

All Coppers are Workers

Are the police paragons of virtue or fascist bastards? Certainly they are abused as fascists by many leftists who, with their customary lack of originality, have also seized upon the American term “pigs” which is used endlessly in their various journals such as Red Mole and International Times. At the demonstrations against the Industrial Relations Bill earlier this year, the police were denounced as enemies of the working class and many placards showing a Bobby as “your next personnel manager” were on display.

Is this attitude justified? Of course the police are not in any trade union and they are sometimes seen in conflict with strikers, besides students and other protesters; so how different are policemen from other wage earners in their general outlook?

Obviously, the nature of their job as part of the state machine ensures that the ruling class will try to ensure that the police cannot strike. Add to this the fact that throughout its history many of the force have had a background of military discipline, and the possibility of a police trade union looks bleak indeed. And yet there was such a union - The National Union of Police and Prison Officers, formed in 1913.

Earlier attempts to obtain better pay and conditions through organisation were made in London in 1872 and 1890. Both were quickly crushed by dismissing the men’s spokesmen. However, during World War One the police were no longer well paid in relation to other workers - were even worse off. Cancellation of leave - days plus many other irritations saw the rapid growth of the illegal union with constables Marston and Thiel as Chairman and Provincial Organiser respectively. When the authorities tried the usual victimisation tactics almost the whole of the Metropolitan Police Force, numbering 19000 men, struck. During the strike pickets clashed with blacklegs and special police, just like other workers in a similar situation.

The authorities, caught unprepared, had to climb down and the men’s demands were met with one important exception - the guarantee of union recognition. Soon after the strike the union claimed it had over 40000 paying members. In some cities the union was influential in the Police Representation Boards - in Liverpool it was able to have men promoted who had been unfairly passed over. Meantime the authorities were preparing for a showdown and in this they were helped not only by granting better pay and conditions, but by the union leadership which was far too militant for its members.

When the union was outlawed by the Police Act of 1919 a national strike was called despite the fact that less than half the police were members; also, there was no strike fund and no likelihood of support from other unions. This time in London only 1113 came out, but in Liverpool 932 out of 1256 struck. Riots took place there in Liverpool, Birkenhead, as looting mobs battled for days with soldiers and specials while a battleship and two destroyers steamed from Scapa Flow to the Mersey. The strike collapsed and every single striker was dismissed, never to be reinstated. For many it meant, besides unemployment, eviction from home and loss of pension. Many who had been opposed to striking nevertheless did so out of loyalty to the union or because they had given their word. Today there are still survivors of this little known episode in working class history who proudly possess a card which proclaims that they are “still on strike”(1).

Nor is the British experience unique. The same things happened in Boston, USA, in 1919 with similar results - all strikers were dismissed. In 1963 the Helsinki police impressed the urgency of their case on the authorities by resigning en masse on the same day! In March this year Paris police stopped work twice on the same day for several hours and distributed leaflets outlining their grievances, amongst which was their dislike of being sent to quell campus disturbances (leftists take note!). Also, many New York police struck for several days last January.

Nowadays the police in Britain, from inspectors to constables, are organised in the Police Federation, formed in 1919. Although forbidden to strike, the Federation negotiates pay and conditions with the authorities in much the same way as a trade union. The separate Scottish Federation has been demanding the right to strike and its secretary, Dan Wilson, commented that the government in refusing this "...are only burying their head in the sand if they deny the police the same rights as other workers. We are, after all, only workers" (Guardian 28/11/70).

So the police record in recognising their class position in society isn't as bad as some people may think. They have, from time to time, shown considerable courage in the face of tremendous opposition from the authorities - and from public opinion. And their response to attempts by their employers to squeeze extra work from them is the same as that encountered in factory, mine or office. Some years ago when the Chief of Police in New York attempted to increase the men's productivity, a police captain observed that "The Chief makes the decisions and then the locker room makes decisions."

In short, the men themselves regulate their work rate. That policemen regard their work in much the same way as other workers can be seen from the numbers who leave the Force for jobs offering better wages and hours. In harsher times a job in the Force was a sinecure and much sought after, and men were prepared to accept the strict discipline. With the coming of "full employment" after 1945 there was a mass exodus of police into better paid industrial work and they were joined by those police who had been in the armed forces. By 1959 almost as many trained men were leaving as recruits were joining. 25000 joined between 1960 - 64 but 17000 left in the same period. In 1964 seventeen recruits meant a net gain of two. As J.P. Martin and Gail Wilson put it - "For many the police service is no longer a lifetime commitment." (3)

The argument is often advanced that in the event of a socialist majority attempting to establish Socialism democratically, the police will be used, along with the armed forces, to suppress that majority. This is an argument which assumes that policemen have political and moral ideas which are very different from those of society in general. Stuart Bowes, in his attack on the police (4) supports this view - "Anti-democratic sentiments, pro-fascist sympathies and racialist antipathies are commonly revealed by individual policemen." Perhaps Bowes hasn't noticed that the same can be said of other workers too - the dockers and market porters who marched in support of Enoch Powell in 1968 are obvious examples.

Bowes quotes many instances of police attacks on strikers and demonstrators, especially during the Depression years. The sad fact is that politically ignorant workers, fearful for their jobs in hard times, will be more inclined to perform despicable acts and obey savage orders. Police brutality during the 20s and 30s can be largely attributed to this, and Bowes has to admit that police violence during the post-war strikes has been little.

Michael Banton, in his book *Policeman in the Community*, points out that "The policeman obtains public co-operation and enjoys public esteem, because he enforces standards accepted by the community." In other words, if the police are "pigs" then they are only a reflection of a society of "pigs": they simply do its bidding. The policeman lives in the community and desires to be part of it and have its respect. He needs, as a social being, the moral support of the community in doing his job and will often disregard the law if it is in conflict with what the community thinks is right. For example, in a society with a high proportion of automobile users like America, the point has been reached where the police often avoid booking for traffic offences because of the loss of respect produced by such action.

The police themselves know the situation. The Federation's Newsletter has stated that "Without the confidence, approval and support of the public, the police machine as we know it today would become incapable of fulfilling its function...the history of the police force shows [that] clearly" Exactly. Imagine how the Royal Ulster Constabulary would fare if it tried to hunt out IRA men in the Republic? Or remember how hopeless was the task of the police in Cyprus and Aden when faced with hostile populations? Anyway, policemen who will draw the line at handing out a traffic ticket because of public disapproval are unlikely to be willing to try quelling a majority determined upon changing society.

Do not misunderstand us about the police: this is not whitewash job. Undoubtedly many policemen have obnoxious Political and Social ideas, and there can be no denying that some of them are prone to use violence. But if they sometimes behave brutally towards students, demonstrators, etc, think how many other workers with all their prejudices would behave towards these, if only they had the policeman's authority and opportunity.

It is long since time for leftists and radicals to stop being hysterical about the police and to have a saner look at the subject .In the Number 6 issue of Ink , one writer, Peter Laurie, has shown just such a welcome approach when in an article describing his past and present attitudes towards the police, he concludes

“We feel that there are forces of liberation at work in our society and that they are being held up and obstructed by blocks like the police. It seems to me now that the police are no more than an organic expression of the mind of industrialised man : we will not change them until we change the way everyone thinks , until we demolish the great inhuman system that divides us and uses us all”

Could this be the light at the end of the tunnel? Our case is that policemen have much the same attitudes as other workers since they are conditioned by the same economical, social and historical forces operating in society. Eventually, the world's workers, will respond to capitalism's inhumanities to the extent that they understand and desire the socialist alternative - production for use and the end of exchange relationships. Then Socialist ideas will be just as prevalent in the minds of any policemen who may still be around. They will be for the revolution, not against it.

Notes

1 For a history of the police strikes of 1918 - 19 see “The Night the Police Went on Strike” by Reynolds and Judge

2 Western Socialist number 5 1965

3 The Police - A study in Manpower

4 The Police and Civil Liberties
Sunday, 1 August 1971

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