

INDUSTRIAL UNREST IN GREAT BRITAIN

By Lawrence Welsh in International Socialist Review.

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The spring of this year was a period of industrial and political unrest over most of the world, and in England this uneasiness found its main expression in the great engineers' strike. After a slight attempt at coercion the Government was forced to yield, and, on consideration of the men's returning to work, promised a full enquiry into their grievances. That enquiry has taken place and the new Munitions Bill, which will be based on the fruits of the enquiry, will probably go far to justify the men in defying the Munitions and Defence of the Realm Acts and striking in war time.

Simultaneously with the special enquiries into the trouble in the engineering industry, there were appointed by Mr. Lloyd George eight Commissions into Industrial Unrest in general, the terms of whose reference were simply "To enquire into and report upon Industrial Unrest, and to make recommendations to the Government at the earliest practicable date."

The reports of the Commissions are now before us, and in our view the labor and money spent might well have been saved. Throughout the eight reports there is no new fact brought to light, and the Government will learn nothing that was not common knowledge amongst all who are acquainted with industrial conditions here. The only consolation the nation can derive for this foolish waste of its money is the fact that the Government can no longer have any excuse for failing to remedy the evils so plainly set forth by its own Commissioners.

The causes of unrest and the recommendations for their removal are closely similar in all the reports.

Prominently to the front in each case is the high cost of living, the failure of wages to keep pace with the rise in prices, and the universal impression that excessive profits are still being made from dealings in the vital necessities of the nation. The report for the North Western area quotes the following figures from the Board of Trade Labor Gazette of June, 1917:—

Increased cost of food as compared with July, 1914, 102 per cent.

living as compared with July, 1914, 70 to 75 per cent.

food on economical basis as compared with July, 1914, 70 per cent.

The view is widely expressed that an effective treatment of this question would settle by far the greater part of the current unrest, and on general grounds we suppose this is a true view. The Labor Movement generally is, we fear, largely preoccupied with questions of wages, and leaves to a few pioneers the problems of proletarian emancipation and the ending of the wage system. It must be admitted, however, that the resentment is not merely against the actual high prices, but against the very fact that profits are being made at all. This fact may perhaps indicate an abstract hatred of economic injustice as well as a concrete dislike of parting with money!

The common experience of the Commission is that the laboring classes even now support the conduct of the war and any resentment is directed against methods rather than aims in the national policy. In the South Wales report mention is made of a fairly general dislike of the police and

military methods in connection with pacifist and other unpopular meetings. The love of freedom, even for the minority and the oppressed, has fled from England, but it may still be found in Wales. There is no doubt that the feeling is spreading that any high-handed Governmental interference with, for instance, the arrangements for the Stockholm Conference, would have a most disquieting effect. The foolish allegations that industrial unrest is in part due to enemy propaganda are dismissed as frivolous and baseless by the one Commission which considers the matter worth mentioning.

The Military Service Acts have constituted a grave source of dissatisfaction, especially in regard to the question of exemptions from military service on grounds of technical indispensability. Various schemes were established and all failed to supply the army with the exorbitant numbers it demanded. The task of selecting men in the Engineering industry for military service as and when they could be spared from their civil occupation was then handed over by agreement to various Trade Unions, who were empowered to issue a certificate of exemption called a "Trade Card." The Unions to whom this power was granted were all "skilled" Unions, and the general labor unions soon found cause to object to the procedure. Charges of unjustifiable ex-

of victimisation of prominent Trade Unionists: especial resentment is felt that the Munitions Act prevents men from leaving their employment, while the Military Service Acts give employers the practical power to force men into the army.

The conduct of the "dilution" plans—the substitution of unskilled and semi-skilled men or women for fully skilled mechanics—has been tainted with the same abuses. Mechanics so "released" are sometimes sent into the army and sometimes to other civil work. In any case, the power of the employer to remove an active employee whose views are too "independent" is considerable, and has been widely used.

The Commissioners report unanimously in favor of abolishing the Leaving Certificate required by the Munitions Act, whereby an employee is not allowed to change his work without the sanction of the employer. The Government has announced its intention of conceding this point in the new Munitions Bill shortly to be introduced. The penal clauses of the Act, under which fines may be imposed for bad-timekeeping and kindred offences, are strongly disliked, and undoubtedly hinder production far more than they aid it.

Considerable uneasiness is manifested on the subject of the restoration of Trade Union Rules after the war in accordance with the Government pledges. The Munitions Act decrees that a record of all departures from pre-war customs shall be made and preserved. Several witnesses before the Commissions declared that this was not being done. In many cases, no doubt, this is the fault largely of the Trade Unionists themselves who

position and that it is considered inadvisable to inform the public through the medium of the press of the many of the evils of industrial life, we cannot believe that the facts we propose to set down could so have remained actual conditions of domestic life in England in the Twentieth Century." What a criticism of the Government's secretive and deceptive methods!

Another chronic complaint is expressed in the phrase "inequality of sacrifice." All classes alike have contributed their sons to the national cause and most have contributed their best energies. But, as usual, the economic sacrifices of labor have been the heaviest. Never far removed from the border-line of starvation, the workers are now feeling most acutely the pinch of the increased cost of living, the heavy and annoying restrictions on personal liberty and freedom of thought, and the divorce from any control over national policy and destiny. Till Labor perfects its economic weapons and assumes control of industry, these sacrifices will be increasingly its lot.

Is it possible to bring together under one head, the causes of all these various sources of unrest? The one general cause is the lack of control by the workers themselves over the conditions of their industrial lives. A complaint which appears in each of the Reports is the extreme centralization of the national industrial life; the whole direction of policy is too much in the hands of officials in London often far away geographically and always far away in their outlook on life, from labor's activities. All government is "from above" and in deciding policy and methods the men have no say.

The famous Shop Stewards' movement is a significant commentary on this condition of affairs. This is an "unofficial" movement from the Trade Union point of view, that is, although the personnel of the Shops Committees consists entirely of Unionists, there is no connection between the official Union Executives on the one hand and the Stewards and members on the other. The aim of the movement is to secure a closer grip on local conditions and a stronger measure of local control than the orthodox Trade Union structure has afforded. The effect of the Stewards' activities has been to "ginger up" the Executives and even to initiate and conduct important Trade movements without the sanction of Executives. It must be said in fairness to the Executives that a regulation under the Defence of the Realm Act made it an offence in any way to hinder the production of munitions; any support given to a strike movement would have rendered the Union funds liable to confiscation. In general, the work of Shop Stewards is well summarized in the Report for Yorkshire:

"The aims and methods of the Shop Stewards acting unconstitutionally are condemned, but the feeling is widespread that the machinery they have created, if based on constitutional lines, would assist Trade Unions to live up to the demands of those who are employed in modern specialized workshops."

The remedy for these evils lies largely with the Unions themselves. The Government has set up bureaucratic machinery in industry because Labor made no effective protest, and because, if it had, there was no effective alternative to hand. If the Unions had spent their energies less on sectional quarrels and purely monetary aims, and more on crushing out the blackleg, and perfecting their economic weapons on the lines of Industrial Unionism, there would have been another tale to tell.

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FREDERICK ENGELS AND A LABOR PARTY

Two Notable Pronouncements.

"It is far more important that the movement should spread, proceed harmoniously, take root and embrace as much as possible the whole working class, than that it should start and proceed on theoretically correct lines from the beginning. The one great thing is to get the working class to move as a class. That once obtained, they will soon find the right direction."

"Had we from 1864 to 1873 insisted on working only with those who openly adopted our platform, where should we be to-day? I think all our practice has shown that it is possible to work along with the general movement of the working class at everyone of its stages without giving up or hiding our own distinct position, or even organization."

SOCIALISTS AND TRADE UNIONISTS.

"Just as absurd as the opposition and indifference of many trade unions to a Socialist party would be the opposition and indifference of the latter to the trade unions. In the trade unions we have the most capable portion of the working class organized, that which is to form the backbone of a Socialist party, and a Socialist movement has only succeeded in striking firm root where it includes the mass of trade unions."—Karl Kautsky, foremost exponent of Marxian Socialism.

THE INTERNATIONAL.

"The International was founded to establish a real organization of the working class in place of Socialist and half-Socialist seats."—Karl Marx.

emptions were also brought against the Unions, and the Government broke their agreement and suddenly withdrew the scheme without any preliminary consultation with the Unions. This arbitrary withdrawal was one of the main causes of the Engineer's strike and of the general unrest. It is only one illustration of the high-handed and capricious conduct of the Government departments when dealing with labor questions, and all confidence in Government schemes and promises has been destroyed by this arrogant officialism.

The new arrangements for the enlistment of men engaged on munition work have not yet been sufficiently tried for judgment to be passed on their efficiency. Numerous complaints have been received of the usual blunders and lack of tact on the part of the official administrators.

Throughout the history of the Military Service Acts cases have arisen

have taken no pains to enforce the registration; in other cases attempts have been made to force employers to fulfil the conditions of the Act, and the latter have wilfully neglected their duty in the matter.

Various other important grounds of dissatisfaction exist, including the following: The long delay which frequently occurs in securing official attention to industrial grievances. The men are forbidden by law to strike, and without this power they are unable to secure speedy redress of their grievances. The lack of decent housing accommodation is, of course, a chronic complaint, but it has been seriously increased by the migration of munition workers into industrial areas. The conditions described by the Commissioners in the neighborhood of Vickers' Factory at Barrow-in-Furness are unutterably ghastly. The Report significantly says "But for the fact that Barrow lies in a very isolated