The Collapse of the South Wales Coal Trade

By J. T. Walton Newbold

DURING the last ten or fifteen years the South Wales miners have come to be regarded by critics, both friendly and hostile, as being in the very fore-front of the revolutionary movement in this country and their lodges, economic classes and conferences as the natural and, almost, the original home of advanced opinion as to the ultimate objective of the workers and the correct means of getting there. They have been bracketted with the engineers of the Clydeside as the twin hopes of the British proletariat. They have struck the imagination of the class conscious workers just as they have attracted the attention and excited the hostility of the capitalist press and the bureaucratic administrators of the capitalist state.

Viewed at the present time or within recent years and not over the whole period of working class development since the Industrial Revolution, it would, indeed, seem as if the engineers of the Clyde and the miners of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire had inherent in themselves some characteristic which for all time singled them out from amongst their fellows of the working-class. Such an idea, such an impression, would, however, be an illusion resulting from taking too short and too narrow a view. It has only been as a result of certain influences, in certain conditions, that the workers in these two important industries in these two widely separated areas have taken the lead in the ranks of the organized workers.

It is neither as a consequence of some innate characteristic of race or racial admixture, nor some peculiarity inherent in engineering or in mining, nor yet a mere chance, that these two bodies of men have adopted an attitude and propagated a theory which have made them at once the heroes and the models of the revolutionary elements of Great Britain. There was a time when the hand-loom cotton-weavers of Lancashire and of Lanarkshire, the stocking-frame workers of Nottingham or other sections of the textile operatives were in the van of progress. On other occasions it was the miners of the Tyne, the iron-puddlers of Staffordshire or, at a later season, the dockers of East London, who made themselves the bane of all respectable and law-abiding citizens.

At one time it has been one set of workers and at another it has been quite another. Certainly, the school of thought associated in so many people's minds with the Rhondda has had an influence longer and more potent than some of these others, but scarcely greater than those who constituted the Working Men's Association and advocated the Charter.

The Industrial Unionists Idea.

The idea of the sufficiency of organization of the workers at the point of production in one all-inclusive union comprising all engaged in that industry and direct action by those workers, in conjunction—somehow to be contrived—with workers in other industries similarly organized with a view to enforcing demands, however drastic—that may be said to be, in essence, the theory adopted from America into the Clyde area and into the steam coal lodges of South Wales.

This idea was, relatively speaking, strictly correct. It was an idea which would develop naturally in the minds of men thoroughly imbued with the fundamental concept of Marxism, the materialist conception of history—the history that the determining factor in the affairs of social life is the method of production then prevailing—and who were completely immersed in the everyday problems of working-class life in the very self-contained mining towns and villages of South Wales. It was, particularly, an idea which took hold upon and expanded in the minds of men who not only worked together in association, great numbers of them doing the same kind of thing and contributing to the mass production of a single undertaking, the colliery, but who were continuously made aware of their great numbers and, living in one great community, where everyone was a miner working at the same colliery, had exactly the same problems to face, and the same employer to encounter.

Their conditions, whether at work or off work, their identical impulses to solidarity, were not paralleled anywhere else in industry outside of mining except, to some extent, in great centres given over to engineering and shipbuilding on a large scale, such as Clydebank, Govan, East Glasgow, or Barrow-in-Furness.

Such were the general causes pre-disposing the miners of South Wales to adopt and to work out in practice the theory of Industrial Unionism.

Now, let us inquire into the peculiar circumstances that have given a special stimulus in South Wales to a theory and practice which seem, at first glance, to recommend themselves to intelligent miners everywhere, and to all workers in large scale production at all times.

The Importance of Shipping.

Capitalism, in Great Britain, has, during the last seventy years, come to depend increasingly upon the import of raw materials and of food, and the export of manufactures. The natural resources of this country have, for one reason or another, become altogether inadequate to supply either the workers or the machines they tend with the means to keep them constantly running. Also, the product of the industry has grown far beyond the capacity of the home market effectively to absorb it.

The development of overseas trade and the productivity of industry have, in this country, continuously reacted upon each other. During the last fifty years a greater and greater part of the product of British industry has been going overseas in the form of means of production—in other words, there has been a constant increase in the export of capital. Upon this capital there has fallen due, at yearly or half-yearly intervals, interest which has been brought home, mainly in the form of tangible commodities. British capital has been a means to production and to the growth of overseas commerce all over the world. The articles of this commerce have, moreover, converged upon or issued out of the ports of Great Britain. British capitalism, in becoming a system of world-wide extent, has come to depend, ABOVE EVERYTHING ELSE, on the sufficiency—and efficiency—of the shipping industry.

British shipping has become more and more important, and whoever wishes to find the vital nerve-system of British capitalism must give his attention to the industry of transport, particularly of overseas transport, by means of which the actual circulation of the commodities themselves is alone made possible. The credit system is but a reflection. Here, at transport, we are face to face with reality. Incidentally we are confronting—power.

During the last half-century, British merchant shipping, in becoming steam shipping, has become utterly dependent upon coal for bunkering purposes. Coal, suitable for ship furnaces, has been the particular product of South Wales. The superior qualities, for use in the stokeholds of swift and luxuriously furnished passenger liners, the various grades of smokeless steam coal, have been almost the monopoly of South Wales.

The Fuel of the Navy

But indispensable as the coals of South Wales and, consequently, the labor of those who produced the coal of South Wales, have been to British Shipping as the most vital service of British capitalism, they have been even more necessary to the armed might by which the British Government has guarded the British merchant marine, British commerce and the far-flung dominions and protectorates of the British Empire. The British navy has steamed upon South Wales coal. It has been South Wales steam coal which has made it possible for the battle fleets, cruiser squadrons and torpedo flotillas to show the Union Jack restlessly, ceaselessly, on every ocean and on the farthest sea.

The ever accentuated competition of naval armaments, the building of vessels that must show no smoke upon the skyline, and must sacrifice any amount of money to gun-power, armour and speed; the increasing requirements of coal for the navies of France, of Italy, and of other Powers have, from 1884 to 1904, and still more from 1904 to 1914, and, during the War, when hundreds and thousands of coal-burning auxiliaries were taken into the Fleet, made incessant, repeated, and above all, regular demands upon the producing capacity of the South Wales steam coal collieries and the efforts of the miners employed therein.

It is no exaggeration to assert that no section of the workers of the whole world—not excepting the shell-makers, warship repairers and merchant shipbuilders of the Clyde at the height of the Great War—have had more potential bargaining capacity, greater negotiating strength, than the Admiralty steam coal miners of South Wales had up to Armistice Day, 1918.

Though, of course, this tremendous power was never fully appreciated, much less exerted, it was intuitively realized by the Government and the capitalists. The whole fabric of capitalism and of the Empire was at the hazard of the emotional masses of South Wales. British capitalism and, behind it, the most efficient of all its Departments, the Admiralty, realized that they must never drive South Wales into the arms of the revolutionaries, whilst yet they were dependent upon them for the fuel of the Navy. In circumstances such as these the practice of Industrial Unionism and the elaboration of the theory of the adequacy of the Strike have had much to recommend them. They have had the semblance of an efficacy which has owed far less to them and to their exponents, amongst check-weighmen, agents and lodge officials, however eloquent and however impetuous, than to economic factors that are rapidly disappearing.

From Coal to Oil.

For, partly as a result of the very natural desire of the Admiralty to obtain alternative sources of fuel supply, but mainly for reasons of a technical character, the British Navy and, with it, the other navies of the world, are abandoning the use of steam coal and are adopting, in its place, oil. Ever since 1903 the British Government, through the Foreign Office or the Admiralty, has been persistently seeking, on the one hand, to secure officially or unofficially, control of the future reserves of oil fuel, and, on the other, to utilize oil for the drive of every kind of warship, from the submarine to the super-dreadnought. Admiral Sir Wm. Pakenham and, in fact, the gentleman himself, have recorded the fact that Sir Marcus Samuel, when Chairman of the "Shell" Transport and Trading Company, was constantly impressing upon the Admiralty the necessity of adopting oil fuel in the Navy. Of course, there were vested interests at work to secure the change, but the paramount consideration was technical. Owing to the developments of torpedo warfare, a warship must have a very great speed and be quick to answer the helm. To add to the already high speed and to do so whilst using coal would necessitate an entirely disproportionate increase in bunker capacity, and, consequently, in dead weight. It would require very heavy engines, and would add greatly

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