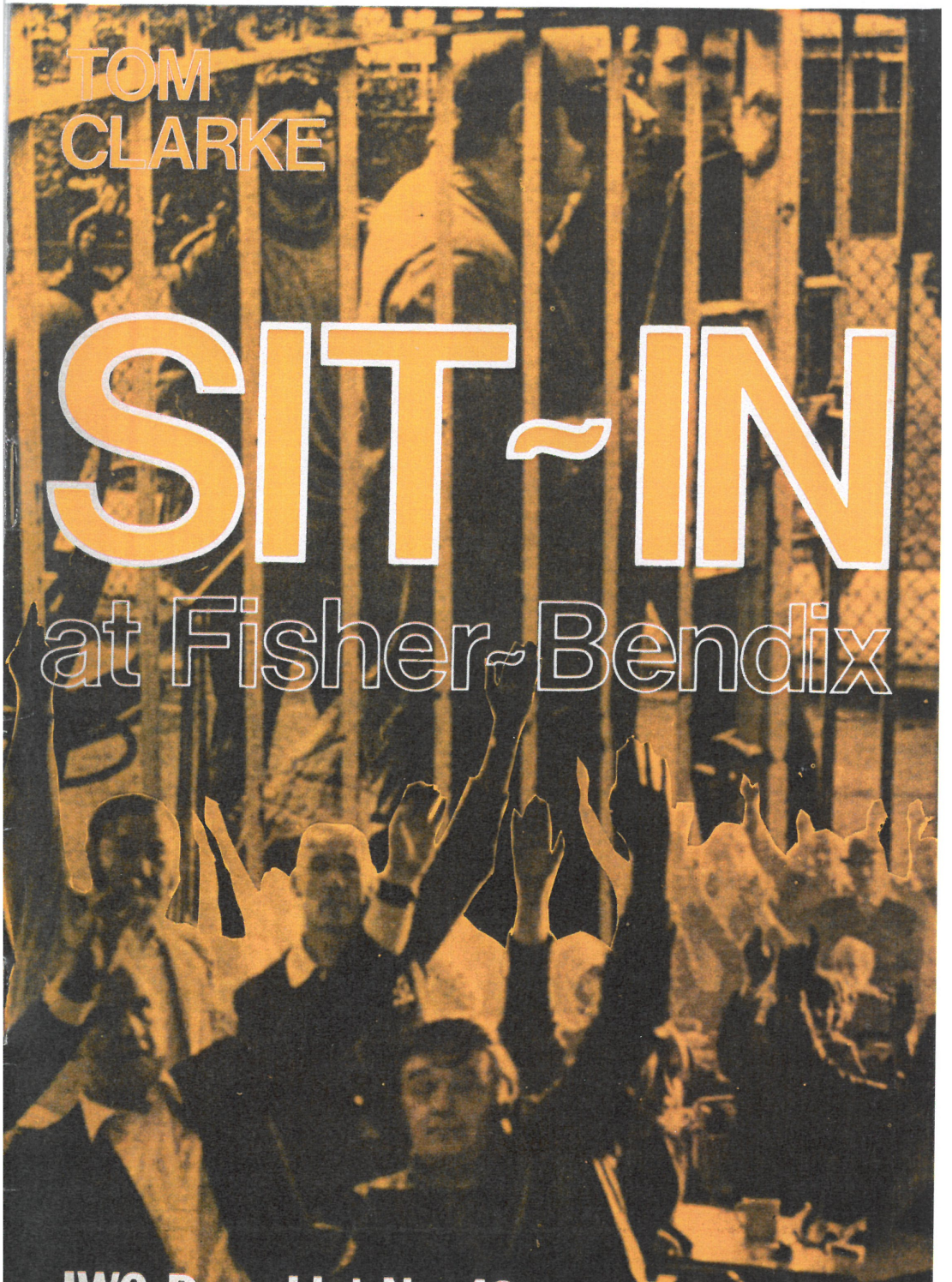
TOM CLARKE

SIT-IN

at Fisher-Bendix



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Sit-in at Fisher-Bendix
by Tom Clarke

The workers of the IPD (formerly Fisher-Bendix) factory at Kirkby, Liverpool have the unique distinction of having taken over the control of their factory twice in the last two years. In January-February 1972 they were involved in a five week sit-in, and in July 1974 a two week work-in, in an effort to maintain job security in a shifting sea of corporate indifference and managerial incompetence and self-interest.

It might be safely assumed that two such traumatic upheavals in such a short period of time would have a significant effect on the ideas and attitudes of the individual workers participating in a total, if temporary, rejection of the figures and structures which traditionally had dominated their working lives. In particular it might be expected that workers' attitudes to the economic system and its major components, capitalism and the corporations that had provided them with so much insecurity, and been so unresponsive to their endeavours, might have changed. Also their ideas on management, a series of which had shown a callous indifference to workers' desire for, and effort towards, secure and well-paid employment, combined with a blatantly apparent inability to perform their supposed function of a rational and efficient allocation and control of resources with the goal of a profitable company.

History of the Factory

The IPD light engineering factory was purpose-built with the aid of a Government industrial development grant by BMC in 1961. It was the pet project of the chairman of BMC to diversify into the domestic appliance market; and for a while the factory prospered, employing two and a half thousand workers on a three shift system, with a wide variety of products, including the Moulton bicycle, stainless steel and vitrous sinks, the Bendix washing machine and dryer, and radiators. However, with the takeover of BMC by Leyland Motors the new chairman, Lord Stokes, looked on the venture less favourably, partly because the benefit of government support in investment grants for building and equipping the factory had receded in importance. The Moulton patent, the first of the modern breed of small wheel bicycles, was sold to Raleigh, and in 1968 the factory itself was sold to Parkinson-Cowan. The workers' insecurity now began in earnest as a range of products were introduced only to be soon abandoned or transferred to other factories. Another successful product the one-piece stainless steel sink was sold to Carron's, a competitor. And ultimately Parkinson Cowan itself collapsed and was taken over by Thorn Electrical. Thorn paid little more for Parkinson Cowan, including Fisher-Bendix and a large number of other factories, in May 1971, than Parkinson Cowan had paid for Fisher-Bendix on its own in late 1968.

From the beginning Thorn's plans were clear – maintain the profit-making concerns, sell off some surplus equipment, close the Kirkby factory, and take all the

profitable lines elsewhere.[1] Yet in January 1971 the *Investors' Chronicle* gave a favourable account of Fisher-Bendix's prospects, although it had made some losses in the past. The quick sale of only three factories recouped half the money Thorn had paid for Parkinson Cowan. Then Thorn declared their intention of hiving off the Bendix washing machine business, but refused to make a definite statement as to their intentions regarding the future of the factory. A nine week strike ensued, but the workers returned exhausted, and Thorn were able to transfer the production of the Bendix machine to CARSA of Spain. Finally it was proposed to move the remaining products to Newcastle subsidiaries.

The workers firmly believed that the main reason for these moves was to exploit cheap labour; whilst the average wage of the Kirkby employees was nearly £30, that of the remaining 71,000 Thorn employees was only £19. Of course, wage rates in Spain were much lower still. At the time there were one million unemployed, and Merseyside, as usual, was especially hard hit. These events sparked the desperation which erupted in the January occupation. As the one angry worker acidly remarked, "The sit-in of 1972 was unique, people who criticise it don't know nothing about it. At the time we were fighting for a job. We couldn't have got a job anywhere else. But there was a principle behind it – he (Sir Jules Thorn) moved the Bendix washing machine out to Spain, he wasn't even going to move it to another part of England like the rest. I wonder if Franco was going to give him a grant? He was looking for cheap labour. For a man who controls 70,000 people to look for cheap labour in Spain . . . "

The 1972 Sit-in

As closure became imminent the senior stewards made preparations for resistance; they visited UCS and Plessey, Alexandria to learn of their experiences, and contacted the Thorn Shop Stewards' Combine for support. A mass meeting gave the shop stewards' committee a carte blanche to organise whatever tactics they thought necessary to safeguard jobs. The idea of an occupation, at first dismissed as foolish, grew until it was widely accepted. However, the popular conception that the convenor, Jack Spriggs, triumphantly led the massed ranks into the boardroom, is somewhat inaccurate. In fact the convenor and senior stewards were already in the boardroom negotiating with the senior management in a final effort to avert closure. A demonstration of support was called for, a group of workers decided that it was now or never to take over and moved off from the radiator shop gathering support on the way. After obtaining the master keys to the factory the few hundred workers marched to the administration building and up the stairs, "We'd heard the meeting was being held in the executive canteen. You know these things do happen like – over a cup of tea and that, y'know it's all so nice – they're only sacking you anyroad. So no reason why they shouldn't be polite about it." In fact the management were found in the boardroom and there the convenor seized control of the situation and told the management that it was a workers' takeover and they should leave the premises.

During this emotive event, the workers felt they were taking a step into the unknown – and were understandably nervous – they had always believed that management and their enclave were forbidden territory, in fact most had never been into

the administration building before. "When we did get to the boardroom there was this invisible barrier, it's got to be said, it was a barrier. It wasn't the door itself – we all seemed to stop three or four feet from the door – eventually someone pushed the door handle open, and shot back as if it was hot. You got this feeling . . . . . and Tom, one of our senior stewards was jockeyed into the office, he wouldn't go at first. Tom's beliefs are that we should throw bosses out anyroad, that they shouldn't exist, but it was obvious that even Tom felt the same way . . . He went in and walked around two of the walls and everyone followed until it was full to the door – but the office was only occupied on two sides – no one was prepared to make their own way round the other side. Eventually, I was in a position where I could go in the door, and the only way I could go was up the free side – so I went in and was followed by some others." But once they had stepped over the threshold into the managerial power base, the workers found a new confidence and decisiveness, thus another worker maintained, "That was a revolution in the true sense, it wasn't like any of the other occupations recently – it was management out in the street – not thrown out, but told to leave the premises. Jack Spriggs went up to the Works Director and said, 'In 1963 there were 2,500 people who worked here, and every time a product was sold off and you made money – you made redundancies. Now we have a workforce of 700, well we've had enough, we're giving you formal notice now, in our own little way – we've got no papers, no formal papers – but as from today *you're* redundant.' For fifty years whenever there's been any trouble it's always the workers who've been put out the gate; either made redundant, or a lockout, or they go out themselves in a strike. But here – and elsewhere in the future – it's the management who are on the street." (For a time this proved to be literally true, as the Thorn management's efforts to set up an office to organise their campaign against the sit-in from a hotel was thwarted with the help of local trade unionists, and they were asked by the hotel manager to leave the hotel.) The management had been taken completely by surprise with the occupation; whilst the factory was in operation – even though it was in the process of being run down – they expected the traditional passivity of English workers, they did not anticipate the workers making an independent initiative before the declaration of closure.

The workers involved in the takeover were very angry, and a mass meeting was called, with half the workforce arriving from the other end of the factory, including stewards who were unaware of what had happened. In an emotion-charged mass meeting it was decided to sit-in until the management agreed to guarantee the future job security of the workers. Immediately the organisation of the sit-in was begun, some workers staying in the factory for a full twenty-four hours. A shift system was arranged with four six-hour shifts ensuring the factory was occupied twenty-four hours a day. Committees were set up to deal with security, finance, publicity and entertainment, and each enjoyed some success. The factory was made secure against trespassers, all visitors having to go through the gatehouse, and also internal theft.

Donations were received from a wide cross-section of the labour movement. Both the initial takeover and the occupation were widely publicised in the mass media – and surprisingly not unfavourably (except the city newspaper the *Liverpool Echo* which managed to convey an unsympathetic proprietorial outrage). The entertainment provided in frequent shows to relieve the boredom of the workers was impres-

sive, revealing the grass roots feeling of much of the Liverpool arts; the Everyman Theatre gave a special performance in the Works Canteen; also the Spinners folk group; the poet Adrian Henri; and the sculptor Arthur Dooley staged a special exhibition. In addition a Library was set up, and TVs were provided by sympathisers.

The main task of the senior stewards was to enlist the support of the transport industry in stopping the movement of Thorn products. A sophisticated information bulletin was circulated nationally, and support was widespread. Also local MP's whose support had been gained, gave notice of a motion in the Commons requesting an inquiry into the extent of public money invested in Fisher-Bendix and absorbed by the parent companies, and an examination of Thorn dealings with companies abroad.

Under the weight of this pressure Thorn were forced to negotiate and, with Harold Wilson the constituency MP acting as intermediary, it was arranged for the new owners Clohurst to keep the factory in production with the full 700 jobs. At the time it all seemed an amazingly successful breakthrough for workers' independent initiative.

Even what, in football-crazy Liverpool, was termed a 'transfer fee' of up to £200-£300 per worker, depending on length of service, was paid out by Thorn (with supposedly no disentitlement from any later official redundancy payment). However, it took over two years for the workers to discover that even during what they regarded as their finest victory, complex financial dealings had been taking place in secret, which ensured the ultimate collapse of their new company.

Harold King and IPD

From the beginning there were signs that the new company would not provide the impulse to propel the factory back into viability. The new managing director, Harold King, seemed inexperienced to say the least; and although a genuine effort was made to make a new start, the old insecurity began to creep back. Clohurst became IPD (International Property Development), IPD became IPD (Industrial) with a separate Foods and Property division. In the end, some secretaries admitted, they were not sure which company they worked for when they spoke to customers on the telephone. Despite the need for a new major product, the only product King brought was his fruit juice business, which he transferred from Surrey (making the workers there redundant). However, gradually trade picked up, but rather than stabilise the situation, to the shop stewards' amazement, King proposed the recruitment of a whole new 'twilight shift' of several hundred workers. It was impossible for the stewards to resist the creation of new jobs, so the management had their way. The three-day week affected the company at the beginning of this year and shortly afterwards it was in obvious financial difficulties. As the senior management began to make threatening noises, a detailed investigation by the *Liverpool Free Press* revealed the financial dealings which had condemned the company.

Ivor Gershfield who owned Stanbourne Properties had bought Fisher-Bendix for £1.2 million, only four days after the sit-in began – though a secret agreement had been made the previous autumn, without the workers' knowledge. A few months later he sold it to his other company, Clohurst, for £1.8 million, (Clohurst borrowed £600,000 of this from Thorn). Gershfield's Clohurst was then taken over by IPD, and

Gershfield received 5 million shares at 10p in IPD in part-payment, the rest to come later. He then proceeded to sell 3 million shares, (half to Harold King) at 25p, (the shares have been as high as 41½p), making a profit of £375,000. Then, to repay part of the remaining debt to Gershfield, King borrowed £2 million from the ill-fated London and Counties Securities, at a penal 5% above Bank Rate. After IPD paid Gershfield it was again short of cash, and so Gershfield sold another of his companies, Magenta, with £1 million assets to King for 270,000 more shares in IPD. It is likely that Gershfield has now sold most of his shares in IPD. By the sale of the factory, and with the shares from the sale of Clohurst, and then Magenta, Ivor Gershfield had netted a profit of over a million pounds. He had left IPD crippled by debt for the government to bail out.

King too had relied on a £1 million loan from the government at a low rate of interest, which had been mooted at the initial takeover; though with the financial and production mismanagement of his company, and his interests in property development both here and in Trinidad – there was no chance of getting this loan from Benn's DTI, who were not prepared to foot the bill for the failings of private enterprise. The saga took another dramatic turn on Friday 28 June, when IPD issued redundancy notices to all 1,200 employees, while the senior stewards were in London negotiating with the DTI, possibly in an effort by King to gain public attention and support in his fight to get the government loan. Anyway, he was quickly persuaded to reinstate all the employees, and substituted a temporary lay off the following Monday, but soon despaired of getting the government loan and called in the Receiver for Barclays Bank on Thursday 11 July.

The next day a mass meeting voted overwhelmingly in favour of Jack Spriggs' call to throw out the Receiver and to sack the present management. In a controlled atmosphere, sharply contrasting with the emotion of the previous occupation, the workers coolly marched into the management's offices, secured the factory, and escorted the Receiver to the gates, (who later announced, after only one day's study, that the factory could only be viable with 450 employees).

The Second Occupation

The shop stewards' committee quickly decided that to avoid the problem of arranging special shifts, to elicit the activity of all the workforce, and to display the factory as a going concern – this would not be a sit-in but a work-in. They felt in a stronger position than in 1972, with a much larger quantity of finished goods in stock, including some parts needed by Standard Triumph; the involvement already of a sympathetic government; and fighting only for the difference between 450 and 1,200 jobs, rather than complete closure. On Monday morning at 7.45 am production began as normal in the works, later the electricity board. which had a large debt outstanding, cut off the electricity from the factory substation, but the IPD electricians put the power on again. The next day the electricity board, using labour from Southport, dug up the power cables and switched off again. Although an emergency generator was activated, this proved powerful enough for only a small section of the factory; at the same time sugar ran out in the fruit juice section, with the result that most workers had to resort to repair, maintenance, and cleaning of the machinery and factory, though the philosophy of the work-in remained.

The managerial history of Fisher-Bendix was most succinctly described by one female shop steward, "There is something wrong with the top here . . . because it collapses all the time." Somehow in this particular factory there appeared a dichotomy of interests between successive corporations with their appointed managers, and the workforce – which became gradually more apparent. Remote corporate boards seemed indifferent to the fate of this subsidiary company, and their career-oriented management showed little more concern. There was a constant turnover of senior management, including eleven works managers in as many years, none staying long enough to win their employees' confidence or respect. The last vestiges of trust disappeared with the first occupation; "I think the first one opened men's eyes to what managements were," one fitter maintained, "all this about management being bad and fiddling and God knows what, I don't think it come to blokes as much as in that five weeks when we actually saw the papers and plans. They were smuggling tools out the country, it seems ridiculous, smuggling tools to Spain! We were putting tools into skips, scrap metal skips; told they were going for scrap – and they were getting taken to Birmingham and transhipped into containers. And when you told the brothers this they just didn't believe you. But during the sit-in when we rooted through the papers, it was there in black and white in the telexes."

Management Incompetence

Probably stories exist on every shop floor of management incompetence, self-interest and eccentricity; what is peculiar at Fisher-Bendix is the profusion and unmistakeable authenticity of these reports, which fuel the workers' desire for a stronger say in the control of the factory and of management. For example the Works Engineer who complained to a fitter of an oil leak in a Bliss press, only to be informed it was a self-lubricating device. Or the visiting company managing director who always insisted on carving the meat at lunchtime in his own directors' canteen and on naming the subject of conversation over lunch, and who insisted on carving the meat at Fisher-Bendix as well, "It would be better if they'd gone through our factory, and found out what was wrong with it – instead of worrying about who should carve the blasted meat."

In many ways Harold King proved to be a caricature of the eccentric director. A main focus of his interests was portraying the successful individualist, by for example personalised number plates on not only his newly acquired limousines (one Rolls Royce, two XJ6's) but his wife's and personal assistant's. He regarded the company as there to serve his needs, which included members of the purchasing department spending whole days tracking down small fittings for one of his two homes. As one worker put it, "If anyone said, this is an actor you've got from Equity, and we're going to dress him up like a rich man – he just appeared that way – y'know the suits and all that business and mixing with Lord Montague. Y'know he promoted a golf tournament in Trinidad and all he got out of it was his photo with Tony Jacklin . . . "

However, King did make some serious efforts to create what he felt to be a new climate of understanding and reason in the factory. The initial step and initial failure was the first factory meeting he called to explain his takeover in an effort to promote 'open' management. "The phoney answers he gave! He must have just thought

fellas would ask him how much holidays and how much money they were going to get . . . And fellas started asking how much money he had to back him up and what did IPD stand for, and where was this money tied up – y'know pretty serious questions. And you could see the man stiffen up as he was standing there – he didn't know what to say y'know. And one of the lads, Archie Breedon the ETU steward, asked what his attitude to militant trade unionism was and honest to God he stood bolt upright! And the next question I asked him why he stood up so straight! He stood up like a Guardsman at the mention of trade unionism!" Presumably due to inexperience as much as generosity King was later to negotiate a production agreement favourable to the workforce. Indeed he publicised his good union relations on Merseyside generally, however when it came to a few workers' attention that he had described them as being anarchists, and they questioned him on the subject, his eventual response was to invite them to leave the factory.

The honeymoon period with King lasted for a surprisingly long time, but came to a predictable and abrupt end. Once aware of the financial dealings which had been kept from them, together with the way in which they had once again become counters in a game of managerial Monopoly, the workers were determined not to allow King, or any similar manager, back into the factory.

How the Workers Saw It

The years of struggle to keep the factory operating in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles has given Fisher-Bendix workers an affection for, and identification with their factory untypical of the modern factory worker. One woman thought it was a 'beautiful factory' and explained, "During the sit-in we cleaned up the factory – because that was something we cherished – not just the women – all the people here." Similarly the pride in the company's products that the workers possess was not something industrial sociologists, or more importantly quality control inspectors and consumers, have come to expect; "We had the Rolls Royce of washing machines . . . the Rolls Royce of sinks – the only one-piece sink in the country – a masterpiece of engineering it was. The lads were proud of it," one semi-skilled worker insisted, "We make good products in this factory. We use good materials. I don't always say the lads are the best workers in the world but the products are good."

There was genuine and deeply felt bitterness at the way the successful products, one by one, had been taken from the factory. George was one of the fitters who had the heart-breaking job of dismantling the production lines of the major products, and replacing them with lines which proved temporary and unsuccessful. He explained, "As normal we sell off our product because they can't sell, so they say to us, 'and the offer was so good!' So fair enough the bicycles went and just after there was a large boom in bicycle sales and the Moulton did very well. In its place we got the gas fire, the maintenance put the production lines in and when you're involved in this you can see what the cost is. The line ran for six months then we took it out. Another gas fire was bought and we moved the lines 10 feet or so, this was always going on. They'd take a line out, then put one in again. The gas cooker line ran for only a month, then they decided it wasn't a viable product for this plant so it went back to the parent factory. The gas fires went as well eventually." As one man con-

cluded, "We've got a modern, fully equipped press shop, we were built as a car factory – and we're making orange juice and radiators – it's a ridiculous situation."

The 1972 sit-in also had a traumatic effect on attitudes to work a shop steward maintained, "When we came back to work the enthusiasm was tremendous. The people were really keen to get the job done and we were prepared to do anything, work any awkward hours to get the job off the ground and make a success of it. I think this goes for everyone in the factory. People were painting and cleaning when they would normally just sit down . . . all the demarcation lines went. 'Just let's get the job right on the road. Let's prove this fella Thorn wrong.' This was the attitude – just to prove Thorn wrong." Predictably, it was found that the new management gradually eroded this goodwill. But any impression of the IPD workers as modern Luddites is quickly dispelled. Most of the workers interviewed were proud and knowledgeable about the machinery in the factory, and one major bone of contention was the inefficient production engineering of successive managements which prevented the most effective utilisation of the machinery and the factory. One worker pointed out that, "this factory was built for a flow of production right through and the more you isolate departments on separate items as has happened in the past the more the problem becomes of feeding and emptying the department, it creates all sorts of bad business practices . . . the amount you pay fellas for carting stuff around the factory gets bigger than the amount you're paying for producing it." Similarly workers found upsetting the amount of wastage, overbuying and lack of standardisation in the plant, a senior steward complained, "We've never had such a thing as a good housekeeping policy in this factory. I don't think anybody is conscious of it. That's from the shop floor to top management. There's always been a great aura of waste and overstocking."

Also the myth of a factory full of people hell-bent on agitation and militancy, popular in conservative quarters, could not be further from the truth. Even the most militant worker interviewed was keen to see the factory back in full production and for the work-in to end. "I hope it only lasts two weeks, and I hope it's a final sit-in. No one wants to go through this every two years. A lot of the people who were involved and who were strong lost time themselves, have crumbled in this particular sit-in – only a fortnight old. It does hurt. But I've found it hurts even more to be laid off, outside the factory when there were 200 people in the factory. And all they were doing as far as I'm concerned was loading wagons to take out stocks that we had in this factory. They were weakening the position of the people who were outside." The point was constantly reiterated in every interview that with this work-in it was hoped to remove the need for any future industrial action and to provide the basis for a secure productive future.

One worker recounted an incident which occurred during the second takeover indicative of the limitation of the workers' rebellion, "The IPD flags were flying all over the factory – which was a big publicity thing of King's – so a couple of the boys decided that we weren't having those, so they climbed up on the roof and took them down. And one of the other lads noticed the union jack flying . . . and decided to lower it. He'd no sooner put his hand on the rope when the women nearly lynched him. Because the union jack like, it's sacred. And it was comical. It was alright attacking the firm -- but not the union jack. He'd wanted to fly it at half-mast – he was just making a

little joke but he near got himself lynched."

Moreover the recent reputation of the factory as having chronic industrial unrest is largely unmerited. Shortly before Parkinson Cowan was taken over by Thorn an interim report appeared in the *Financial Times,* one man explained, "We read it and it said due to industrial unrest in Kirkby we've made a loss. But in actual fact this place hadn't had a strike in eighteen months. He was using this place as an excuse. But everyone would accept this area to be one of industrial unrest. No one thinks the average working guy's gonna buy a *Financial Times.* The paper was put out here though!" Thus incompetent management may often be concealed by claims of industrial unrest. In the two and a half years of King's reign there were no strikes caused by internal disputes, only one-day sympathy strikes on national issues, the IR Act, Pentonville 5, and Shrewsbury 3, "But they're all open-and-shut cases you just go out and come back in and it's settled." "I think any boss on Merseyside would give his right arm for the industrial peace we've had here, two days out of 365 is not a bad average." Tom Staples, a senior steward, pointed out that the main reason for this was, "We've been trying to show that if any problems did arise that we were not responsible for them, and I think that we've achieved this position. I don't believe that any worker here now, or the leadership would accept the situation of a new management like the last one. We believe we've been kicked around enough by boss after boss." It is difficult not to agree with the conclusion of one astute worker, "I don't think the workforce here is bad. I think management call them bad because there's slightly above the average number of blokes thinking for themselves."

Solidarity in Struggle

A realistic appraisal of the contemporary validity, though continuing weakness, of class consciousness and class solidarity had permeated the thinking of a large number of the workforce, as Ralf a fitter explained in depth, "Our own enemy is the ordinary working people. The bloomin' apathy of some of them, surely the fellas in the banks are ordinary working fellas? I often think that the men who cut the electricity off, surely they're ordinary working fellas? – Southport's not the end of the world. The same when the telephone engineers are ordered to cut the telephones off. It beats me why they don't just say 'no we're not cutting it off'. It puzzles me, y'know when y'don't pay your rates when you've had a few weeks strike like. The fella who sends the form saying you're going to court if you don't pay up, he's an ordinary working man isn't he? It annoys you sometimes. And you're coming up here, I've got a car – I don't know if workers are supposed to have cars – but you get fellas comin' up on the bus and some of them don't actually have a penny, not after this, but the other times when we were on strike, nine weeks once and six weeks another time, and the bloomin' conductor asks you for the money. Surely they know you're coming in to picket? – they know a lot of you by sight. It beats me how ordinary fellas can lean on other ordinary fellas for money just to try and assert their bosses' rights. The whole lot beats me. They shut a firm down and move it down to Slough or somewhere. It's not that the boss tries to sack them and move the factory down to somewhere more convenient, it's the fact that he'll always get blokes to come in and move the machinery and lorry drivers y'know. If they all just said 'no you're doing fellas out of work' – the boss has got no chance. But he can always get more fellas who think

it's better to do what he says than fellas who'll stand up against him."

The women at IPD gave their full support to the work-in. The spectre of militant middle-aged women seems rather incongruous, like something from a Monty Pyton sketch, likely to amuse rather than alarm factory managers. However, though some women showed a reluctance to be involved in 1972, in the 1974 dispute they proved an unexpected source of strength. When it was proposed at the mass meeting that the management should be evicted; they were the first to respond and shouted, "Don't wait to throw them out, throw them out now." One woman worker offered a possible explanation, "I've reared my kids and I want to work for me. I don't care what I'm doing." Another supported her, "Our kids are grown up. We're working for ourselves now – we've still got a lot to offer – even at forty odd, nearly fifty. You're more mature in your ideas. We'll be 100% behind the new people whether it's a workers' cooperative or British Leyland or whatever. We'll have a go. If they don't think we're good enough, and they can prove it to me, then they can put me out the door – but not till then." A male worker supported this view of the relative freedom of activity middle age had brought, "Y'know I'm in a happy position. I'm forty-one now and both my kids are working. So there's only me and my wife to worry about. Financially, like, it doesn't bother me to a great extent. But it must be sickening for lads who've just took mortgages out and have got young kids. Y'know two months on the dole can crucify them. I know this from when I was young. They haven't shirked it in any way, but it must be hitting them harder than other fellas."

From the beginning of the first sit-in in the traditional distance between the white collar workers and the manual workers of the plant narrowed considerably. The sit-in committee, later to become an enlarged joint shop stewards' committee, consisted of both the three manual unions, TGWU, AUEW and EEPTU, and the white collar unions, APEX, TASS and ASTMS. In 1972 only half the staff supported the sit-in, but by 1974 the staff were more solidly behind the works. Even some of the non-unionised middle management stayed with the work-in. As one female APEX shop steward said, "A lot of the staff who are in this time stayed out last time, and remember what they went through afterwards, the bickering and so on. I suppose they realise now that they're fighting for their jobs as well as we are. If we win they win, if we lose they lose." While recognising the white collar workers' marginally better market position, she was sympathetic to the lot of the majority of the workforce, "We would be alright if we were made redundant, we'd get jobs alright, we wouldn't get the money but we'd get jobs. But the people in the factory won't, especially here in Kirkby. In that factory there are whole families – husbands, wives and children." The staff involvement with the struggle was a subject of pride for the manual workers, as one declared, "Where else would you see the staff, the clerical workers, coming out over the jailed dockers, is there anywhere else where this could happen?"

Redundancy Rejected

A sociologist has offered a penetrating analysis of the whole problem of redundancy, "Where redundancy is concerned, public policy has defined the problem largely in *managerial* terms. That is to say, the 'threat' that has been discerned is the threat of economic and technological stagnation caused by the undue restriction of managerial initiative and the unwillingness of workers to adapt to change. The

assumption has *not* been redundancy as such is undesirable and should, therefore, be eliminated. On the contrary, the very legitimacy of redundancy has been underlined and the problem defined in terms of how best to facilitate managerial decision-making and encourage workers to accept the inevitability, indeed, the desirability of redundancy . . . A plausible view of the 1965 Redundancy Payments Act and its financial provisions is that it reinforced not only the commodity view of labour, but also served to facilitate an approach which regards workers as quite properly the most easily varied factor of production."[2]

The workers at Fisher-Bendix have independently assimilated and acted upon this analysis. Ralf explained, "Even if we don't win this like, the very fact that we've caused a stink and put obstacles in people's way is important. If everyone that was made redundant did that it wouldn't become the easy way out it has become for a man who wants to alter his factory or his workforce. They still do it because so many fellas will say 'give us the lump sum, we'll go'. But even if in the end you had to accept it, I think everyone should have a go at making it the most awkward thing a man could do – to make anyone redundant."

In fact the 1972 occupation had exactly this kind of effect on employers locally, and combined with the other occupations and work-ins which occurred at the time, seemed to introduce an unfamiliar element of caution in the redundancy policies of companies nationally As one steward put it, "In 1972 there were a lot of redundancies and sacking matches going on in Kirkby before we took up occupation. But after what we did it suddenly stopped." Another steward maintained, "Redundancy as far as we're concerned doesn't exist. We will fight for every job. And we've been successful in keeping jobs since we realised we shouldn't argue about side issues." The workers had redefined the problem of redundancy in terms which made their resistance to management proposals complete, as a senior steward indicated, "If we would have accepted the situation of 450 jobs at present, and the rest laid off indefinitely, I think the situation would have gone on to less than 450 jobs and, over a period of time, complete closure. I don't think you can put yourself in the situation whereby initially you're accepting the opposition's terms of reference in the hope of altering, or doing something about them later. I think you've got to decide in your mind that it's a 'no' from the beginning – that his terms of reference just aren't suitable to us – until we can alter them we're just not going to accept any proposals that he's putting forward."

Advantages of the Sit-in

The occupation experience of the workers had convinced them of the considerable superiority in many circumstances of the sit-in over strike action. Unnecessarily complying with the minutiae of capitalist property law, the British working class on picket duty, have for a century been standing out in the cold. The effectiveness of a sit-in is easier to organise, as a senior steward explained, "You've got greater control, I mean if you're striking from outside, you have a job picketing twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, plus you can have difficulties with the law outside – difficulties that you just don't get inside." It is difficult to get men to turn out to picket, and therefore those that do, often have to stay inordinate lengths of time. Moreover as one worker complained of the 1971 strike, "It was the most boring thing you can imagine, sitting there day and night."

Important also, is that the occupation is a form of offensive industrial action revealing potentialities in workers and their capacity for self-organisation, which remain largely dormant in the restrictive defensive postures to which trade unionists have traditionally condemned themselves. "The '72 sit-in was exciting – it was brand new. That day in the canteen when Jack said, 'That's it lads, we've had enough, we're gonna take it over', everyone was really excited. It went well, it didn't last really long enough – five weeks – to become a drag. I think it showed you the talents that some blokes had – that's what struck me. Blokes you'd worked with for ten years – and to be honest I'm as much to blame as anyone – you didn't know half of their names, only their first names. And it suddenly struck you what organising ability fellas had who'd been ten years on a spot welder."

Indeed an immediate improvement was noticed in one area, the canteen, which a firm of outside caterers had operated. "Women and men took over and produced meals that we've never had the likes of since. Ordinary workers took over a big canteen like that and provided much better meals, near enough for nothing." Another worker supported this, "They were the best meals we ever had in the canteen; I must mention one fella, Barney of the paint plant, was the best cook I've ever come across." There was another important benefit, "We've agreed that it's much better for us all to be in here than at home. It doesn't interfere with your family life as much. You just come to work at a normal time and go home at a normal time. The only time that's possibly different is the weekends." The three shift system was maintained, with a special shift at weekends for the maintenance men.

Some indication of the extent of the organisational effectiveness of the sit-in was given by one office worker, who when asked what the main differences were between the control of the shop stewards and the management replied, "The shop stewards are a lot more confident than the management were." Perhaps an aspect of this confidence was a 50 feet wide sign hung on the factory railings during the sit-in of 1972, 'Under New Management'.

Learning from Experience

Both occupations proved successful experiements in workers' self-management, though some weaknesses were revealed. In the first sit-in some isolation occurred between the senior stewards carrying out the technical managerial functions in the admin. building and the workers occupying the factory. As one worker complained, "We were being isolated from the stewards and from any visitors, MPs and so on. In actual fact the only things you did occupy yourselves with much of the time were cards and talking. People had been told they must take part in the sit-in. Playing cards for me is not taking part in the sit-in. I would like each man to be given a turn on the gate, and answering the phone. Being able at some time or another to go on a visit. People visited universities and spoke to students, I say alright, send a speaker, but send two people with him off the shop floor who can sit and listen, at least they're being involved." He felt the workers' involvement could have been generally improved, "A lot of the men lost heart because all they found themselves were was numbers, like a publicity stunt. Like, the papers would come round, and say 'can you lift the radiator up so we can photograph you working', 'can you sit in a group here' and photo you playing cards. This is not what a sit-in is about, it's

not active." However, the senior stewards had reacted to this criticism and with the work-in, they stressed active involvement, moved over to the factory, and communicated more information.

One problem in this respect was that the undoubted and exceptional ability of the senior stewards meant that their proposals were too readily consented to. Jack Spriggs the convenor, "a bit of a rough diamond", had led the workers successfully through struggle after struggle, and had won their affection, as well as their confidence in his leadership. He was ably supported by a group of senior stewards who had revealed a tenacity, imagination and intelligence which had taken successive managements by surprise. However, if oligarchy is not to spread to the shop floor, which often is the only reservoir of real democracy, then attention should be paid to preserving and expanding democratic procedures. In the turmoil existing between the two sit-ins, creating a dominant need for unity, the election of the senior stewards had become a formality, shop stewards' meetings were held on an ad hoc basis without any regular meetings and gave less chance for stewards to debate important points effectively: indeed stewards were timid in their criticism when faced with a united front of the senior stewards. In their turn, some stewards seemed to feel, "You're not allowed to criticise them because they're shop stewards". To evade this attitude and encourage greater participation it would seem necessary for the mass meetings and shop stewards' meetings to be provided with more information on which to base their decisions.

The Debate on Industrial Democracy

The experience of the workers also allows them to make some contributions to the growing debate on industrial democracy. It may surprise the Benn-baiters of this world, but in this factory at least Tony Benn is regarded as a hero, nationalisation a welcome refuge from the stormy sea of capitalism; Stan Ely the deputy convenor explained, "Our ultimate aim is for the Government or ourselves, to take this factory over, we're fed up belonging to the capitalist system, and being messed about from pillar to post by various owners – we're just not interested any more. We believe that if we can get Government intervention then certainly we will achieve our aim of a long term future." This was angrily supported, "It's alright for the Tory Party to press for a grant for private enterprise – but they're against nationalisation. It smells to high heaven. The taxpayer is keeping the rich man rich. They're keeping private manufacturing business going with these grants. We need a Workers' Financial Times to tell us of this."

Yet there was a widespread awareness of the serious democratic shortcomings of the existing nationalised inudstries and a resolve not to fall into the same trap. There was a demand that if nationalisation was introduced it could only be with a system of workers' control emanating from the shop floor. Tom Staples the senior steward had thought deeply on the problem, "I believe the railways, mines, electricity and so on are just state capitalism. The capital provided by the state but the same lot in control. I think nationalisation here would be different from that. Industrial democracy has got to come from the struggle on the shop floor. The way the TUC have developed their policies on Industrial Democracy is the wrong way – as with their policies on the trade unions – they decide what the policy should be – they decide

that we should have wage restraint because we've got a Labour Government in that's not prepared to challenge the heights of capitalism. The lead should come from the grass roots labour movement, and I think as soon as this comes we'll get our branch meetings full of members, instead of hardly any. Because you know the TUC, the Trades Councils and the Regional and National Bodies of the Unions are more bureaucratic than the politicians. My own union (AUEW) – we're the exception, I know it's nothing to write home about but at least we've got some form of democracy . . . We have got to start educating the shop floor that besides creating the wealth we can also control it – rather than some gink who doesn't do anything."

Some workers did however have misgivings on whether any new democratic structures might impinge on the traditional hard-won power workers' base of the union organisation on the shop floor. Two central problems were envisaged. Firstly, the shop stewards' involvement in management was thought by some to hinder the advocacy function of stewards, "A steward has got to be devious, he comes up with all the old ad-lib excuses, say for lateness – 'been up all night, the kids have been sick, toothache, three nights on the run' – so they can't suspend the man. That's your job as a steward – he's supposed to carry out the union's instructions. He can't do it if he's been upstairs as a manager one minute, and downstairs the next. It's impossible." It would seem that the roles of shop steward and *manager* proper should be kept strictly separate, though this situation could be removed by the evolution of fully autonomous work groups. A first step to achieving this had already been taken at Fisher-Bendix with the unionisation of first line – and some middle-management.

Worker objections to involvement in decision-making focused on the major problem of how worker directors could participate in unpopular, but unavoidable, decisions and retain the support of the shop floor. The issues of pay and redundancy were particularly sensitive, one worker excalimed, "I don't see the answer when a firm is going downhill; how you put it over to workers that they can't have a rise because of the financial interests of the firm. I could never see workers on the shop floor accepting a steward on the management committee saying that, in the interests of the firm, 150 people are going to have to go up the road. It's going to have to be Jesus Christ to get that over to them!" Such argument reveals the fundamental nature of the changes necessary if industrial democracy is to succeed; to become a living reality rather than a technical fraud. Constitutional and legal reforms are necessary but not sufficient changes; they must be accompanied by a wide range of economic and social transformations. Thus the worker's argument is a valid one; it would be pointless asking workers to restrain their pay demands if the worker or management directors' pay were not correspondingly restrained – or if they received a higher salary which buffered them from the effects of restraint. A radical movement towards equality of income would seem to be an essential component of a successful approach to industrial democracy. Similarly redundancy, as such, is intolerable and may be avoided by a range of more acceptable methods of labour deployment: more efficient manpower planning; a reduction in the working week; worksharing, or in the last resort voluntary, and well compensated, transfer of workers to other companies. Policy and practical reforms of this nature are necessary, but themselves would be impossible without an abandonment of the capitalist value system of privilege, hierarchy, and domination; together with the ideological manipulation

that propagates these values. An alternative value system is necessary to attain a co-operative enterprise, one of equality and solidarity that on rare, but significant occasions has blossomed in the historical struggles of trade unionism. Thus a senior steward predicted, "I don't think we'll get anywhere till we get this sort of co-operation. Till we get the feeling that when one's hurt it hurts everybody else."

The other problem is the related one of the extent to which trade union representatives on management boards may adopt managerial ideology and interests, "Stewards may start to associate with management, and they are associated with management. They must start thinking like management when they are presented with facts and figures . . . It's going to be an awful long road if the workers are going to accept stewards on the management board, never mind if the management board is going to accept them." A senior steward supported this, "I would not consider that the workers' representatives should be shop stewards, because they would lose their role as shop stewards . . . you lose the whole basis of a trade union, you become the boss, you just can't become a boss. You take the responsibility on of being a shop steward . . . to the best of your ability. I'm sure many or most shop stewards in the factory have had the opportunity to become what we term bosses, but it's just not on."

But, in fact, the creation of a minimum of 50% worker directors, elected from – and recallable by – the shop floor, bears no resemblance to the unfortunate managerial practice in the past of promoting shop stewards to management positions in order to remove the leadership of the shop floor – rather this can represent a redistribution of power, in which shop floor leaders may exert a greater influence over major decisions. Indeed the same steward admitted later, "Education is the basis of any takeover, and I think over the last two years we've learned a lot, i.e. we're in the position where we could run the factory ourselves." If stewards were elected as worker directors it would be doubly important that the periodic election of stewards and worker directors should be strictly adhered to, and that workers should have available full minutes and background information relating to board decisions on which to assess the ability and contribution of worker directors, and the adequacy of their representation.

The example of Fisher-Bendix workers, and other workers involved in occupations and work-ins in recent years, together with the gradual shopfloor encroachment on management power exhibited nationally, has helped to arouse the TUC and the Labour Party from their decades of slumber concerning the question of industrial democracy. In the past the TUC have been over-cautious regarding more radical ways of redistribution of power than traditional collective bargaining. The Labour Party in its approach to industrial democracy has in the past appeared, as the new Labour MP for Kirkby, Kilroy-Silk, once declared, "to be more concerned with creating an efficient industry and a dynamic economy than industrial democracy per se" [4] The new Labour Party policy on industrial democracy supported by the TUC, and briefly represented in the Green Paper, 'The Community and the Company' reflects a realisation of the multi-dimensional approach needed if only *some* of the entrenched inequalities of power which exist in capitalist society are to be eradicated.[5] Thus the encouragement of wider trade union membership, the extension of shop floor bargaining, the development of company and group bargaining, the introduction of fifty per cent trade union representation on boards, and a new emphasis on the educational responsibility of trade unions, together with the proposals concerning the disclosure of information

by companies, *may* at last create the conditions for 'workers' control'.

Yet there are dangers in this expressed by one IPD steward, "If we accept the TUC's document, or any document of this nature on Industrial Democracy we're not going to get anywhere. All they're doing is containing people, not developing, just containing people." To avoid this these proposals can only be regarded as a step towards self-management, since "What is proposed is, in fact, a system of *dual* power (employees and management) throughout industry, including the private sector."[6] This situation of dual power was discussed by Trotsky, "This double sovereignty does not presuppose – generally speaking, indeed, it excludes – the possibility of a division of the power into two equal halves, or indeed any formal equilibrium of forces whatever. It is not a constitutional, but a revolutionary fact. It implies that a destruction of the social equilibrium has already split the state superstructure. It arises where hostile classes are already each relying upon essentially incompatible governmental organisations – the one outlived, the other in the process of formation – which jostle against each other at every step in the sphere of government."[7] Thus such proposals for dual power, may be regarded as only the context for more radical change.

After a feasibility study, during which the workers agreed to a rotating lay-off, on 6th September it was announced by Benn at a factory meeting in IPD that the DTI had agreed to allow the setting up of a workers' cooperative on the model of Triumph Meriden. If these experiments in industrial democracy are to survive where others have failed, they must be protected from the inimical atmosphere of a potentially hostile capitalist economy, and this would involve the support of a Labour Government, and the Labour movement generally. The prospect of attempting to create an 'island of socialism in a sea of capitalism' is a daunting one, but if anyone can do it, it is likely these workers can. Whether the workers' cooperative arrives at a system of workers' participation, the 'dual power' of workers' control, or full workers' self-management only history will tell. Whatever the new situation, it is likely that the experience of the IPD workers in controlling their own fate during the two occupations will leave a permanent imprint on their minds, as haltingly but profoundly expressed by an IPD driver during the work-in, "This has become more than a job now y'know. I could walk out of here tomorrow and say, 'Oh, it's only a job', and go and get another job. Probably I'd be better off. But it's become more than a job. If we win through today or tomorrow as we're expecting to . . . "

FOOTNOTES

1. *Liverpool Free Press,* January 17, 1972, Special Supplement, 'Fisher-Bendix Takeover'.
2. *Liverpool Free Press,* May 1974, No. 15.
3. R. Fryer, 'Redundancy Values and Public Policy', *Industrial Relations,* 1973, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 3, 4, 17.
4. R. Kilroy-Silk, 'Contemporary Theories of Industrial Democracy', *The Political Quarterly,* 1970, p. 173.
5. The Labour Party, *The Community and The Company Reform of Company Law,* Report of a Working Group of the Labour Party Industrial Policy Sub-Committee.
6. G. Radice, *Working Power: Policies for Industrial Democracy,* Fabian Tract 431.
7. L. Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution, Vol. 1,* 1932; p. 222 in R. Hyman *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism,* Pluto Press.

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