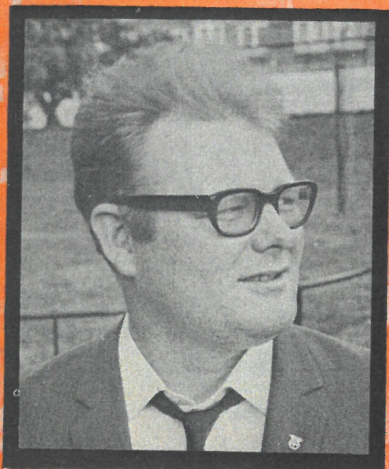


U.C.S. An Open Letter

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A Letter to the UCS Stewards

Dear Brothers,

I am a London docker, a shop steward, a member of the TGWU's Region No. 1 Committee, a member of the London Labour Party, and Vice-Chairman of the Institute for Workers' Control.

I want to make two points, one concerning the experience of the dockers in their campaign to achieve nationalisation of their industry with workers' control, and the other, concerning the need for a national transport policy in which ship-building and all forms of cargo handling should be subject to a common policy which is democratically determined and administered, and in which full account is taken of the social cost to all sections of workers concerned.

1. Last year, the dockers were united on a national scale, in pursuit of the demand that docks nationalisation, which was then going through parliament, should correspond in its form with a programme which we have worked out in some detail, and after years of discussion and policy-making in the unions the Labour Party, and in seminars of the IWC. I am *not* here to advocate that the ship-building workers should adopt the dockers' programme, or anything so mechanical as that. But in taking control of the UCS shipyards the ship-building workers are putting into practice a form of industrial democracy. If this is to be more than a temporary experience, a demonstration which is eventually overtaken by some modified form of orthodox management, it seems to me that the ship-building workers will very soon be asking the question: how should a democratically-run shipyard be organised? And: how can we establish the organisation we desire, in practice?

The dockers' experience suggests very strongly that, if the workers themselves, and their organisations (unions and political parties) have engaged in a thorough discussion at all levels, then the kind of programme, the kind of demands that emerge, will be the property of the workers themselves, and that as such, they will be prepared to fight for them. If you want ship-building — or simply the UCS — to be nationalised, or municipalised, then it is no use (so we learned anyway) leaving it to Whitehall, or even to the national levels of your own Party, to draft the details of the management body or bodies which will have authority in your industry. You need *your own* blueprint, which specifies who has authority, where it comes from, and to whom it is accountable. That is

what we did on the docks. We prepared a document, *The Dockers Next Step* (2nd revised Edition 1969 available from the Institute for Workers' Control, 45 Gamble Street, Nottingham, NG7 4ET) which contained our blueprint. It is not perfect. It may well not be the model of democratic management which you are thinking about. The point is that it is *ours*; we worked on it, produced it, campaigned for it. The Labour Party and the TGWU both produced programmes which have much in common with our programme, and this fact indicates the way in which a genuine "public opinion" was forming on this matter in our section of the labour movement.

With the experience now being acquired by the stewards and workers in the present historic act on the Clyde, there is no doubt in my mind that you will reach beyond what we were able to set down in our programme, and that your demands for democratic management will be more precise and directly related to experience than ours could be. But this is my point; set in motion *now* your discussion of what *form* of democratic authority you want. Define it and popularise it. We are all engaged in a common fight to replace arbitrary, socially-blind authority, by a responsible, democratically-accountable system of social management. The Clyde workers and the Clyde community have taken a giant stride towards this goal. We are sure to learn great lessons from your experience.

2. Your struggle for full employment and social costing of economic decisions, expresses the needs and interests of the whole working population. I want to argue that because of the way in which technological change is taking place, the decisions about who builds ships, where they are built, what kind of ships they are, and who owns and operates them, have repercussions throughout the world of labour. We should recognise this fact, and seek to unite and harmonise our separate concerns in order to impose social costing on the whole transport revolution. In this way the solidarity which has been built on the Clyde over the threatened closure of the ship-yard, can find expression in very wide sections of the labour movement indeed.

In the past decade or more, a revolution in cargo-handling methods has been introduced, mainly through the competitive struggle of ship-owners for traffic. We have had the growth of containerisation, bulk-carriers, lighter-aboard-ship, and air-freight. This multiple development has led to huge economics in the use of traditional labour in the docks, in inland handling of freight, and in the merchant service. If shipbuilding is to remain and prosper on the Clyde (and I support without reservation your demands in this respect) then some of the work which you do, contributes further to the labour-saving threat which faces maritime and port workers of all kinds. At the same time, it constantly undermines your

own position as ship-builders, since one container ship is able to do the work previously done by several conventional ships, and the demand for new ships is therefore reduced. The shipyard *workers* are not of course responsible for the social consequences which affect either themselves, or their brothers and sisters in other parts of the transport industry. The decisions taken by the shipowners, and the dockers can grasp immediately the central point which is being made by the Clydeside workers; that these decisions are taken *regardless* of social consequences. Dockers and merchant seamen are thrown on the scrapheap as a result of the same process from which the shipyard workers suffer. Shipping companies employ you indirectly, just as they employ dockers and seamen directly.

Moreover, the technical developments in shipbuilding and cargo-handling are changing the *geography* of the port and industrial landscape. New ports, to handle modern vessels and methods are being built. There is, of course, no overall socially conscious plan to direct these changes in location. Often they threaten to leave old ports and industrial areas derelict. Often they are developed in areas outside those with strong trade union and labour traditions, therefore increasing the arbitrary authority of owners and management.

This is what we fear may happen at Foulness. Now Foulness may be at the other end of the island from the Clyde, but its growth concerns you directly. At one time, the idea of a Maritime Industrial Development Area on the Clyde, based on a new port, and bringing new industry, — and new development of older industries like steel — was strongly favoured in so-called “planning” circles. But the Foulness lobby of ore-producers, airport developers, chemical and oil companies, and Anglo-German steel interests, preferred a location in the South-East of England, near to the Common Market ports and estuaries on the North coast of Europe. So — the Scottish steel industry may decline, the ports of Liverpool, the old port of London, Hull and elsewhere, may decline, and the Scottish unemployment problem may multiply, simply because the shipping consortia, and large industrial interests, are concerned only with their *internal* costs and profits.

From this kind of observation, the dockers are moving towards the demand for National Transport Policy. The Clyde workers’ demand for social planning can broaden out our whole approach to this. We ought to be demanding that the ordering of ships, the organisation and location of ports, inland freight facilities, steel production, and process industries like oil and chemicals, should all be subject to social control. At the centre of much of this, stands the shipping industry itself. If a publicly-owned and socially accountable shipping industry were created, it could help to give you a steady, phased and relevant stream of orders, and could be held

accountable for the social consequences of its developments, as they affected both shipyard workers and all others in transport.

The need for unity amongst working people requires that, recognising our mutual inter-dependence, we now address ourselves concretely to the problem of common policy in the whole field of transport. In this way, we make your struggle directly relevant to the struggle of dockers and other transport workers, and greatly strengthen the bonds of solidarity between us.

I could never have imagined, just one year ago, that I would have an opportunity to address an appeal of this kind to a ship-building community. Your problems seemed remote from our problems. Now, in the moment of your adversity, we can recognise the strength and the relevance of your case. The fact that it is now practical politics to speak about common social planning and industrial democracy across this wide field, is a measure of your achievement and an indication that your heroic action cannot be isolated.

Yours fraternally,
BRIAN NICHOLSON.

9th August 1971.

U.C.S.

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