

# SEAMEN AND THE STATE

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**T**HE seamen's strike, which is at the moment of writing still going strong, is an event of more than usual interest. It has a bearing on the meaning and relevance of the Government's incomes policy, on the reality of the Government's drive for the modernisation of industry, on the relations of the state with the trade union movement, on the application of 'social justice' to the affairs of this key industry.

We are being told by the press that the losses in respect to the balance of payments will be around £20 million a month. Yet the Government seems almost to have welcomed this strike with a view to demonstrating how tough it was going to be with the workers. All the paraphernalia of the Emergency Powers Act has been invoked to intimidate an official strike whose demands are to the utmost extent reasonable. Yet the case for a Labour government intervening on the workers' side was absolutely overwhelming. Shipping is an industry working under a narrow vicious system of labour discipline imposed by the Merchant Shipping Act (1894) that is without parallel in any shore-based British industry. Not even the ship-owners dare to defend this Act in its present form. Here was an opportunity for a Labour government to introduce some necessary and popular changes.

Apart from this infamous Act the industry is one where conditions have notoriously lagged behind those of the rest of British industry, where the previous leadership, by ordinary right-wing standards of trade union administration, were for years notoriously lax, incompetent and, many trade unionists believed, corrupt. The Govern-

ment had, as far as this industry is concerned, all the necessary data comparing British and foreign seamen's conditions; comparisons which showed the British in the bottom half of the wages league. Yet despite these low wages the industry is manifestly losing ground. There was a time when the net earnings from shipping made a powerful contribution to the British balance of payments. In 1958 the British capitalist economy sold £629 million of shipping services to foreigners and bought £586 million of services from them. There was a net favourable balance of no less than £128 million in 1958. By 1964 it had been changed into a net deficit of £25 million.

It was therefore an industry that ought to have caught the eye of a 'modernising' government, an industry with its continuing influence, generation after generation, of the great shipping families on the various lines. They have been moving with the times but moving much too slowly.

Since the war British owners have done more missing than hitting. They have been slow into tankers, slow into bulk carriers, and slow into cruising while others have scooped the cream. (*Observer*, May 22.)

In some respects the ship-owners of the 1960s resemble the mine-owners of the 1920s and the 1930s. They claim that they are earning a very much poorer return on their capital than is the case of other British industries. They seem to regard this as a sufficient reason for keeping seamen's wages and conditions below those of other industries. They are constantly complaining that foreign shipowners have an unfair advantage because they are subsidised by the state (as is indeed the case). They seem to think that this is sufficient justification for expecting British seamen to accept low wages and in effect to subsidise them. Of course, not all sections of the industry are in the doldrums. The companies whose main trade is cargo liners appear to be doing quite well and are rationalising and automating ships' operations very fast indeed.

Efficient operators in the cargo and tanker trades are handling their tonnage with lower crew costs as devices like automatic steering and boiler-control take over from the sailors. Over the last few years Manchester Liners have reduced crews on their 10,000 tonners from 50 men to 30. (*Sunday Times*, May 22.)

Mr. Aubrey Jones of the PIB is very fond of giving lectures on productivity to workers seeking wage increases. But over a wide field in this industry, productivity is increasing all the time with wages remaining comparatively low.

Some people believed that the Prime Minister would do one of his eleventh hour interventions and get intensive negotiations going, but both he and the Minister of Labour, Mr. Gunter, stayed aloof as long as possible and when the Prime Minister finally saw the seamen's executive it was to deliver an unimpressive monologue. In fact, both Wilson and Gunter appeared to be viewing the strike not as an opportunity for beginning to remedy intolerable grievances, nor as an industrial problem to be solved by modernisation, but as an opportunity for demonstrating to foreign bankers and capitalists generally how tough a Labour government could be with the trade unions.

The Government had agreed to an increase in doctors' remuneration (quite justifiably, in my opinion) going far beyond the incomes policy norm. So it decided to make up for this breach of incomes policy by standing firm as far as the seamen were concerned. Yet the seamen had a clear case for being also treated as exceptions. Mr. Gunter told the House of Commons on April 22:

This Prices and Incomes Board was never intended to restrain the lower paid from getting more. What was in our minds was this: that we felt that the better off had better hold back while the lower paid caught up.

But it was clear that the Government was not concerned with this. It had made an exception on the comparatively *highly paid doctors*. It was not prepared to make one of the *low paid seamen*. They were expected to adhere to the norm. The Government was not concerned with social justice, modernisation, or with a speedy settlement of the dispute but with impressing the bankers of Britain and America with its willingness to stand up to the unions. The Prime Minister's broadcast was quite extraordinary in its hypocrisy. He sympathised with the seamen, he admitted that they had many grievances, but told them that the strike was unnecessary and could accomplish nothing. There was not even the usual hypocritical stance of pretending to be neutral between the contending parties. The seamen were told that they could expect and get nothing. The strike was described as a strike against the state and against the incomes policy. One can imagine the uproar that would have arisen had a Tory Prime Minister spoken in such terms. A strike whose main object was to force the ship-owners to concede the 40-hour week on the same basis as other British workers was denounced as a strike against the state, and a strike against the incomes policy. Is it a state interest that British seamen must be forced to work longer hours and endure worse conditions than other British workers?

Is it a state interest that workers held back and oppressed, should never be allowed to try and catch up with their fellows? Is it a state interest that Labour Prime Ministers should manifestly take the side of a group of hard-faced reactionary employers against their own workers? Mr. Wilson soon followed up and demonstrated that this was no mere rhetoric by introducing a series of regulations under the Emergency Powers Act. The state is mobilised to intervene against the workers at the slightest excuse.

Where does all this leave the incomes policy? What light does it throw on the Government's basic attitude to the trade unions? Clearly the idea that the incomes policy is concerned with 'social justice', however interpreted, is exposed once and for all. If ever there was a case for an exception being made it was with the seamen, but the Government was preoccupied from the very outset with demonstrating to the world that it regarded the 3-3½ per cent norm as sacred and was prepared to enforce it on all trade unions. The question of whether incomes policy is compatible with free collective bargaining has also been answered. A union is free to bargain provided the settlement does not exceed the norm of 3-3½ per cent. A union has the right to strike but if it insists on a settlement above the norm, the Prime Minister is free to tell it that it is striking against the state. He is free to take an attitude which strengthens the will of the employers to resist. He is free to invoke the intimidatory powers of the state not merely against the union involved but against other workers who are likely to come to that union's assistance. The introduction of the emergency regulations is not merely a repetition of what Labour and Tory governments have done in the past, but when viewed in conjunction with the incomes policy it is a move towards the state regulation of wages. Since 1945 the monopoly capitalist economies in Europe have been teetering on a knife edge between mass unemployment and inflation, between creating sufficient mass unemployment with all its unforeseen consequences as a means of holding back the wages movement, or proceeding to direct state intervention to halt the wages movement and to shackle the trade unions. It is the British Labour Government which in 1966 is at the head of this movement.

The description of the working conditions of British seamen contained in the Interim Report of the Committee of Inquiry fully substantiates the seamen's case. It is admitted (that after taking the 1965 agreement into account) 'there can be no doubt that standards of remuneration in Germany, Holland, and Scandinavian countries

are in most respects higher than in Britain'. This must be borne in mind when apparently high percentage increases of wages are being referred to. If the wages of a group of workers have remained for many years below the level of those of comparable foreign workers, it will require a very high percentage increase to enable them to catch up. It is absolutely clear that even if the full seamen's claim had been conceded they would barely have done so. The employers' own census of hours worked show that 66 hours per week were being worked on 'foreign going' ships and 73.6 hours in the 'home trade'.

But of course the Inquiry was bedevilled by the Prices and Incomes principles. The Court did not consider the seamen's case on its merits at all. It was concerned in going some way to meeting the seamen's case, without as *The Times* put it 'wrecking the Prices and Incomes Policy'.

Operating in this strait-jacket it could not do the honest thing and recommend the immediate granting of the seamen's full claim at once. It gives with the left hand and takes away with the right. Particularly provocative is the withdrawal of the employers' tiny concession of 12s. 6d. per month 'efficient service pay'. Such silly trickery is unworthy and only a desire to uphold the 'incomes policy' at any price, can explain its being in the report at all.

The infamous suggestion was made that the TUC and its affiliated unions should unite, not in support of the seamen, but in support of this utterly biased report — a proposal which resembles the shameful betrayal of the miners in the General Strike of 1926. The duty of the General Council and its affiliated unions is to bring the utmost pressure on the government and the shipowners to grant, here and now, the fully substantiated claim of the seamen. Anything less is betrayal.

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*Did you read 'The State Steps In' by R. Page Arnot in last month's issue? It put into historical perspective the Government's actions on the Prices and Incomes Policy.*