

FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO WORK

At first, a relatively small number of young people were out of work. Some workers laughed and called them “dole Bludgers”. Then three-quarters of the school leavers for 1975 couldn’t find work. A smaller number of workers said the young people nowadays wouldn’t look for jobs. A whole industry — shipbuilding has, and still is, threatened with total closure and the sacking of all its workers. Other workers began to worry when their turn would come. Now there are 400,000 out of work and the rumour is that the steel industry may be closed down because BHP cannot make high enough profits in spite of millions of dollars in subsidies. Now workers are not just worried they are frightened.

Labor Party leaders like Tom Uren and Rex Connor have told workers that not just one or two industries, but the whole manufacturing sector is fighting for its existence against the policies of the Fraser Government. They have warned that with the future of shipbuilding, stands or falls the future of Australian Manufacturing generally. The development of Australian capitalism shows that this is no idle warning. The Liberal-NCP Government, even if it wanted to preserve the manufacturing sector of the economy intact is forced to attack manufacturing if it is forced to act by the logic of “counter inflationary” policies which destroy secondary industries as aggressively as they destroyed Medibank, cut Government social services and lowered real wage levels.

It is forced to act as well by the fierce, increasingly open conflict within the different sections of the Australian ruling class and under direct irresistible pressure from the multinational banks and business corporations. This action may be slow. It will certainly be disguised. But it will be relentless and irresistible — unless fought.

The life of manufacturing has always been in danger. Manufacturing developed too late in Australia to be anything but a subsidiary and appendage of the giant industrial nations which had undergone industrial revolution before 1914. The Australian squattocracy at the turn of the century, frittered away the profits of its wool exports on land speculation and the mining boom while other nations industrialised. The land speculation moved from boom to slump with monotonous regularity while mining progressed but only to feed the furnaces of factories in other countries. Thus when secondary industry started developing it was too late to turn Australia into a serious industrial country by world standards. Its markets were limited to the relatively small population of Australia. It depended for capital on British banks and American investors and it depended on immigration for workers. Manufacturing thus was a charge on the export profits of farming and mining who would prefer to buy cheaper from overseas and depended on handouts from overseas capital. Its survival has always been doubtful. In a period of world economic crisis, its survival is more doubtful than ever.

The history of manufacturing is more than just the history of the backwardness of Australian capitalism and its decisive subordination to world imperialism. It is a chapter, the most important chapter still not ended, of the formation of the Australian working class. In Europe and the Near East, thousands have been prised from a peasant or semi-employed existence to enter the working class of the world’s smallest continent on the periphery of the Pacific. The suburban homes of half Australia have been raided to turn housewives into wage-workers in order to survive with their husband’s low wages and the economy’s high prices. Even in crisis where Australian manufacturing’s profits turn to losses which turn to bankruptcies, the cry is still for more workers from anywhere in

the world — except Australia's nearest Asian and Melanesian neighbours which Australian imperialism has fought and will continue to have to fight to perpetuate its "divine right" to swindle and exploit the South Pacific.

Australia has become a major forcing ground for the continued proletarianisation of Europe, a developing "European" nation geographically an appendage of South East Asia. The greatest international outreach of the Australian ruling class, its plundering of the European labour market, is matched only by its inability to plunder the European market of any other commodity, whether money or goods. Its intense need for European or Near East labour is counterbalanced by its fear of the people of the surrounding Pacific nations and of Australia's own black indigenous people which the past, present and especially the future of Australian foreign policy make security risks for Australia's cynical imperialism. Nothing shows more graphically than the mode of political recruitment of its workers, the colonial isolation of the Australian ruler, their altogether alien character as a ruling class in the South Pacific. Australian rulers' colonial isolation and their imperialist politics are two sides of the same coin.

Because Australia dominates Niugini, for example, first directly, now indirectly, she dare not allow Niugini workers permanent entry into Australia. This refusal to develop a truly internationalised working class is designed to divide workers on colour groups in preparation for a future war — Australia's own Vietnam.

The growth of manufacturing is for the capitalists a question of the accumulation of capital, to be halted if the rate of profit falls. For workers, however, the growth of manufacturing is a question of their own survival as a class and their ability to fight capitalism and win.

In an economy limited to agriculture and mining the numbers of workers would fall, the number of unemployed would grow and union power to win better wages would rapidly diminish. The continuing international character of the Australian working class means its incorporating many different national traditions of struggle, and a wide variety of political experience from countries less isolated and more sharply divided on class lines than a small ex-British colony at the edge of the Pacific. Those opposed to immigration in the union movement are people who have always tried to divide workers on narrow craft lines and prevent a strong united political and economic struggle being based on the industrial principle of organisation. So long as the manufacturing sector of the economy is weak, the working class in Australia will be weak too.

In a colonial economy, the first casualty of economic crisis is always manufacturing. Partly this is due to economic causes as we have seen — the low rate of profit of the manufacturing sector, its low export capacity, its high cost character compared with industries overseas, in all, its backwardness and belated character in terms of world economic development. Fundamentally, however, these economic criticisms of the manufacturing sector are not themselves decisive for capitalism. In the last analysis, the Australian ruling class fears a strong working class far more in a period of economic crisis than at any other time. The attack now being launched on workers allegedly driving manufacturing into bankruptcy by high wage demands is really an attack on the most combative workers in the manufacturing sector, who in crisis would provide political leadership for the entire working class. It is not the economic past of these workers but their political future that drives Fraser to brandy. If these workers can be defeated now, other workers can be forced to resign themselves

to falling wage levels and worsening conditions. It is an anti-working class offensive that motivates the struggle against manufacturing.

The tactic of defending the manufacturing capitalists against the Labor Government — what Uren and Connor are doing is not only defending the most backward sector of Australian capitalism against these sectors which can hold their own in world trade it represents a failure to understand whom Fraser is really attacking. Fraser can always split the manufacturers' organisations from the Labor Party by raising the question of wages and create a united capitalist front against the workers. This is what he has done with the shipbuilders. This must be countered by a fight to defend manufacturing not as it is — the most backward sector of Australian capitalism — but as it should be : organised under workers control as part of an international socialist division of labour. It is useless to give even more protection — Government handouts, paid for by the workers — to businessmen incompetent to run industry without begging for subsidies. It is precisely the industries who have been protected most in the past who sacked workers first. It is those same industries who now pay the lowest wages in Australia. These people cannot run an industry well, either from the capitalist or the workers standpoint. They must be dumped.

A policy of keeping Australian workers' jobs, under the present organization of industry, by taking jobs away from workers of other countries — like Japanese workers, on higher wages than Australian workers— means that we give away the possibility of using the combined strength of Australian and Japanese unions against the capitalists of both countries to keep jobs. Hawke will not so much as attempt this policy because he wants to make Australian workers blame Japanese workers. Australian businessmen form their problems in a nationalist way and so prepare them for imperialist war. What is required, instead of the nationalist policies of Hawke is, a new step toward internationalism: the opening of the doors of the Australian working class — maintaining, of course, existing wages and conditions — to workers from Australia's nearest neighbours. That is the best guarantee of peace for Australia, and of the raising of living standards hi Asia and Melanesia.

The Immediate tasks of workers control of manufacturing should be to explain the debts and credits of the whole branch of the economy, beginning with individual business undertakings to determine the actual share of the national income appropriated by the individual capitalists and by the exploiters as a whole, to expose the behind-the-scenes swindles of banks and trusts, finally to reveal to all members of society that squandering of human labour which is the result of capitalist anarchy and the naked pursuit of profits.

No office holder of the capitalist state is in a position to carry out this work, no matter how great authority he is given. Premier Wran cannot even control the New South Wales police, let alone the organisation of industry. To break the resistance of the exploiters, the mass pressure of the proletariat is necessary. Only factory committees can bring about real control of production, calling in as consultants, not as "technocrats" — specialists sincerely devoted to the people; accountants, statisticians, engineers, scientists etc. A firms entire economic records should be open to the workers inspection if, on the basis of the information contained in these now secret records, thousands may lose their jobs and their security.

The struggle against unemployment cannot be considered without calling for a broad and bold organisation of public works, — not just paying workers to dig holes and fill them up again but to reconstruct deteriorating housing, health, transport and communications facilities which are

“unprofitable” for the capitalist to rebuild. Public works can have a progressive significance for society only when they are made a part of a general plan, worked out to cover a considerable number of years. Within the framework of this plan, workers would demand resumption as public utilities of works in private businesses closed as a result of the crisis. Workers’ control in such cases would be replaced by direct workers management.

Such a plan is impossible without workers’ control, the penetration of the workers eye into all open and concealed springs of capitalist economy. Committees representing individual business enterprises should meet at conference to choose corresponding committees covering all manufacturing industry. Thus workers control will become a school for planned economy, preparing for workers management of the whole economy and its expropriation from the capitalists. Manufacturing, as the most parasitic industry, is already rotten ripe for expropriation: the only question is, how ready the workers are to replace their present bosses. Only a general expropriation of all capitalists can solve the problems of manufacturing, but the expropriation of the manufacturing capitalists can be the first step to the main goal.

The right to work is the only serious right left to the worker in a society based on exploitation. Against unemployment, “structural” as well as “conjunctural”, the time is ripe to advance, along with the slogan of public works, the slogan of a sliding scale of working hours. Trade unions and other mass organisations should bind the workers and the unemployed together in the solidarity of mutual responsibility. On this basis, all the work on hand would be divided amongst all existing workers in accordance with how the extent of the working week is defined. The average wage of every worker remains the same as it was under the old working week. Wages, under a strictly guaranteed minimum, would follow the movement of prices. This is the traditional policy of the Australian Labor movement, the programme of the six-hour day, the name which Labor Day — celebrated last month — has as its name and objective. It should be carried out immediately in manufacturing.

These policies are the policies of the Communist Left. They can be achieved only through a workers’ and farmers’ government, part of a Socialist United States of Australasia and the Pacific. They represent the only way to defeat unemployment.

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