

Ranks Explode Over...

British Steel Strike Sellout

LONDON, April 5 1980 —The longest national strike in post-war Britain ended two days ago when 150,000 British Steel Corporation (BSC) workers were forced back to work by their union leadership. Instead of the 20 per cent wage rise with no strings and no redundancies [layoffs], the demands for which militant strikers had battled for 13 weeks, they returned on the basis of a humiliating arbitrated settlement. The deal announced by Lord Lever's „Committee of Inquiry“ consists of an 11 per cent basic wage rise tied to „productivity“ (speedup) bonuses of 4.5 per cent to be negotiated locally—while inflation is raging at 19 per cent annually. This abject sellout—barely 1 per cent more than BSC had offered six weeks earlier—also gives management the green light to eliminate fully one-third of the existing jobs. Thus the union tops have handed Margaret Thatcher's Tory government a victory for its programme of vicious attacks on the unions and the workers' living standards.

The steel workers were not slow in expressing their outrage at this deal. On April 1 over 100 pickets, drawn mainly from South Yorkshire and Wales, greeted the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) negotiating team with jeers and catcalls as it emerged following its 41 to 27 vote for the settlement. Delegates who had supported the sellout were kicked, spat at and assailed with cries of „you're out,“ „you're fired,“ „that's it for you, you won't get reelected“ and „sellout.“ Scuffles broke out between cops and enraged militants who were attempting to stop cameramen from taking their pictures—though a Spartacist photographer was left alone. „She's ok, she's from 'Spartacus',“ said a picket to his mate.

The speed with which ISTC head Bill Sirs and his cronies forced through the return to work reflected their fear that the strike was on the verge of spreading. Even as the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) steel delegates were meeting in London's Transport House on April 1 to approve the settlement, in the same building T&G dockers were voting to call for a one-day national dock strike the following day in solidarity with the 12-day-old Liverpool dock strike over the blacking [„hot- cargoing“] of scab steel. The steel delegates voted a return to work ignorant of the dockers' decision.

At a picketers' meeting that evening at the Victory Club in Sheffield, South Yorkshire there was not a striker to be found who saw Sirs' deal as a victory. And the next day at a mass meeting of 3,000 Sheffield and Rotherham steel men, the local bureaucrats pointed the guilty finger at the union tops but pleaded for a return to work nonetheless. They almost lost the day when ISTC divisional officer Keith Jones swore from the platform, „We were not party to the settlement in London but we've got to live with it, and we will and *you* will.“ The response was a deafening chorus of „20 per cent! 20 per cent!“ Rumours that flying pickets from Wales were headed for Yorkshire were greeted with an enthusiastic acclamation that the picket lines would be respected.

But even within hours of the return to work the militant steel men demonstrated that their fighting spirit had not been broken. When the BSC disciplined two workers in Rotherham and another in Port Talbot, South Wales for refusing to unload lorries [trucks] which had been blacked for crossing picket lines in the strike, new picket lines were immediately thrown up in Sheffield, Rotherham and Port Talbot. The strike soon spread to plants in Stocksbridge and Teeside to include a total of 25,000 workers. At Port Talbot, threatened with 12,000 redundancies this year, the strikers set up a mass picket of 1,000 men. Some 700 of the angry pickets stormed and briefly occupied the plant's pay office after the company failed to pay them the £50 return-to-work bonus which had been part of the settlement. Steel workers in Scotland and Scunthorpe were also considering joining the new walkout.

A day later the Yorkshire strikers were ordered back to work by their local officials, with Port Talbot following suit the next morning. After several hours of discussion with management at TGWU strike headquarters in Rotherham on April 4 local officials announced to the score of pickets standing outside that the wildcat strike had been ended by BSC's agreement to reinstate the victimised workers and „investigate“ the question of the blacklisted lorry firm. As two days earlier they had screamed „sellout“ at Sirs & Co., these militants now yelled „sellout“ at the local misleaders.

The treachery meted out to the steel strikers has ramifications far beyond the wretched pay deal. In the wake of the sellout a national strike at British Leyland called for April 8 has been whittled down to a handful of plants. The government's anti-union Employment Bill is waiting in the wings as are over 50,000 redundancies in the steel industry and a new round of attacks on living standards, exemplified in the budget introduced in Parliament two weeks ago. In this context, Sirs' posture that the sellout is preparation „to gird our loins for the next struggle, in which we will fight the case for jobs“ is truly obscene. Yet this disgusting apology was echoed by the Socialist Workers Party and International Marxist Group even before the strikers had actually gone back.

Nonetheless, the bosses had better tread warily. Not since 1974 has Britain been so close to a general strike. The steel men have been defeated, betrayed, but they have not been broken. „It could flare up again,“ said one Rotherham militant after the latest walkout was quelled. To make sure the next battle ends in victory, the best *militants must* now set about drawing the lessons of this defeat: the crying need to cohere a revolutionary opposition to Labourism. As archaic British industry grows increasingly uncompetitive, the ruling class talks of „deindustrialisation,“ forcing massive cuts in nationalised enterprises and social services. The programme of the Labour Party in office is not fundamentally different, only Callaghan and Benn want to make the unions agree to their own impoverishment in a treacherous „social contract.“

Sirs and all the reformist misleaders, from Labour „lefts“ to Communist Party-backed union „hards“ like Arthur Scargill, only dicker over how many cuts to take and who will get them. In refusing to call a general strike against the hated Thatcher government, Trades Union Congress head Len Murray stated clearly the fear of all the reformists: „If we did that we would not know what to do with the power we have got.“ They know that in a revolutionary confrontation they would quickly be swept aside—that is why they sabotage the steel strike. A Trotskyist party is needed with a programme to use the power. The Spartacist League is dedicated to building that party, which will lead the struggle to break the death grip of decrepit British capitalism. It is the only alternative to sellouts like this one.

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