

## The July crisis 1972 part 2

# General strike against the Tories?

By Alan McArthur

*WORKERS' Liberty 41* carried an account of the events leading to the jailing of the Pentonville Five in July 1972, and of the working-class movement that freed them. In part two the lessons are drawn out for the left.

**T**HE fight against the Industrial Relations Act which culminated in the jailing and then release of the Pentonville Five was the most significant political industrial battle which had faced the British working class since 1926.

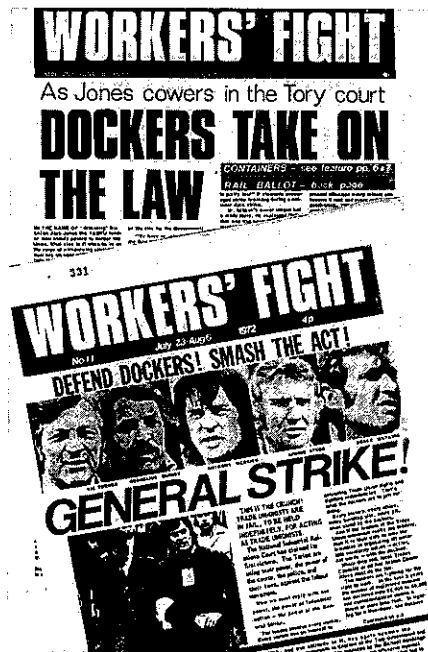
The Act and the National Industrial Relations Court staggered on after July '72 — as did Heath's government, waiting to be finished off by the miners — until 1974, when they were repealed by the incoming Labour Government. Had it not been for the miners' strike of 1973-4 and the narrow election victory of February 1974 — neither of which could be predicted in July 1972 — the Tories may well have been able to dig in and impose the Act over time.

But it could have been decisively beaten. A General Strike could have smashed the Act and opened up the possibility of much more.

It is the job of revolutionaries to understand the level and tempo of the workers' movement at all times, and to raise demands that push things forward, enable the movement and the class to raise itself up to the next link on the chain of development. That is what a General Strike with the specific aim of defeating the IRA, sufficiently propagandised and prepared for in the preceding months, could have done in July '72.

General Strike here is not to be understood, for example, in line with the classical Bolshevik model of the General Strike as led by revolutionaries and leading to an armed insurrection. General Strike is not a synonym for revolution. It is not to be understood just in terms of the British experience of 1926, either, but in terms of the less one-sided international experience of the General Strike, such as the French General Strikes of 1936 and 1968.

Neither is the General Strike to be seen as a panacea, a knee jerk catch-all solution to this (or any other) immediate situation — or as the only weapon or the only strat-



As *Workers' Fight* saw it

egy. The call for a General Strike was not counterposed to the fight for other forms of action, or calling on Labour to commit itself to repealing the Act, or raising the call to Kick out the Tories. On their own, however, those demands could be counterposed to immediate action. The call was the most powerful and effective weapon available, and came out of the logic of the struggle. As France '68 had proved, there is not necessarily any rigid or structured check-list of steps to the General Strike.

*Workers' Fight* (forerunner of *Workers' Liberty*) argued for a General Strike as a weapon for an immediate goal: a General Strike to Smash the Act. This was a demand both on the leadership and for immediate rank and file action, for a General Strike from below. It did not put the ball in the bureaucrats' court. It was an immediately comprehensible agitational demand.

Clearly this agitation had to be coupled with clarifying the associated issues — such as the history of the General Strike and the political implications of full-scale industrial action. A General Strike is open-ended, with a multitude of possible conclusions and implications. Any such confrontation — even as a tactical weapon for a limited goal

— would raise the question of who rules in society. Revolutionaries had to talk about the role of the state and the law.

A General Strike can lead to all-out political confrontation with the ruling class, and at very least will counterpose new or "irregular" forms of working class organisation to the state. Revolutionaries needed to prepare the ground for our own intervention into the strike, to start to put the case for the possibility of consciously counterposing working class to bourgeois power, of making actual revolution a possibility.

The call for a General Strike was realistic. As soon as the IRB was announced — when it existed only on paper — the resistance was great, though not from the leaders of the TUC or the Labour Party. For their Day of Action on January 12 1971, the TUC advocated only public meetings on the Bill outside working hours. Yet, half a million workers took strike action anyway. In Coventry, 20,000 marched from the car factories and into the town; 10,000 struck in Liverpool, 6,000 in Luton, and so on right across Britain.

The TUC General Council never had a positive, active strategy to defeat the Act. Their policy was one only of non-cooperation. They refused to recognise or attend the NIRC (although that changed as soon as the T&G was fined) and expelled from the TUC unions that registered under the Act. Not forgetting, of course, that in March '71 they went so far as to release a record — General Secretary Vic Feather on one side, a song against the Industrial Relations Bill on the other!

The Labour Party committed itself to repealing the Act. Harold Wilson spoke alongside Vic Feather at an Albert Hall rally. Labour MPs disrupted parliament as Heath's Tories had the Bill bounced through the committees and the Commons with little chance to debate or amend it. However, like the TUC leaders, the Labour leaders condemned the unofficial strikes, and they made no attempt to build or join a real movement against the Bill.

Yet the pressure from below was constantly re-emerging. The TUC's token Sunday afternoon march against the Bill in February '71 became the biggest political

demonstration of the century, 140,000 people joining the seven mile long march as it went through London. On March 1 a one-day stoppage against the Bill by the the AUEW, the engineers' union, closed engineering and car plants, and shipyards. An incredible three million struck on March 18, the day of the TUC's Special Congress on the Bill...

And so on... The level of militancy against the Act was immense. Properly harnessed it could have undoubtedly smashed the Act. And the militancy only grew. 1972 saw major action by railway workers and in the building industry, as well as on the docks: the state-ordered,

bluff-calling June 1 strike ballot on the railways returned a five-to-one vote to strike, forcing the Tories to up their absolutely final pay offer once again. And, of course, it saw the miners' strike that smashed Heath's seven per cent pay norm, and left the government utterly and humiliatingly defeated at Saltley coke depot, Birmingham, in February.

The miners' strike greatly weakened the government. Much attention (and troops) were turned to Ireland. All that Heath had in his favour was the vacillation of the trade union leaders, who had all the while been enjoying chats with Heath and the CBI on what to do about the econ-

omy. The Tories played their trump card with the £55,000 fines on the T&G. The trade union leaders could try to ignore the NIRC; it wasn't going to ignore them. The Act no longer just existed on paper — and the bureaucrats were challenged by Heath to put up or shut up. They shut up, ended non-cooperation and turned up to the NIRC.

But rank and file workers would not accept this betrayal. They freed the Pentonville Five, dragging their "leaders" behind them. Given the choice of obeying the Tories' laws and hoping a future Labour Government would repeal the Act or fighting here and now, they chose to fight. Taken to its highest level — the General Strike — that direct action would have at the very least ripped up the Act and cripplingly defeated the government. The level of militancy made it not only possible but the logic of the actual on-going struggle.

The farce of the Official Solicitor's two entrances to the public stage had demystified the law, exposing the bosses' class interest that lies behind it. Local official and unofficial bodies that could call and organise action already existed in many places, albeit often in embryonic form or dominated to varying degrees by the Communist Party. There could have been a General Strike to Smash the Act.

The front page of the May 1 *Workers' Fight* called for a General Strike. The paper continued its propaganda for the strike in the lead-up to, during, and in the immediate aftermath of, the jailing of the Pentonville Five. But *Workers' Fight* was a very small organisation that could achieve very little immediately on its own.

How would the strike come about? By arguing in the union structures for an offensive against the Act, branches calling for an emergency TUC Congress, and calling on the TUC leaders actually to lead a fight. All the while militants and socialists could have linked up bodies like the stewards' committees to make a network of workers' committees and organisations to co-ordinate action from below.

Enough people at the start of that chain — all or most of the forces of the left, for example — and the impetus would have spread through the class and been multiplied very quickly. Being a small revolutionary organisation means that, even when right, you may be able to have little direct influence. Being much larger but consistently wrong is useless. If the revolutionaries had been building their organisations in, rather than on the fringes of, the labour movement, 1972 could have seen very much more than one of the greatest and most inspiring movements ever of the working class in Britain.

## The failure of the left

By Martin Thomas

**T**HE call for a General Strike was first raised in 1971 by the Socialist Labour League, which was then the biggest group on the revolutionary left, though very sectarian and well on the way to craziness. The way the SLL raised the call discredited it for many Marxists. The SLL was demagogically ultra-left, constantly claiming that capitalism was in its final crisis and that the workers were on the boil for revolutionary action.

Its call was for a General Strike to kick out the Tory Government and replace it with a Labour Government pledged to socialist policies, which made no sense. A General Strike is not a tool for winning elections. To tie a General Strike to such an aim was to assist in advance the ruling-class option of demobilising a full-scale or potentially revolutionary General Strike by calling an election.

The idea of a General Strike had been out of circulation in Britain for nearly half a century. The only classic Marxist text on the subject readily available in 1971 was a comment by Trotsky which seemed to imply that a call for a General Strike was irresponsible unless made by a strong revolutionary party ready and able to take matters forward from the General Strike straight to a revolution. The first big strikes under the Tory Government — by power workers and postal workers — had ended in defeat.

Yet the General Strike call struck a chord with many workers who were neither ultra-lefts nor demagogues.

Other left groups started to raise it, though without much clarity. The *Workers' Fight* group was thrown into a sharp internal debate on the issue, and in July 1971 a large minority split away because they opposed the majority's support for a General Strike call.

Other groups had problems with it too. In mid-1972 the SWP (then called IS) dithered, would not call for a General Strike until after the TUC had set a one-day General Strike and the dockers had been released, then explained that the General Strike call was "propaganda, not agitation", meaning that it was for general shouting, not action. The IMG (now *Socialist Outlook* and other splinters) held that all "calls to action", even general strikes, were "administrative" matters unworthy of Marxists, who should instead explain a rounded view of the general issues.

The Tories' Industrial Relations Act survived July 1972, and it need not have done. The Tory government and the shilly-shallying leadership of the trade unions and the Labour Party also survived. If the strikes of July 1972 had been escalated to a full general strike to smash the Industrial Relations Act, then those pillars of British bourgeois society would not have been swept away at one blow, but they would have come out weakened and facing a mass movement of workers full of new ideas of their own power and strengthened by links made in the strike. We could have seen that in 1972 — if the revolutionary left had been better prepared.