

The sit-down strikes in America

America, we have often been told, is the great land of "Liberty". They boast there of their "Liberty Statue" and their "Declaration of Independence". There is scarcely a snob in the American States who will fail to trace his ancestry to the "liberty-loving" English, or omit to recall with pride the landing on Plymouth Rock of the Puritan Pilgrim Fathers from old England. Perhaps Col. Bob Ingersoll, the Freethinker, was not unwise when he suggested what a pity it was that Plymouth Rock hadn't landed on the Pilgrim Fathers. The liberty known to the American workers is much the same as that experienced by the working class throughout the world--the liberty to work for the benefit of capitalists and to slowly starve amidst the plenty which the workers have themselves produced. Since it is part of the workers' "freedom" that they may leave off working when their masters fail to consent to demands for improved conditions, trouble is bound to arise between these two contending forces. It is inevitable that some "wicked and troublesome swines" among the toiling masses will set out to ask for a little more from life as they find it. Hence, in America and practically all over the world, we are presented with a series of strikes which periodically mark the history of capitalist society.

Despite the efforts of all the social reformers and "world planners", the clash of interests between workers and capitalists asserts itself. The recent strikes in America provide proof (if indeed such is needed) of the soundness of the Socialist analysis of capitalism. Private property versus the sustenance of the workers--profits versus wages--the power of those who own the means of life versus the slender means at the disposal of those who merely interfere with that power rather than become all-powerful themselves. The underlying causes of the American strikes have been misrepresented to be due to inter-Trade Union rivalry--to the long-standing quarrel between craft Unions and industrial organisations. But whilst it is true that conflict between these does exist, the causes of the strikes are, as usual, the conditions of capitalist society. The Trade Union movement of America has been largely built up on the basis of craft organisation, and generally only what are called the best-paid workers have been catered for. The mass of semi-skilled or unskilled workers have had little or no organisation to deal with their demands in negotiation with the employers. In fact, many of the most powerful combines in America have always refused to deal with any other workers' organisation than those which they, the employers, finance and organise, under the name of "Company Unions". But the present strikes have been conducted by a committee for industrial organisation led by, among others, John L. Lewis, a former Welsh miner and latterly a member of the United Mineworkers of America.

Following the example of the French and Belgian workers during last year, who decided to "stay-in" whilst on strike, the American Automobile Workers' Union "struck the job" and "stayed put" inside the factories. It was here that the sanctity of private property asserted itself. Those inside the factories formed their own committees, which arranged for the supply of food, to be delivered to them by friends and relatives outside, every means possible being observed to conduct the strikes on orderly, peaceful lines. But the majesty of the *Law* had something to say--and do--in the matter. Ordinary police, special police, and hired thugs surrounded and entered the factories, using mustard and tear gas to dislodge the strikers. A judge decided that the action of the strikers remaining in the factories was illegal, so a cordon of 4,000

troops, armed with bayonets and machine guns, was drawn round the factories, and the strikers' food supplies cut off. Yet the strike ended largely in favour of the workers. Soon after the settlement the General Motors Corporation announced an increase of pay of 2 1/2d. a hour, which, it is estimated, will cost £5,000,000 a year, and agreed to the principle of collective bargaining. The success of the automobile workers appears to have been the signal for similar strike movements all over the country. The giant steel industry, which has turned its back on collective bargaining for the past fifty years, was threatened with strike action. At Waukegan, Illinois, in two factories of the Fansteel Metallurgical Company, a stay-in strike actually took place. The *Times'* report of this is to the effect that the fight which took place between the strikers and the police was an "unequal fight". Against sprays of acid from fire extinguishers and volleys of tools and other missiles used by the strikes, the police brought into action "an improved *turris*--a wooden structure 30ft high, armoured with sheet steel and mounted on a lorry--and through its portholes shot hundreds of gas bombs into the factories. "It was impossible", says the *Times*, "to stand up against that, and after an hour's fighting the strikers broke and fled."

Yet here again the workers gained notable concessions, such as are described as "the biggest victory United States labour has ever had."

"By two wholly surprising acts late yesterday", says the *Times* (March 3rd), "the principal steel companies have averted from this industry a strike involving half-a-million men, and ended at the same time a deadlock which has kept the *Government from getting the steel sorely needed for new armaments.*" (Italics ours.) The *Times* describes these two "surprising acts" to be, first, the recognition by the Carnegie Illinois Steel Company of the right of an outside Union, i. e., other than its own company unions, to act for the men. Second, the establishment of a basic 40-hour week and £1 a day, with usual overtime rates. It is thought that this decision will serve as a standard of working conditions throughout the entire industry.

It appears that a wave of enthusiasm has now taken hold of the American workers, and a great increase in Union membership is announced. As Socialists, we see in this something that is to the good in the class struggle. These efforts of the workers to combine, either to resist the onslaughts of the master class, or to gain whatever they can, must meet with the support of all workers who understand their class position.

The particular form of economic organisation through which the struggle is conducted is one which the circumstances of the struggle must mainly determine. The chief thing is to maintain the struggle whilst capitalism lasts. The spirit of the craft form of Trade Union is generally one which tends to cramp the activity and outlook of the workers, each craft thinking itself something apart from all others, particularly from the non-skilled workers. But capitalist society itself tends to break down the barriers artificially set up between sections of the working class, as many of the so-called "aristocrats of labour" have been made painfully aware. The industrial form of union should tend to bring the various sections of workers in an industry together, and thus help level the identity of interests between all workers so organised. But the whole question of Trade Union organisation in itself, and by its very nature and necessity, calls into prominence the deeper, far deeper, question of the position of the working class in its entirety. Capitalism, the private ownership of the means of life and production for profit, is the root cause of the workers' troubles, and they must,

therefore, learn that the capitalist system must be abolished if they are to reap the fruits of their labour. What are called high wages cannot secure the workers against the ravages of capitalist exploitation. The supreme task of the working class must be the ending of capitalism.

Meanwhile the struggle on the economic field must be looked to and encouraged. But the workers must not be deluded into a false sense of power by occasional Trade Union victories, such as those in America, France, and elsewhere. It is essential that stock should be taken of the conditions at every step of the way. In the case of the American strikes, conditions favoured the workers in gaining their demands. Prices and profits are at present rising, and production is in fairly full swing. In such cases the capitalists do not want their works idle; *that* they can reserve for the time when they really want a fight to a finish, or when they want to dispose of surplus stocks when changes in the methods of production are contemplated. It is estimated that in the case of the steel industry of America the pay-roll will, in consequence of the increases in wages, increase by twenty millions a year, but, as the *Times* points out, this sum will be recouped by the present rising prices of steel. The American Government alone needs twenty-five million pounds' worth to meet its naval requirements, and steel works must be kept going for that purpose. Besides this, private orders for steel in America are even larger than those of the Government. In such conditions the master class will seek to compromise with the demands of the workers. But these conditions are not always with us, consequently, it is not always possible to win strikes, as the history of strike movements in this country will prove. Nevertheless, the workers should take what opportunities that come along. It would be a lamentable fact if they failed to take advantage of a "rising market" in the sale of their only commodity--their power to labour. Failure to take this elementary step in the class struggle would generally indicate failure to work for the greater movement for Socialism. What the workers need to learn is the source of capitalism's power and the process by which the workers are subjected. That "learned judge" of America who declared the stay-in strike to be illegal, truly sized up the position when he said: ". . . he had no power to consider the merits of the dispute . . . He confined himself to the point that, *under the law, the workers had not the right to take possession of their employers' property.*" (Italics ours.)

That it is outside the pale of the law to deal with the struggle between workers and capitalists is, of course, a purely technical point in legal procedure. In practice it proves not only a mockery of the workers' position, but at the same time reveals the underlying force of capitalist "law and order".

The declaration of illegality was accompanied by the use of gas-bombs and machine-guns to drive unarmed men from occupying a vantage point in a battle for bread and butter. Truly can the "impartiality" of capitalist law-givers be taken as tragi-ironical. Anatole France, with characteristic irony, correctly figured the position out when he wrote: "The Law, in its majestic *equality*, forbids rich and poor alike--to sleep under arches; to beg in the streets; and to steal bread!"

The Socialist Party urges all workers to consider the position. They have to strike and face lock-outs because they are slaves to the capitalist class. They cannot enter into ownership of the means of life whilst the capitalist is in possession of political power. That power is given them by the workers themselves, who have been trained for

centuries to think along capitalist lines, and then through the medium of the ballot box have, in consequence, elected the capitalists to, power. The wealth of the world is produced by the workers and it is, therefore, just sound common sense to say that what the workers can produce for the capitalist they can produce for themselves. But Socialist understanding and determination is essential to that task. Until the workers are prepared to give their consideration to this aspect of their problems, all the stay-in sit-down strikes in the world will not rid them of their troubles.

Already, as far as the working-class movement in America is concerned, there are rocks ahead to be seen. John L. Lewis, their strike leader, who backed Roosevelt in the last Presidential election, is said to be looking to the Presidency himself, and may contest the election for the position in 1940. The Labour movement in America is similar to the Labour movement in this country; it is reformist, and does not seek to abolish capitalism. Let the workers ponder over the position. Should Labourism triumph in the USA the workers may find themselves, during future sit-down strikes, gas-bombed by the police, *acting under the authority of their own leaders*. The only cure against all this is Socialism, a system of society wherein strikes and all other aspects of class struggle will have been consigned to the limbo of the past.

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