works Order to the Munitions Act). These benefits were important in ensuring that union officials were not subjected to an intolerable amount of pressure from below.

The relationships between shop stewards and their branches and district committees were rather more problematic than those between stewards and their executives, simply because of the differences between the industrial structures of the engineering districts. However, in general, it is possible to say that shop stewards became increasingly independent of their branches and district committees during our period. In the inter-war years, it was relatively common for shop stewards to be appointed by their district committees or branches (depending on their union), rather than elected. In the late 1930s, as the scope for shop steward activity increased, so more stewards were actually elected from amongst their workmates. As their numbers grew in the factories, they organised themselves into joint shop stewards' committees, and took shop floor matters there rather than to their district committees. By the end of the war, many shop stewards had formed 'combine committees', linking stewards in the different workplaces of a single company, thereby becoming even more independent of their individual district committees. But within this general framework, the locality was all-important: in Manchester, for example, the shop stewards were less independent of the district committee than in Coventry (witness the weakness of the Manchester Shop Stewards' Council in 1941), simply because trade union organisation in the workshops was much poorer. If there were no shop stewards' committee to attend, then stewards had to look to their district committee and their representatives

on it. Moreover, national trends often obscure such 'unusual' districts as Barrow, where, because of the overwhelming predominance of Vickers munitions works and shipyard in the town, the District Committee was dominated throughout our period by the senior shop stewards from that concern.¹

It has already been felt necessary to remind the reader of the importance of different local situations whilst discussing the relations between shop stewards and district committees, but it is even more difficult to say very much about the relationship between the shop steward and his members without descending to the local and factory level. Nevertheless, at a very general and national level, the picture is undoubtedly one in which shop stewards became increasingly important to engineering workers. Several factors can be pointed to as being both causes and symptoms of this fact, but the underlying sine qua non was an increasing trade union membership. Naturally, the shop stewards played a crucial role in recruiting and retaining this membership, and were able (whilst increasing the density of their own coverage) very often to create a rapprochement with their members which would be envied by some contemporary shop stewards.² The challenge to build such a relationship was thrown down by the 'Total War' itself and the large range of problems which it continually posed such as firewatching, rationing, income tax, hostel accommodation and transport to and from work in the blackout, to mention just a few. Many stewards took this challenge up. Yet there were at least two large groups of engineering workers (apprentices and women) who remained largely unorganised throughout the war, and these arguments can in no way be applied to them. Indeed, during 1943 and 1944, the discrete but acute grievances of these groups caused them to engage in large-scale strikes

¹ This cohesion probably explains why the Barrow DC was so frequently a thorn in side of the EC of the AEU; it was twice suspended for supporting strikes in our period. (in 1937 and 1943)

² The current vogue for the "check-off" system amongst managements shows their appreciation of the importance of dues collections to steward-member relations.

largely independently of the shop stewards.

As we noted at the beginning of this discussion of steward-member relations, local considerations are crucial. Amongst these, it is important to note such social factors as the different types of immigrant into Coventry in the early months of war (who had varying trade union backgrounds), the intensity and effects of bombing in different areas, and so on. However, in this study, it has been what could broadly be termed the 'economic' and 'technological' situations in our four engineering districts which have received most stress. The central contrast has been between the piece-work shop steward of the more technologically advanced districts and the time-work steward of the more technologically backward. Piece-work (in both its collective and individual variants) meant close and regular contact with the stewards' constituents in order to arrange production itself (as in the gang system) or to discuss the inevitable timing and earnings problems. Time working stewards tended, on the other hand, to have rather less contact with their members pushed on them from this direction. To the extent that piece-work spread throughout engineering during the war, as dilution was carried out, more and more shop stewards were provided with the opportunity of forging closer links between themselves and their members.

The third and final principal relationship which we set out to examine was that between Communist engineers and the national and international leadership of the Communist movement. Although this topic is regarded as an interesting and important one, only a small fragment of it has been touched on in the corpus of this thesis, and therefore only a few tentative conclusions can be offered.

As far as relations between the Communist International and the CPGB are concerned, it is clear that the CI exercised a less and less direct leadership over the British party during the years 1927-43. The CPGB was allowed increasing control over trade union policy in particular: we can trace this through from the CI's insistence in 1927-8 that the CPGB

follow the dual union approach of the Third Period, through the early dispensation to abandon this tactic given by the RILU in late 1931 and the gradual slackening of CI interest in trade union matters from the mid-1930s on, to the eventual dissolution of the Third International itself in 1943.

This steadily decreasing pressure from Moscow allowed the CP more freedom in adapting its trade union policy to British conditions, which in turn contributed to the party's increasing influence among engineering workers. Thus, the CP progressed from having no rank and file paper at all for engineering at times during the early thirties, to having the New Propellor, which claimed a rising circulation amongst aircraft workers between 1935 and 1940 (when its paper supply was restricted by the Government); later on in the war, the E&ATSSNC was able to hold impressively large meetings of shop stewards. However, the influence of the CP, let alone the CI, over a stratum of shop stewards, was certainly not a simple and unmediated sway.¹ Communist shop stewards often distanced themselves from the 'party line', as we have seen on several occasions. Communist shop stewards sometimes neglected to mention that the war was a capitalist dog-fight in 1940, just as they were sometimes behind strike action in the latter part of the war. British engineering shop stewards were certainly not the 'marionettes of Moscow', neither were they the marionettes of King Street; they had always to consider the views and needs of those who elected them as their representatives in the workshop.

¹ This could hardly have been such a relationship even if only because during the war, AEU delegates formed by far the largest bloc of trade unionists at CP Congresses.

Biographies of Individuals

Mentioned in the Text.

These biographies, arranged in alphabetical order, are conceived of as an aid to reading the text. In general, they do not expand at length on comparatively well-known figures such as Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon, nor on those individuals for whom biographies or autobiographies (e.g. Douglas Hyde) are available. They are simply an attempt to make the rest of the thesis, in particular the local studies, of more interest to the reader. It is hoped that, in the process, some small contribution to labour biography has been made. Unless otherwise stated, the source of information is the subject himself.

Robert Allan

A Clydeside engineer, Allan was politically unattached throughout the 1930s and 40s, as far as I can tell. A skilled man, he had an excellent record as an organiser: in November 1936, he received the AEU's medal for recruiting the largest number of workers to the AEU in the country. Not surprisingly, he soon became Divisional Organiser until at least 1943. During the war, he continued to maintain his political independence: in February 1942, he criticised the Labour City Council in Glasgow for refusing to arbitrate on a pay claim for corporation engineers.

(Peter Kerrigan, AEU Journal, Nov. '36; War Commentary, mid-February '42)

Bill Abbott

Born in Ancoats, Manchester in 1905. Became an apprentice pattern-maker at a firm of wire manufacturers at the age of fourteen. He worked there for eight years, from 1919-27, until he was sacked for his activities as a shop steward; in 1925, he joined the CP and the MM. In 1928, he became a founder member of the Openshaw branch of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. In 1932, he went to work at A.V. Roe's Newton Heath factory, losing his job there two years later for political reasons. He then became East Lancs. organiser for the NUWM. In 1935, he found regular work, becoming convenor at Metropolitan-Vickers by 1944.

H.G.H. Barratt

Coventry engineer and life-long opponent of the CP. A member of the AEU, he was elected shop steward at the Daimler Co. in January 1941, where he became the convenor in March 1942. Frequently a delegate to the National Committee of the AEU, including in 1947, when he opposed a motion that the AEU should buy shares in the Daily Worker. In March 1949, he was elected National Organiser of the AEU by 34,121 to George Crane's 32,505. The Daily Worker commented:

"Mr. Crane, a fierce opponent of wage freeze, was subjected to considerable misrepresentation from certain Right-Wing quarters because of his views and membership of the CP."

(Minutes of the Coventry District Committee of the AEU; DW, June 28, 1947, March 16, 1949.)

Claude Berridge:

Skilled engineer; member of the AEU. Founder member of the CP. Member of the All-London engineers' Lockout Committee, 1922. Member of the London District Committee of the AEU, 1924. Member of the Willesden General Strike Committee, 1926. Elected AEU Divisional Organiser, 1935. Re-elected to this post in the first ballot until 1950s.

(DW, Aug. 9, 1951)

Jack Bowman

Mr. Bowman became an apprentice in 1907. A member of the Steam Engine Makers, he took part in the long and bitter engineers' strike of 1908 on the North-East Coast against an attempt on the part of the local employers to reduce the district rate. He worked at Vickers-Armstrong's Elswick Works during the First World War, becoming a shop steward as a young journeyman towards the end of the war. He was also active in the SDF and then the SDP. He became District Secretary for the AEU just after the amalgamation of the SEM and the ASE, and soon afterwards he was elected to the EC of the AEU. He retained his District Secretary's post until after the end of the Second World War, opposing the Communist Party at every point. After the war, he represented the AEU on the North East Regional Board for Industry. Mr. Bowman is still alive.

(Bowman)

J. Clokey

Member of the AEU Glasgow District Committee, 1940-45. Supported the People's Convention in 1940. Shop steward at the Corporation Gas Works, Govanhill. Member of AEU National Committee, 1940.

(Peter Kerrigan, New Propellor, Oct. 40).

Harry Finch

Travelled from London to Coventry as a WIL member in his late teens as part of the WIL's dispersal policy at the beginning of the war. Joined the Labour League of Youth on his arrival, and became an apprentice toolmaker. In 1944, he was sent to work in the mines in Cannock Chase, where he was involved in a series of strikes and disturbances over pay and living conditions in the hostels. He was a political prodigy, writing a number of articles in the RCP's Internal Bulletin on the problems posed for revolutionaries by redundancy.

He remained a Trotskyist throughout the 1950s, writing for a number of left-wing journals and becoming convenor at Norton's. In 1956, he was sacked after a long strike there. He later worked at Dunlop's until sacked in 1971. He is now a member of the Workers' Revolutionary Party.

Jim Gardner

Member of the CP; and of the National Union of Foundry Workers. Narrowly defeated in the election for General Secretary of that union, in the spring of 1943, by Albert Wilkie, by 8,024 votes to 7,744. In December 1944, he was successful in his candidature for the post,

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defeating Tom Colvin in the second ballot by 10,900 votes to 9,562. A prominent Communist official throughout the 'Cold War' period, and a leading advocate of national strike action in the Confederation pay claim of 1953-4.

Jock Gibson

Born 1908. A Communist from the early 1930s, active in the T&GWU and on the Coventry Trades Council throughout our period. Trades Council President, 1934-36 inclusive. Worked at Standard and Rootes, and then became convenor at Daimler in 1941. Chairman, CSEU District Committee in 1942. Later became convenor at Chrysler, Ryton, retiring in 1973.

Percy Glading

National Trustee of the AEU. Sentenced to three years imprisonment for espionage at the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, in 1938. Member of the CP.

(Pelling, CPGB, p. 107) (War Commentary, mid-August, 1943).

Harry Hartshorne

Member of the CP, although it is not known when he joined. He worked at Ford's in Detroit during the 1920s, and then worked at their Manchester factory. In 1931, he was moved from Manchester to Dagenham as one of a team of skilled men sent to the new factory, where there was some trouble over the lower rate being paid to the toolmakers than they had received in Manchester. He was active in the unionisation of Dagenham, and was a shop steward there in 1944.

(DW, Feb. 9, 1944; Richard Whiting.)

Edmund Frow

Born 5 June 1906, Lincolnshire. Apprentice to a Wakefield engineer at fourteen. Joined Leeds CP in 1924, and worked full-time for the Party in Castleford during the General Strike. Lost his job in 1926, and was unemployed for one year until he found work in Derby. After eighteen months in Derby, he moved to Liverpool. At the end of 1929, he went to Manchester and worked at Ford's for three months before he was sacked for political reasons. Between March 1930 and January 1934, he was unemployed, but worked with the NUWM and the CP, becoming a member of the CP District Committee. In October 1930, he went to the Soviet Union with representatives from other areas to the Communist International Commission on the state of the Party. In 1934, he started work at A.V. Roe's, Newton Heath, and then moved to Ferranti's Hollinwood, where he worked with Alf Jones (who was later to become a shop steward and District Committeeman) and Gardner's Eccles, where he worked with

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the Walmsley brothers. In 1937, he moved to Salford Electrical Instruments, where there were no shop stewards at that time, and had some success in organising several hundred men into the AEU. He later had a good deal more success in this direction, and at the same time he became the shop steward representative on the District Committee (1938), Divisional Committee delegate (1941) and NC delegate (1942). He remained a District Committeeman for twenty years, eventually becoming District Secretary in 1961.

J. Gray

Labour Party member and member of Yoker No. 2 AEU branch; he stood unsuccessfully (59 votes) for the Labour Party Conference in March 1942 from the Scottish division of the AEU. He was shop steward and then convenor at the Albion, and District Committeeman in 1940. At the end of the war, he was elected Divisional Organiser for Division No. Four.

Peter Kerrigan writes:

".... we on the left considered on the basis of his actions that he was a 'Right Winger'. He held the D.O. position for a good number of years, retiring on reaching 65. I am not sure of the date of his retirement but would estimate between 1961-63. I cannot remember his first name."

(19.9.75)

Jock Haston

Born 1912. Worked as a merchant seaman before becoming involved in extreme left-wing politics in the 1930s, becoming the leading theoretician of the Workers' International League before the war. On the outbreak of war, Haston travelled to Northern Ireland for a period,

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with some of the rest of the leadership of the WIL, but soon returned when they realised that political work in the rest of Britain was still possible. Haston was continually hounded by the police, and had several passports with false names. This could cause problems for other members: Jack Williams, a man of about his height and an ex-seaman found himself visited by the police on several occasions when they were looking for Haston. The police eventually found him and arrested him for giving a false identity, the same day that Russia entered the war. He spent two months in jail when found guilty of the charge.

Haston was a persuasive and resourceful schemer, as he showed on several occasions: he persuaded the paper controller that the Socialist Appeal had enjoyed a circulation of 20,000 before the war, which was quite untrue since the Socialist Appeal had not been printed before the war, and Youth For Socialism had a tiny readership. On the strength of this, the Socialist Appeal was able to secure ample paper when other papers had to struggle. Haston was active with Roy Tearse in Barrow, and again in Newcastle as the RCP's Organising Secretary during the apprentices' strike. On this last occasion he was arrested and convicted under the Trades Disputes Act, receiving twelve months despite his eloquent defence. The sentence was quashed on appeal, allowing him to stand as the RCP's candidate at the Neath by-election, where he received 1,781 votes against the Labour candidate's 30,000. He continued as the leader of the RCP until the latter's dissolution in 1949.

Mr. Haston is still alive.

(D. Herald, 8 April, 1944; Daily Dispatch, 6 April 44).

(Jack Williams; Higgins)

Gilbert Hitchings

CPer. Joined the party in 1928. "To the South Wales unemployed marchers in the grim 20s and 30s, who stayed in and marched through

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Bristol, the name Hitchings is a household word." Member of the AEU National Committee, 1937 to 40. Elected to the EC of the AEU in 1943, where he remained until 1952, when he failed to be re-elected. He returned to his native Bristol to work in an engineering factory as a turner, but died only a year later.

(DW, Nov. 24 and Nov. 27, 1953).

Walter Holmes

Born 1892, his father was a member of the ASE. Imprisoned for conscientious objection, 1916-19. Joined the staff of the Daily Herald under George Lansbury in the early 1920s. At this time he was a Guild Socialist, but he became a founder member of the CP. He was editor of the Sunday Worker until the appearance of the Daily Worker in 1930, when he became DW roving correspondent. Visited Russia, Manchuria, China and Abbyssinia (1935). Organised Industrial and General Information Service when the DW was suppressed in 1941. Visited Nuremberg trials as the DW correspondent. Chairman of the Communist Party Committee at the DW, 1952.

(DW Oct. 29, 1952.)

Jack Jones

Born in Liverpool in 1913, into a militant left-wing family. His father sympathised with James Connolly and Jim Larkin. Jack Jones would have liked to have served his time as an engineering apprentice but was sacked (and his indentures thereby broken) by an engineering firm during the Depression. He then worked in the docks for a spell,

becoming a leading figure in the TGWU locally. Fought for the Spanish Republic for a period, and then returned to Britain and took up the post of District Secretary in Coventry just before the outbreak of war in September 1939.

Jones was responsible for setting up the only functioning T&GWU District Committee, which was still the only such body in that union until the late 1960s. He was also responsible for setting up the local CSEU District Committee in 1942, and was elected its first President. His relationship with the CP was always close, but never close enough for him to be mistaken for a Party member; he frequently made statements to the Daily Worker, but these never touched on delicate political or industrial matters.

Mr. Jones is now the General Secretary of the T&GWU.

William Joss

Founder member of the CP. Born 1879. For many years CP education organiser in Scotland. Treasurer, Scottish District of CP, 1954.

(DW, Feb. 11, 1954.)

Peter Kerrigan

Demobilised from the Army in April 1920, and finished his apprenticeship in the winter of that year. Became Chairman of ASE Springburn No.4 branch. Joined CP in April 1921. Member of the Central Lockout Committee in Glasgow, in the Engineers' Lockout of 1922. Started in 'M' shop, Beardmore's Parkhead Forge in October 1923. Elected shop steward and

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then convenor in 1924. Vice Chairman of the Glasgow Central Strike Co-ordinating Committee, in the General Strike. After three days, Kerrigan was elected Chairman, as Jock McBain, Scottish Organiser for the National Union of Foundry Workers, received instructions from his Executive to concentrate on his work covering the whole of Scotland, and therefore had to vacate his seat as Chairman. Leader of the West of Scotland contingent in the National Hunger March of October 1936. Volunteered for the International Brigade, and took the biggest contingent to go there from Britain (120 volunteers) in December 1936. Appointed Political Commissar for the English speaking volunteers then assembling at Albacete and training in the surrounding villages. Accompanied First British Company, which fought in the South until taken out of the front to become the core of the British Battalion which fought at Jarama.

In April 1937, he was recalled to Britain (he was on the Clyde at the time of the apprentices' strike), but returned to Spain in May 1938 as a Daily Worker correspondent, this time on the Catalonian front. Present at the last great Republican offensive as war correspondent in the Army of the Ebro until they were withdrawn in late September along with the remnants of the International Brigades. Returned to England in late October 1938. Worked on the Clyde until 1943, when he moved to London to work full time for the CP. Parliamentary candidate for Shettleston (covering Parkhead) in 1945, and then for the Gorbals (1948, 1950, 1951, 1955, 1959).

Now the Minutes Secretary of Greenwich No. 2 AUEW branch.

Heaton Lee

Born 1916 in South Africa, where he trained as a mining engineer. Came to Britain with a number of other South African Trotskyists just before the war. During the 'Imperialist War' period, he seems to have followed an 'entrism' tactic in the Communist Party, and to have spoken for them publicly. After the CP's change in line on the war, he became an open member of the WIL, and their North-Eastern area organiser. He was arrested with Haston, Tearse and Ann Keen for his role in the apprentices' strike of 1944, receiving six months before the sentences were quashed on appeal.

Jock McBain

Skilled moulder. A shop steward during the First World War, he was a prominent member of the Clyde Workers' Committee. Together with Tom Bell, he led a strike of moulders in September 1917, which won an increase not only for the moulders, but for the whole engineering industry. He was later Scottish Organiser of the British Ironfounders Union. In the early 1920s, he became Scottish and Northern Irish Organiser for the National Union of Foundryworkers. In 1926, he was elected Chairman of the Glasgow Central Strike Co-ordinating Committee, and called out the workers in locomotive factories in the first wave of strikes. The EC of the NUFW instructed him to attend to business outside of Glasgow, and he had to resign his chairmanship after only three days. It was clear that McBain had brushed with his National Committee because the NC said that they had heard nothing of the instruction of the TUC General Council calling for the action that he had taken.

In March 1936, it was clear that he was still carrying on in his old way, because the NC had to "respectfully point out to Mr. McBain"

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that a ballot of the membership would be required before the affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party was adopted as union policy, and that the NUFW was already affiliated to the Labour Party, and therefore to that Party's Constitution. In 1940, he was still discussing the reform of the union with other militants, but he died in January 1941.

Nan Milton: John Maclean, pp. 107, 150; Fyrth and Colling: The Foundry Workers, pp. 173, 241; Minutes of the NC of the NUFW, 23 March, 1936.

Tommy McLaren

Skilled Engineer. Worked at Mavor and Coulson's, on the Clyde, during the late 1930s and the war, but one of the supporters of the People's Convention was a 'J' McLaren, convenor at Howden's. It seems likely that this was in fact Tommy McLaren, as the CP had already made some mistakes in establishing the trade union positions of their members (see New Propellor editorial of November 1940, where a correction to the previous information given about two supporters was corrected in small print.)

He had been a member of the CP, but left to join the Labour Party. Glasgow District Committeeman during the war. Elected to the Glasgow Town Council after the War, and became a Baillie.

(Peter Kerrigan: New Propellor, Oct. 40)

Harry McShane

Born in the Gorbals on 7 May 1891. His father was a builder's labourer and a Catholic, of Irish descent, his mother a Protestant.

Lived with his grandparents from when he was a few weeks old until he started work. He was brought up a Catholic in a Catholic school. Became an apprentice sailmaker, which he gave up after eighteen months. He then worked at wire-weaving for six months whilst waiting to start an apprenticeship in engineering.

First became interested in Socialism through John Wheatley's Catholic Socialist Society. In August 1909, he joined the Kingston branch of the ILP. He became interested in Marxism largely through the publications of the Socialist Labour Party which had a bookshop in Renfrew Street, Glasgow, and by attending John Maclean's economics classes.

On 5th August 1910, he filled in a form printed in the Clarion asking for further details of a proposed British Socialist Party. The BSP was formed in 1911, and Harry became involved with John Maclean in holding street meetings to propagandise for the new party. In 1912, McShane completed his apprenticeship, and was dismissed soon afterwards for refusing to do the work of apprentices who had gone on strike. In 1914, he joined the Army, but he later deserted and returned to Glasgow, where he worked at several shops under a false name. Went to sea after being recognised on several occasions, and on his return, obtained work at Beardmore's Parkhead Forge, where he was given an exemption card. Went to work for a small firm in Bridgeton in 1916, which sent him to fit some plant at Stephen's. He lived in Salcoates, and got the local socialist to go out and hold anti-war meetings on Sunday afternoons. Was arrested there, and nothing came of it, but when he returned home, he found the police searching for him. After a brush with the police, Harry moved to another engineering factory, and joined the Clyde Workers' Committee as a shop steward. During 1920, he broke with the BSP, and joined with MacLean in a propaganda campaign which centred on unemployment. In July 1922, he decided to join the CP.

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McShane and Maclean decided to hold their unemployed organisation aloof from the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, but his views on this question changed, and the movements united. In August 1923, he moved to England. Early in 1925 he went to the Yukon, and remained there until January 1930, when he returned to Glasgow. Clashing almost immediately on his return with the local CP Organiser, he enlisted the support of a representative of the Communist International who was in Glasgow, to defend himself against the charge of 'ILPism' because he wanted a demonstration to be accompanied by a deputation to the town hall. He soon became Scottish Organiser of the NUWM. He was arrested on several occasions, including the demonstration on International Fighting Day Against Unemployment (6 March 1930), and 1 October 1931. In 1932, he led a Scottish contingent on the National Hunger March to London. In 1933, he helped to lead a Scottish March to Edinburgh. One of the leaders of the 1934 National Hunger March, and of the Edinburgh contingent on the 1936 March.

Parliamentary candidate for the CPGB in the Gorbals in 1931, and fought the Gorbals ward almost every year in the Municipal elections. In 1939, he became Scottish correspondent for the Daily Worker until the paper was closed down on January 1940. He then became Glasgow Secretary of the CP. Moved back to his former position when the Daily Worker reappeared. He was a member of the Scottish Committee of the CPGB from 1930 until 1953, when he resigned from the CP. He had doubts on many issues, but he seems to have concentrated his fire on the lack of democracy within the CP. His resignation was discussed by Harry Pollitt in the pages of the Daily Worker, and 'replied' to. After eight months unemployment, found work at his trade in a shipyard. An active member of his trade union branch, and delegate to the Trades Council. He remains an active revolutionary socialist.

(R.H.C. Hayburn: The Responses to Unemployment (Hull Ph.D. 1970
Daily Worker, July 30, 1953, August 8th, 1953. Harry McShane.)

J.W. Mitchell

Mitchell was a skilled engineer, and a friend of Jack Bowman and Jimmy Brownlie before he was elected Divisional Organiser for the North-East Division of the AEU in the 1930s. A member of the Labour Party, he was elected Mayor of South Shields in November 1944.

J.T. Murphy

It is impossible to do justice to Jack Murphy without writing a full-scale biography, a task which has not yet been undertaken. Only a brief summary of the main events of his life can be given here. Born in 1888, Murphy went to work at Vickers Brightside works in Sheffield when he was fourteen, where he worked until 1918. A member of the ASE, he became a shop steward during the war, and wrote The Workers' Committee. (1917) This pamphlet established him as the leading theorist of the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement.

Murphy was a very political animal. A member of the Socialist Labour Party, he educated himself by reading Marx, Connolly and other revolutionary writers whilst turning gun barrels at Vickers'. In 1918, he stood for the SLP at Gorton, polling 1300 votes. A leader of the SLP's Unity Committee in 1919-20, he became a founder member of the CP. In 1920, he was elected by the SS and WCM to the Second Congress of the Communist International, where he was overwhelmed by what he saw and heard. In December 1920, he returned to Britain with money to found a British Bureau of the Provisional International Committee of Trade and Industrial Unions. From 1922 until 1932, he was a member of the CP's Central Committee. He made frequent visits to Moscow, where he was held in high regard.

In 1932, he left the CP in protest at the 'Third Period', but although he later became involved with the Socialist League, he retained a political outlook close to that of the CP. The outbreak of the Second World War saw him in opposition to the CP on the nature of the war, as he argued that it was an anti-fascist struggle from the start. He spent the first two years of the war working in a London aircraft factory, where he was an inspector's shop steward, a story recounted in his book Victory Production! (1942). Murphy died in 1966.

(Hinton; Martin; Victory Production.)

Jack Owen

Skilled engineer. A member of the Social Democratic Federation whilst an apprentice before the First World War. Member of the Manchester ASE District Committee. Worked at the Woolwich Arsenal during the First World War, where he became a shop steward. He was sent as a delegate from the Arsenal shop stewards to the Clyde when the shop stewards there were deported. Attended Ruskin College, Oxford, where he helped to found the National Council of Labour Colleges. Election agent for Alf Purcell when he fought Moss Side. Elected to the Manchester City Council in 1937. On July 30th 1940, he took the chair at a Daily Worker rally in Manchester, and was expelled from the Labour Party as a result. He returned to the factory, but immediately accepted a position as a journalist and member of the Daily Worker editorial board.

(DW, August 8th, 1940).

The Engineer ...

Dave Ramsey

Born 1884. Patternmaker, an active shop steward during the First World War. Represented the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement together with Willy Gallacher and Jack Tanner at the Second Congress of the Communist International. Founder member of the Communist Party; active in the Hands off Russia Movement. Scottish Organiser of the CP after 1926. Harry Pollitt's election agent in his contest with Ramsay MacDonald at Seaham Harbour in 1929. Died in 1948.

(DW, March 4, 1948. A. Rosser, Lenin's Moscow.)

Hugh Scanlon

Shop steward, Metro-Vickers Manchester, and District Committeeman, 1940. Supported the People's Convention. Elected Divisional Organiser immediately after the War, and soon became Secretary of the Confederation District Committee.

(New Propellor, Oct. 1940. DW, March 10, June 28, 1949.)

Joe Scott

Joined the ASE in 1917. He was sacked, and forced to take a job in the Smithfield meat market, where he joined the Transport Workers Union. In 1923 he returned to the engineering industry. Member of the Minority Movement, Active in the Members' Rights Movement in the AEU, and was a member of the London District Committee of the AEU. In September 1935, he was elected Divisional Organiser of the AEU. In 1940, he was chairman of the Shop Stewards' Committee at Bett's, London. Elected to the EC of the AEU in June 1942 for No. 1 Division (London and South East). He retained his seat there until 1957.

Scott was elected to the EC of the CP in 1929. He lost this

position in 1931, but he was elected again in 1940. Remained on the EC until 1951. Now lives in Potters Bar, Middlesex.

(Peter Kerrigan)

Tommy Sillars Born 1900.

Worked at Glasgow Corporation Gas Works, Govanhill. Member of the CP. The remarks of the Scottish Conciliation Officer concerning him are quite interesting. He said that Sillars' position as a District Committeeman was slightly precarious in 1940, because it was felt that, as a shop steward at the Gas Works, he was rather 'leading from behind'. In any case, the Conciliation Officer was of the opinion that the Gas Works management did not recognise shop stewards. At the 1940 meetings of the AEU Conference and National Committee, he made two speeches which were rather radical: in the first, he proposed that the EC's report on 'subversive influences' be referred back, and in the second, at the NC, he argued in favour of the use of the strike weapon as 'the last resort'. The following year, he failed to be re-elected to the NC, despite the fact that he was, as the Conciliation Officer put it, "the chief cell of that body (the CP)". In 1945, he was elected Scottish Divisional Organiser. Elected to EC, 1950, and won a court case against Ben Gardner and seven members of the EC who refused to accept his election. Died in 1952, aged 52.

(DW, June 1, 1940, March 20, 1951, May 13, 1952. LAB 10/360, 30 November 1940, 18 January 1941.)

Billy Stokes

Born in Earlsdon, Coventry in 1894. Left school at twelve years old to work in a Coventry cycle factory, painting wheel rims. Later served his apprenticeship as a fitter. Worked at the Daimler during World War One, where he became an ASE shop steward and developed his left wing views with another young steward, George Hodgkinson (Labour Lord Mayor of Coventry in the immediate post-war years) and an older socialist steward, Robert Thompson. Stokes did not join the Communist Party at its formation, but shortly afterwards, in early 1922. In that year, he was elected secretary of the engineers' Lockout Committee. He was also a prominent figure in the local branch of the Minority Movement, being Secretary for most of the MM's existence in the town, and delegate to the Midland Bureau of the MM.

In 1931, Stokes was elected District Secretary. Six years later, he was elected Divisional Organiser, although he did not have the support of the CP in his candidature. His break with the CP came at this point, and although he remained friendly to the Party until the outbreak of war, he steadily distanced himself from them from 1940 onwards. During the Cold War period, he became a vociferous opponent of the CP, and later became Personnel Manager at the Armstrong Siddeley and a JP. Mr. Stokes is still alive.

Bill Tattersall

Unlike most of the other trade unionists dealt with in these biographies, Tattersall was already well into middle age by the beginning of our period, and is no longer alive. Consequently, precise details

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of his career have been difficult to come by. However, he was an important figure in the Coventry trade union movement during the war.

Originally from the North, Bill Tattersall was AEU Convenor at Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft, Baginton (Coventry) by the mid-1930s.

Harold Taylor (q.v.) described him:

"I met a bloke called Bill Tattersall, who looked to me as old as Methusela. You've got to remember at this time I was 27, and Bill Tattersall was probably about 54. He was tousle-grey hair, a bit thin on top, and a rugged face - rugged character, and as fearless as they come... I would pay tribute to Bill Tattersall, who died many years ago, to being that factor that made Baginton a very unified, cohesive group of shop stewards."

(Interview of 12 April, 1976)

Tattersall was never a member of the CP, although he was prepared to associate himself with the New Propellor (NP, February 1944.)

Harold Taylor

Born 1910. Joined the Army soon after leaving school (Royal Army Service Corps), leaving in 1933 to work on the Coventry buses. On the buses, he met a Communist active in the NUWM, Walter Wellings, who persuaded him to join the T&GWU. Started work at Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft Whitley (Coventry) in 1935, becoming a shop steward and CPer. Moved to AWA Baginton in 1937, where he became senior steward. Moved to the Standard Motor Co.'s Canley plant in 1940, where he became T&GWU convenor until he resigned in 1944. Started a small engineering business at the end of the war, in which he employed his old friend Ernie Roberts (vide p. 102).

Roy Tearse

Born 1916. Despite ill-health, Roy (christened Rowland) Tearse went to work at Handley-Page's factory in North-West London at the beginning of the war, as part of the WIL's 'industrialisation' plan. Tearse soon gained a shop steward's card in this Communist-dominated factory, but obtained his release (probably in 1942), and worked full-time for the WIL-RCP. He was active in the Barrow strike, then at Barr and Stroud's. After this last dispute, he returned to England, to help strengthen the Nottingham branch which was already quite strong in the Royal Ordnance Factory there (the convenor, Bartholomew, and several stewards were members). Soon afterwards, he was elected chairman of the Clyde Workers' Committee, a position he held at the time of his arrest for his activities in London and Newcastle around the apprentices' strike. At this time, he was industrial organiser for the RCP (a job involving a good deal of travelling, it seems). He continued a member of the RCP until its dissolution, and is still active in left-wing politics.

(DW, 6 April 1944, Daily Dispatch, 6 April 1944).

F.E. Walker

Skilled engineer. Joined the ASE in 1906 in Manchester. His trade union activities were confined to the branch. Before the war, he initiated an 'Industrial Union Group' in Manchester (part of Tom Mann's Industrial Syndicalist Education League?), which "did good work in the branches by way of militant propaganda before the Minority Movement came into existence". Secretary of the Chester 1922 Lockout Committee. Member of the Manchester District Committee of the AEU from 1924 onwards. Elected Chairman of the Divisional Committee in 1927. Defeated in the final ballot for EC Chairman, 1923. Vice Chairman of the Manchester Labour Party in 1926.

Member of the EC of the AEU.

(Letter from Smethurst of AEU EC for branches, dated 18 February 1928. Attached to the letter is a Minority Movement circular on the national elections in the AEU. TUC Library: HD6661/M5255.)

Arthur Walmsley

Born in Salford, December 1895. Went to work at Vulcan Loco. Works at the age of thirteen. Three years later, he joined the ASE. Joined the Army in the First World War (6th and 13th Battalions Manchester Regiment). Returned to Salford in 1918. Worked at L. Gardners (Oil Engines) Ltd., Patricroft, 1922-29, becoming a shop steward. Joined the CP and MM in 1924. Worked at Metro-Vickers 1929-31. Lost his job at Metro-Vickers when he was delegate to the Red International of Labour Unions in Moscow in 1931. Worked in the NUWM, 1931-32, and then at Ford's Dagenham with Harry Hartshorne (q.v.). Returned to Manchester and Gardner's in 1933, working there until 1946. Became Chairman of the shop stewards' committee and convenor there. Member of the AEU District Committee for a large part of his career, being made an honorary member because of his exemplary attendance record.

Albert Walmsley

Born 1902, younger brother of Arthur and William (q.v.). Worked in most factories in Manchester. Joined CP in the early '30s. Shop

steward at Gardner's 1934-41. Shop steward at Ford's Manchester for the Merlin Engine section. District Committee member.

William Walmsley

Born 1892, brother of Arthur and Albert (q.v.). CPer. Shop steward at Ford's Manchester during the war, and member of the AEU District Committee.

William Lewer Warman

Born 9 March 1908 at South Norwood, Surrey. Apprenticed as sheet metal worker at 16, but was sacked at the end of his apprenticeship, and only worked sporadically until 1939. First joined a union at Hawkes, Kingston. Moved to Coventry in late 20s, and was elected as the youngest member of the Coventry committee of the NUSMW in 1931. Chairman, Coventry Trades Council, 1938-41. Joined the CP in November 1939, becoming a member of the CP's District Committee in 1940, and chairman in 1942. He remained chairman until 1973.

Chairman of the shop stewards' committee at Standard Motors, 1944-58, involved in the major strike there against sackings in 1956. Became a member of the Central Committee of the CP in the 1950s, staying on for eight years until he became a full-time official for the Midlands area of the NUSMW.

Bill Wellings

Born in 1905, Bill Wellings started work in a Coventry engineering factory in 1920. Two years later, after being sacked, he started work as a Corporation bus driver. In 1924 he came into contact with the CP and the Transport Workers' MM, and was active in the Council of Action during the General Strike. For much of the 1930s he was unemployed and active in the NUWM. In August 1939, he started work with the London firm Karriers, then carrying out contract work inside the Standard Motor Co's main factory at Canley. He was soon able to start work in the machine shop there, but moved to Rootes No. 1 shadow factory in February 1941, where he became a T&GWU Shop steward. Later in the war, he was moved to the Daimler No. 2 shadow factory, where he became a shop steward and a District Committeeman. He was actively involved in the Daimler Combine Committee during the strike of 1945.

Mr. Wellings worked at the Humber (Chrysler Stoke) until he retired in 1970. I am sorry to have to record that Bill Wellings died in 1975.

Jack Williams

Jack Williams was a merchant seaman who travelled to the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, and, disillusioned with what he saw, joined the WIL on his return to London. He went to work in Coventry just before Harry Finch at the beginning of the war, sleeping in the Labour Party HQ in Coundon Road when he could not find anywhere else in 1940. He worked at the Daimler Co. at Sandy Lane, and soon became T&GWU shop steward, the first in the factory. In 1943, he was conscripted into the Army, and was later court-martialled under King's Regulations for disobeying orders. On his return to Coventry, he went back to the Daimler, regained his shop steward's card, and became

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District Committeeman and Trades Council delegate.

Mr. Williams was a valuable and committed political shop steward who helped me in my work on several occasions. I am sorry to have to record that he died suddenly in 1975.

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ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

A. GOVERNMENTAL SOURCES

1) Ministerial Papers at the Public Record Office.

The PRO housed by far the most important body of source material used in this research. The main classes of documents for my purposes are listed below, in descending order of importance:

- i) LAB 8 and LAB 10. These two classes of files must be central to any research on wartime industrial relations. LAB 8 is generally concerned with general labour matters touching on industrial relations, e.g. dilution, the transfer of labour, provision of canteens, etc. whilst LAB 10 contains the reports of the regional Conciliation Officers, special strike reports and Headquarters files, memoranda, etc.
- ii) LAB 34, Ministry of Labour Disputes Books. The raw material for all strike statistics given in this study.
- iii) INF 1. Ministry of Information documents relating to home security, 'Fifth Column' activities, home morale, etc.
- iv) AVIA 15 and 22. Records of the Ministry of Aircraft Production. These are rather difficult to use because of the non-consecutive numbering used in the indices, and the tendency for industrial relations material to be mixed with technical files.
- v) CAB 65, WM series. Minutes of the War Cabinet, consulted selectively with the subject index. CAB 98.18. Minutes of the Cabinet Committee on Communist Activities.
- vi) Various files from the SUPP (Supply) MEPOL (Metropolitan Police) and ADM (Admiralty) records were looked at. The only ones of much interest for our purposes were the Admiralty documents on industrial relations: ADM 178/162-3: 'Dismissal of Communists from employment in War Department and Navy Department, 1927-37' (open without restriction) and ADM 197: Admiralty Whitley Council Papers. But these records were only on the fringe of this topic.

2) Beaverbrook Papers at the House of Lords Record Office.

The main category relevant to the Second World War is Series D (88 boxes). Unfortunately, the entire collection of papers is still in a chaotic state, despite the claims made in the official guide (A Guide to the Political Papers, 1874-1970, deposited by the First Beaverbrook Foundation. (H.L.R.O. Memo. no. 54, 1975.)

B. EMPLOYERS' SOURCES.

1) Monthly and fortnightly Minutes of the Coventry Engineering Employers Association, 1930-46, at Davenport Road, Coventry.

2) Sundry documents made available to me at the headquarters of the Engineering Employers' Federation in London.

C. TRADE UNION SOURCES.

1) Weekly Minutes of the Coventry District Committee of the AEU, 1935-45, at the Coventry AUEW District Office, Corporation Street, Coventry.

2) Minutes of the Coventry Branch of the National Union of Sheet Metal Workers, 1935, at the Coventry Record Office.

3) Minutes of the Coventry branch of the National Union of Vehicle Builders, now at the national museum of the Automotive Group of the T&GWU, Holyhead Road, Coventry.

4) Minutes of the Glasgow Trades Council, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

5) Minutes and Reports of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council, including the Minutes of the Metal Trades Group of the Council, 1930-46, at the Central Reference Library, Manchester.

6) Minutes and papers of the TUC Organisation Committee, in the TUC Library, Congress House, London.

7) Minutes of the Humber Shop Stewards' Committee, 1951-

8) Minutes of Works and Local Conferences in Coventry, in the Modern

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Records Centre, University of Warwick.

D. POLITICAL SOURCES.

1) Tarbuck Collection, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

This is a comprehensive collection of internal Trotskyist documents, which have been used for the period 1939-49.

2) Aldred Papers, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

3) Trotskyist papers in the Brynmore-Jones Library, University of Hull.

4) Papers relating to the Peoples' Convention in the Marx Memorial Library, London.

E. OTHER SOURCES.

Mass Observation archive, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton. Like the Beaverbrook papers, this archive is difficult to use because it has not yet been properly catalogued.

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PRINTED MATERIAL

A. Collections

1) The Maitland-Sara collection of pamphlets at the University of Warwick. This invaluable collection of pamphlets consists of five cabinets of pamphlets, arranged by author but not catalogued.

2) Marx Memorial Library's collections of pamphlets.

3) Library of the Working-Class Movement, 111, King's Road, Manchester.

An excellent collection of pamphlets, factory and rank and file newspapers.

B. Important Individual Documents, Series of Documents, etc.

1) Governmental Publications.

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B) Local

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C) Political and Industrial

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NB. As this thesis is being submitted, Mr. Mike Woodhouse of the
Cambridge College of Art and Technology informs me that he has discovered
a continuous run of a paper produced by the shop stewards at A.V. Roe,
Manchester. This important find calls into doubt my tentative suggestion
that Manchester had fewer factory papers than Coventry. Clearly, more
research needs to be done in this area.

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The selection of people included on this list is necessarily rather arbitrary, in view of the thin dividing line between a formal interview and an informative chat. Most of the interviews mentioned here are available from me in typescript or tape form.

Jack Bowman, Derek Cox, Eric Harrison, Eddie Frow, John McPhee, Tommy Nicholson, Billy Stokes, Harold Taylor, Roy Tearse, Jim Ward, Bill Warman, the late Bill Wellings, the late Jack Williams.

In addition, two friends have kindly lent me tapes of their interviews.

These are:

Peter Caldwell with Jock Gibson; Kim Howells with John Perryman.

Several busy people have also been kind enough to correspond with me.

These are: Jack Jones, Peter Kerrigan, Harry McShane and Hugh Scanlon.