

# **DOCKS III:**

## **A National Strategy**

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## DOCKS III:

### A National Strategy

Last month, we published a statement<sup>1</sup> on the present crisis in the docks industry, in which we called for (a) the Protection and Extension of the Dock Labour Scheme, (b) the drawing-up of a National Bargaining Policy for all the ports, and (c) the formation and pursuit of a National Transport Policy. We endorsed the TGWU's National Docks Group Committee's Programme<sup>2</sup> — which includes the demand for no redundancies in the industry, an end to labour-saving productivity agreements, a reduction in the working week, and an extension of the annual holiday, work-sharing, reduced retirement age etc. We found that whilst these measures were sound as far as they went, a much more aggressive content is needed to form a really satisfactory and militant programme. We welcome the demand, (which we pioneered throughout the last eight years) for nationalisation with workers' control,<sup>3</sup> which has now been expressed by the dockers' National Shop Stewards' Committee. The rate of decline of jobs on the docks is still gathering pace, and it is now necessary to consider what forms of action can be mounted to reverse this, and to establish without compromise *the right to work* for all dockworkers.

The most immediate need is for dockworkers to find a means whereby the employers' and government's device of shifting cargo from one port to another is stopped, so that they can no longer play one port off against another, in their drive to weaken and finally to destroy the Dock Labour Scheme. During 1970 and earlier, we witnessed the decline in the position of Liverpool; cargoes were shifted to other ports, and the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board was faced with bankruptcy. In London and the South-East, the shift of cargoes to unitised handling at Tilbury and elsewhere was accompanied by a decline in the old docks' trade of London, with bankruptcies and laying-off of dockers to the unattached pool. In Hull, dockers face an acute crisis for the same reasons. Trade through the port fell during 1971, due to the slump in imports, the use by employers of unregistered ports, and of other ports within the Scheme. The employers provoked a number of one-day strikes last year, by flouting the agreement on the definition of dock work, and then proceeded to blame the dearth of trade on our militancy. This is an old and familiar trick, which is played on the workers in every one of the major ports in turn.

Last month, the call for a one-day strike against unemployment in the docks, issued by the Shop Stewards' Committee, met with an overwhelming response from the major ports. This was a good beginning to a *national* campaign; certainly nothing *but* national action can achieve our purposes. Since then, the national shop stewards have announced plans for National action, to be approved by mass meetings, to contest the growing number of dock-workers who are being returned to the unattached pool of unemployed dockers. Port employers in London aim to increase the pool to 2,500 and then — we believe — to demand a cut in the size of the register. Undoubtedly the same sequence will occur in Hull, where two large employers are known to be trying to return several hundred workers to the pool in the near future. The employers, along with Tory backwoodsmen, hope very soon to be in a position to re-open the whole question of the Scheme itself. Their purpose is to make decasualisation unworkable in particular ports, regardless of the social cost and economic loss caused to the whole community by the running down of a town's function in the national economic system. We believe that the employers only want the Scheme to work to cover Welfare, Training, etc. They will use every endeavour to get control over "hiring and firing." The present decasualised system is now unacceptable to them, since with the abolition of piece-work in the ports, men have to be paid a higher attendance money. The employer has to pay the Scheme's levy (currently 12 per cent) to the NDLB on attendance payments, as well as money paid to men working, for all men in his employ. This is why employers are now dumping men on to the unattached register. This attack on the Scheme is now part of a *national* employers' strategy, although it is directed at particular ports from time to time. Hence the need for a *national* response on our part.

Before we deal with this however, there is another aspect to the present crisis which demands our attention.

### *Closure of Docks*

The crisis of the Dock Labour Scheme is coinciding with renewed "rationalisation" of docks systems by Port Authorities. The PLA has been closing old docks systems for years now; Liverpool's new container berths will lead to similar acts by the MDHB, and in Hull, the British Transport Docks Board recently announced the intended closure of two docks, with 200 redundancies amongst NUR docks staff. The NUR branch concerned has announced its determination to resist the closure of the docks, if necessary with industrial action to bring all docks in Hull to a standstill. This is no idle threat, since the NUR mans all the lock gates to the docks. Local M.P.s have announced their support for the resistance, and have demanded that the BTDB should open its books to trade union inspection, since they have produced no figures with which

to justify their decision. All dockworkers should unite behind this kind of demand. The commercial philosophy behind docks closures is of the same kind as the "lame duck" doctrine of this government, when applied to UCS, River Don works, etc. The labour movement as a whole will rally to the dockers' side, both on this matter and on the question of full employment for dockers, if we are seen to be fighting not only for our jobs, but for the social benefit of our communities. Jack Jones has recently made a vitally important demand in this respect. In an interview with *The Port* (February 10th 1972) he said:

"...nothing short of a major social policy, underwritten by the Government, can really deal with the problem effectively.

I mean a deliberate effort to provide work in the docks areas in those ports where this is a major problem. Work of a character which can be provided within the Dock Labour Scheme. . . if a real effort were made, many companies could be persuaded to build their storage and distribution points at the port side . . . a start should be made now with a major examination of the possibilities . . ."

A recent and *confidential* study prepared for the Government has stated that Britain will only need four ports in the future. The wild, unplanned technological revolution through which our industry is passing threatens docks communities throughout the country. Only the workers themselves, supported by their trade unions and the wider labour movement, can insist that social cost, derived from a full and *public* social audit,<sup>4</sup> is used to control this process, and that full employment — the right to work — be erected as the basic plank of our platform, without which nothing shall be changed. This is the demand which sustains the UCS workers, and carried the Fisher-Bendix and Plesseys actions to success.

### *UCS-type Solutions?*

At the UCS, workers were in a strong position to work-in, because the liquidator needed the work-force in order to complete ships in which capital was already tied up, and which could earn money when completed and sold. In such a situation, the work-in is viable and powerful.

At the River Don steel-works, threatened with closure by British Steel, the workers demonstrated that the product of the works (heavy forgings) was not available from any other plant in the British economy. Hence their threat to work-on received the support not only of workers and trade unions, but of business men, who still required supplies of this product. In these circumstances, the work-on is a viable and powerful strategy. In the River Don case, it succeeded in preventing the closure without having to be put into practice.

In other successful cases, as at Plesseys and Fisher-Bendix, straightforward occupation of the plant succeeded, because the plant and

machinery was still highly valued by the firms, which wished to close and to move it elsewhere in pursuit of rationalisation. The sit-in is a powerful weapon in these circumstances. 5

In the docks industry, we appear to have none of these advantages immediately to hand. There is surplus capacity of docks and wharves, and an increasing number of unregistered wharves. Too many employers are chasing too few cargoes, and there is over-investment in modernised equipment — container berths and cranes, roll-on-off berths etc.

Whilst ships and shippers are free to move at will between these excess supplies of berths and equipment, the neglected and idle capital investments are *dead*, unwanted. (Ask the portworkers of the Northern European coast, which is littered with unused giant cranes and container berths.) The cost of this capital loss is borne almost entirely by public authorities, the Trust Boards or Nationalised Ports such as the PLA, MDHB, and BTDB. They are forced by government policy to cover costs out of revenue,<sup>6</sup> and so put up their charges, driving further cargo away to the small and unregistered ports. The subsequent cost of the decline of working communities is borne by those communities themselves, and all who depend on them for ancillary work. None of it is borne by ship-owners or the major port employers.

### *A National Work-Sharing Scheme*

In these circumstances, the best response is to plan work-sharing. We are already talking about this as part of our policy in each single port. In London, one group of dockworkers has operated a successful work-in already, on a limited scale, to maintain in work a gang of dockers which employers said were surplus to requirements. Dockers can understand from long tradition the need to do this within an individual port. What we have not yet achieved, and what is now vital, is a *national* work-sharing plan. We have to challenge the right of ship-owners and multi-port employing firms, to shift ships and cargoes around according to the various stages of their struggle to establish hire-and-fire powers in the docks. (We should include in this, an agreement not to work ships which have recently called at unregistered ports).

In Hull, the shop stewards' committee has applied in the past week for a license to operate as a port employer, with the aim of taking up dockers from the unattached pool, and to challenge the sacking policy of the private employers. This is a step in the right direction — it is a positive act, in the spirit of the "right-to-work" campaign. Whether or not the technical and legal problems of this application are solved, the dockworkers must certainly prepare to step in to the breach left by the "redundant" private employer, not in order to compete with surviving employers or against other dockers on commercial terms, but to demon-



strate that the ports can be operated, by workers, for use and not for private profit.

If we simply occupied (sat-in) where a dock or a register of dockers is threatened, the ships will go elsewhere. We should be sitting on dead capital. That way, we obtain no bargaining power. If we simply offer a dockers' self-service, as is proposed in Hull, the ship-owners will respond in the same way. They will boycott the dockers' company. But if we agreed nationally that we would refuse to work cargoes destined for areas where the ship-owners are not sending ships, we could prevent the victimisation of each port, and make our stand effective. This is simply a work-sharing operation on a national scale. We should require that our national trade union representatives draw up a schedule, in which we could see where in the past the cargoes destined for inland have been handled, during the past ten years.<sup>7</sup> Where it is obvious that a major port is suffering a rapid and unusual run-down in its proportion of the country's trade, we should then agree that dockers in other ports should handle only their traditional proportion. The ship-owners and other parties responsible for directing cargoes would then be unable to take cargoes away from the port which is suffering, or which is operating under workers' control.

This after all, is only what governments have done since Attlee's day, in refusing permission to firms who plan to build new factories in areas of high prosperity, whilst promoting development and granting permission to build in areas of high unemployment. In addition of course, governments have provided financial subsidies to firms building in those depressed areas. Similarly, we should impose a distribution of cargo-handling in accordance with the social needs of the workers concerned. Port Authorities which suffer losses through diversion of trade should receive government subsidy in the name of the same social interest. (We should remember that government has not been slow to grant financial assistance to private unregistered ports such as Felixstowe!)

#### *Action from the Trade Unions and TUC.*

The national trade union movement in transport has a clear responsibility to lead a national campaign in support of these demands. In every port there is a Trades Council, local organ of the TUC, on which transport unions are well presented. TGWU leader Jack Jones is well-known for his proposal that shop stewards' committees should participate in the work of these Councils. Port shop stewards' committees should respond to this idea by arranging for their programmes and proposals to be placed before their Trades Councils. In turn, the Trades Councils have direct access to the TUC. Recently, the TUC set up its own top-level Transport Committee, comprising the national representatives of all unions with members in the transport industry. Trades Councils,

and also individual transport unions, should call on this Transport Committee to

- (a) service Trades Councils and transport unions in all port areas with regular and up-to-date information on the movement of cargoes, and on trade union policies in each port.
- (b) in co-operation with Labour M.P.s from all ports, press the government and Port Authorities and employers of port labour to open their books to trade union scrutiny, so that a basis for a social audit of the economics of the docks industry is available.
- (c) itself initiate research and inter-union discussions, with a view to forming a national transport policy.
- (d) co-ordinate national trade union solidarity behind any section of port-workers who are fighting to keep open port facilities and to maintain full employment on the docks.
- (e) convene with all speed a National Delegate Conference of all transport workers who are covered by the organisations represented on the TUC Transport Committee.
- (f) send representatives of the TUC Transport Committee to learn at first hand the views of dockworkers in the localities.

We welcome the TUC's recently published support for the "right to work" campaign. In its *Annual Economic Review* (published on 9th February 1972) the TUC accepts the clear case for action in defence of jobs, and it describes the UCS work-in as "the most vivid example" of such action. This pronouncement must be followed up in practical ways such as those described here. Certainly shop-stewards as well as union leaders will regard the TUC's statement as the go-ahead for vigorous actions to oppose places for unemployment and docks closures.

*Finally:*

to make all these proposals effective, we must first establish our national work-sharing scheme. If we with-hold our labour from every ship whose cargo was destined for another area, then any port which comes under attack, and any group of dock workers who offer their own port-labour service, can be defended. From that, we are in a real bargaining position from which to press for the right to work, for maintenance and extension of the dock labour scheme, for control of un-registered ports, and for the supremacy of social need over private gain. Our fight will be transformed into the fight for the survival and real economic health of our great port communities.



## Footnotes

- (1) *Transport Workers' Voice* February 1972
- (2) See *The Port* January 14th, 1972.
- (3) See *The Dockers' Next Step* (2nd Revised Edition 1969) Institute for Workers' Control pamphlet no. 12.
- (4) A model of the kind of inquiry which is needed can be found in *UCS: The Social Audit*, a Special Report by the IWC. pamphlet no. 26, 1971.
- (5) See Ken Coates' paper on unemployment and workers' control submitted to the Newcastle IWC conference, January 1972.
- (6) See the Government's White Paper, *Financial Policy for Ports*, Cmd. 4794 September 1971, in which the anti-social principles of the Government's attitude are clearly spelled out, in passages such as this:-  

"The Government does not believe that the problems of ports in this country will be solved by either subsidies or the worn-out specific of nationalisation. The Government expects the ports to put themselves in a position where they can provide the services essential to the country's economic prosperity efficiently and profitably. They are expected, like other businesses, to be self-supporting and competitive".

The government proposes that private profit-making should be introduced into Port Authorities (its model is Felixstowe, which receives special praise) and that loans to unprofitable ports will be made only on stringent terms, with interest rates "two percentage points *higher* than the Government lending rate and increasing progressively over the life of the loan".

This is the economics of a capitalist mad-house.
- (7) The necessary information can be pieced together from statistics published by the National Ports Council, but we must demand that these be issued monthly, not annually. We also need urgent information on tonnages going to small unregulated ports and river wharves.

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