

The London Strikes

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The great revolt of the Dock Laborers and other workers of London which for the last two weeks of August and the first two weeks of September absorbed public attention, is one of those incidents in the struggle between the haves and the have-nots which mold thought and influence progress. It originated in the action of a handful of men at the South West India Dock who ceased work on the 13th of August because their very moderate claim for a higher rate of wages and more favorable conditions of working was not granted. In the course of a few days the strike extended to the other docks and then, day after day, the strikers received accessions to their number from the wharf laborers, the lightermen and other kinds of riverside laborers. At the same time other workers quite outside the dock industry, took advantage of the agitation to demand better conditions for themselves. Coal porters and car men, printers' laborers, iron workers, and their helpers, tin-plate workers, rope-making and jam factory girls, tobacco workers, orange porters, candle-makers, tailors, bricklayers and their laborers, basket-makers, chemical works employees, screw-makers, and other workers, ceased work and, like Oliver Twist, asked for more. In many cases they got it almost immediately; in others they had to hold out for a little while, but by the time the principal strike - that of the dockers - had ended on the 14th of September in a sort of compromise, by which the men employed on and after the 4th of November are to receive the advance in wages and better conditions asked for, the success of most of the other workers who had joined in the fray was assured.

A few days after the commencement of the struggle, John Burns was invited to address some of the meetings of the men. He accepted and from that time forward his energetic action in speaking to -and for, as well as organizing, the men, put him into the position of leader of the strike. He was ably supported by Tom Mann and many other comrades, with the result that a series of effective meetings were held on Tower Hill, at the Dock gates and elsewhere, including large demonstrations in Hyde Park on four succeeding Sundays. At one time, too, parades of the men from the east to and through the city took place daily. A committee to receive and distribute relief to the dockers on strike was formed and the funds began to roll in, not only from all parts of London and England, but also from Australia, whose generous citizens subscribed no less than L22,000.

Public opinion showed itself unmistakably on the side of the strikers. This we think goes to show that a general feeling of solidarity among the workers is growing and that very many of

the non-workers are beginning to understand that every human being ought to have a chance to lead a human life. Even the Lord Mayor and some Members of Parliament, together with Cardinal Manning, declared that the demands of the dockers were justified. A milk vendor gave away 200 gallons of milk daily for some days in succession, a grocer gave away whole cheeses, a pawnbroker offered to take pledges without interest while the strike lasted, and a landlord actually declared his intention of not taking any rent for the period in which the men were unemployed. Some of the trade unions subscribed large sums; notably the London Society of Compositors paid L100 a week. How useful the reactionary can be to the revolutionary cause Mr. Norwood and his colleagues ably showed us. By their continual refusal to come to terms they fanned the flame of the revolt until at the height of the strike probably no less than 150,000 workers were affected.

The importance of the docker began to grow in the public estimation soon after the strike commenced and the distribution of provisions began to be hindered. Flour, meat, tea, sugar, coals, etc., were locked up at the docks and prices began to rise. Traffic in that important London thoroughfare the Strand. was stopped for weeks because the wood necessary for the paving was at the docks. It was realized that the despised unskilled worker was as necessary to society as the most eminent scientist. The attempts made to get men to take the strikers' places failed miserably. By an admirable system of picketing and other precautions, most of those outsiders who offered were dissuaded from going in, and nearly all the foreign sailors who were urged to do the work refused. The general feeling of these latter was expressed by the Chinaman who said, "S'pose you pay one sovereign one hour me no can do."

One of the most satisfactory features of the agitation was the apparent disappearance of the various Socialist bodies as such. The names of organizations seldom transpired, but Socialism and Socialists were everywhere. There was work for all and our comrades resolutely set to work to do it. Political humbug disappeared from the Socialist program as soon as our comrades in the various societies found themselves face to face with a live workers' movement. Evidently Socialism has passed out of the select circle period, has become too strong, too widespread to be managed by two or three groups with high-sounding names, and is penetrating the mass of the people. Federations, Leagues, Associations and Unions, so organized as to restrict the initiative of action to an elected few have been overshadowed in this strike movement by the individual action of their own members, and the common bond of union which the members of all these bodies seek has been found in the common cause. A fresh impetus has been given to the formation of independent societies and groups of Socialist workers. We are pleased, too, to see that the formation of several trade unions has resulted. Many thousands have been enrolled into the Dock Laborers Union; a Coal Porters and Carmen's Union has been started in the North of London; and Printers' Laborers, Laundresses, Bass Dressers, House Painters and Decorators, Hair Dressers and others have followed suit. These unions will all be useful in bringing the workers into line for the Social Revolution, and it is to be hoped they will not be spoiled by centralization.

Strikes and trade unions can, of course only palliate the evils of the existing system of society. But this palliation is in the right direction. Instead of leading the workers to rely upon parliament for assistance, it impresses upon them that "who would be free himself must strike the blow," and induces them to strive themselves for their own emancipation without regard to the visionary schemes of political tricksters. Said the *Star* during the course of the strike, "How will the best House of Commons in the world give the workers their rights if they are not themselves prepared to sustain and enforce them?" To this question we append another, "What is the good of your

House of Commons to the workers if they have to sustain and enforce these same rights?" Surely it is good for nothing. Surely the worker should discard altogether his superstitious belief in the efficacy of state-help, refuse to sanction by his vote the iniquitous system of government, and rely upon the strength of his own arm and the clearness of his own head for his emancipation from the sweater, the rack-renter and the tax-collector. We think the workers are beginning to understand this, and we are sure these strikes will help them to do so.

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