CBR LOCKOUT
Betrayal of 72 Hour Workers

On December 8th 1967 the President of the National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Workers communicated to the workers, locked out from CBR Jersey Mills since April, a settlement he had reached on their behalf with the CBR management. We do not like having to criticize our Union, for which we have fought during eight months. But it is our view that this agreement is false, unreasonable, and undemocratic, and we cannot accept it.

THE CBR LOCKOUT. At CBR Jersey Mills, Shanklin Road, Brighton, the minimum working week is 72 hours and the rates of pay are about half Union rates. In 1966, an operator contacted the TUC for the appropriate Union and was referred to the NUHKW. On April 6th, two NUHKW members were dismissed from CBR after having arranged a Union meeting. The NUHKW declared an official dispute, and asked for re-instatement and Union recognition. Subsequently, CBR asked employees to sign a document of Union non-membership, and dismissed a further 15 Union members.

The CBR Lockout has aroused nationwide interest, because of the minimum 72 hour week, and the use of 'the document'. The locked-out workers have picketed the factory for 12 hours a day. Hundreds of messages of support have been received. Bill Jones, T & GWU, General Council TUC, said, 'The lads in industry up and down the country have assisted these men. The time is long overdue for the leaders of our great movement to lend a hand'. Ernie Roberts, AEU, said, 'The Trade Union struggles at CBR Mills Brighton and RA Stockport are epic struggles for the defence of the right to join a Trade Union'. The President NUJ said, 'The courageous and determined fight of the CBR workers for elementary Trade Union rights commands the solidarity of every Trade Unionist'.

The men on the picket-line knew that too much material was getting through. During eight months in which the men endured the hardships and uncertainties of the picket-line, the NUHKW was repeatedly urged by the men to step up pressure, for example by: second-order blacking, sympathetic action among NUHKW members, greater liaison with Brighton Trades Council, following CBR vans to ascertain business connections, approaches to uncooperative firms, a Union officer to organise pressures, and a Ministry of Labour Committee of Investigation.

The President of the NUHKW had on two occasions responded to C. B. Roffe's suggestion of nominal recognition, and in November began to talk of accepting recognition without reinstatement. The President several times tried to dissuade members from continuing, now that reinstatement was improbable. The President doubted whether the NEC would want to continue the dispute if the sole aim were to close CBR down.

8th DECEMBER: END OF THE OFFICIAL DISPUTE. This is the agreement the Union communicated to the men:—

'1. It is a fundamental right that workers may belong to a trade union. Both parties accept this'. For the NUHKW to accept this agreement, carries the counterfactual implication that workers were dismissed for reasons other than Union membership and activities. This Article is ridiculous. Nor does it apply to the NUHKW, since the NUHKW does not now intend to enrol in CBR.

'2. It is understood that one of the functions of a trade union is to negotiate on behalf of its members.' This does not entail that CBR will negotiate with a trade union, and is vacuous. Nor has the NUHKW any members to claim recognition on behalf of. Roffe had several times offered nominal recognition.

'3. During the dispute, sufficient labour has joined the company for the plant to be fully manned at present and therefore no employment opportunities exist.' On date December 8th, CBR were in fact understaffed. Turnover is normally about 300% p.a., so that workers could be reinstated over a period by normal replacement. In any case, whether employment opportunities exist is irrelevant, for no union can honourably conclude an agreement following a Lockout or a strike, unless there is no victimization, that is, if all those who wish are reinstated. The NUHKW is therefore condoning the victimization of its members.

'4. The parties agree to use their best endeavours to reach a better relationship.' Since the NUHKW does not intend to recruit, the only relationship is legal, viz. the writ by CBR on the President for libel and injurious falsehood in the President's letter to shareholders.

'5. On the basis of the above understandings the parties agree that it is in the interests of all concerned that the present dispute is now terminated.' The locked-out workers are concerned, though not a party to the agreement, and we do not consider it is in our interests. Also, Brighton Trades Council, whose
appeal fund contributed a third as much as our Union, was not consulted, and has stated ‘We had a moral right to be consulted, and were not even officially informed of the decision’.

Why end the dispute now? In November, the President said that no implicit time-limit had been set to the dispute. The President said it was not for financial reasons; indeed, money has been given to the men equivalent to what they would have received in benefit up to March 1968. Nor is it because the men are breaking up or do not wish to continue. We believe there are two reasons: (a) Our Union does not think it can close CBR by blacking. This, we suspect, it has supposed from the start. In our opinion, it has not tried hard enough; partly because the NUHKW would have to appeal more extensively to other Unions; and partly because the Lockout has been a strain on the Union’s manpower. A small Union may find it difficult to win such a Lockout, unless it is prepared to take unusual steps. (b) Our Union describes itself as ‘non-militant’. The CBR Lockout was only its second official dispute since 1932.

The view of the men and of Brighton Trades Council is that the dispute should be continued. It took the Roberts-Arundel Strike Committee a year to effect adequate pressures on RA. There are issues on which the Trade Union movement must fight; and the CBR Lockout must be fought. Many Trade Unionists share this view. It would be worthwhile closing CBR down to prove that the Trade Union movement will defend to the utmost the rights of its members. The President said, “You can call it a wrong judgment if it is your point of view”. Our view is that such disputes are worthwhile because they activate Unions and their membership and vindicate Trade Union principles. Therefore we think it is a wrong judgment to end the dispute now.

Why conclude a false agreement? The President said, “It is a hollow agreement”. In our opinion, the NUHKW has continued the dispute for eight months partly for the sake of its ‘image’ carrying the banner. We believe that to fight on principle means to involve people fully in the wider issues. To treat Trade Union principles nominally, as in this Agreement, is to strip them of significance. If the NUHKW did wish to end the dispute, it would have been better not to make any false agreement.

Is our Union democratic? We have several times been refused permission to become a fully recognized branch of the NUHKW, and to affiliate to Brighton Trades Council. We have had no contact at all with other NUHKW members. We have thus not been allowed any say in the working of our Union. Yet we have been fighting and suffering for it for eight months.

We were neither present at the negotiations, nor consulted afterwards. The NEC approved the agreement before we even knew of it. The President told us, “It is a fait accompli ... We have not come here to argue”. We were not allowed to discuss the settlement. We were not allowed to vote on whether the settlement should be accepted.

If we had been freely asked, we would have refused. The Union in fact offered each member sums of money up to £200 if they signed over a 2d. stamp that ‘I acknowledge that the dispute is now ended, and I have no further claims on the NUHKW’. The Lockout Committee advised members to decide individually as to whether to take the money, realizing that the dispute could not be continued with inadequate funds. The Secretary, Mike Taylor, and the Treasurer, Geoff Killick, refused to sign (thereby forfeiting £137 each), because they do not accept the settlement, and wished to uphold the dispute on behalf of the other members. We should have been allowed to vote against the settlement, and to state our case to our district delegate, even if the NEC had to over-rule us.

WHAT ARE WE DOING NOW? When we were locked out, the dispute became official, and it is now unofficial. We have daily meetings. We continue to picket CBR. We draw attention to the exploitation and victimization at CBR, and also to the weaknesses in Trade Union organization. We are requesting NUHKW members to question the decision of the NEC to end the dispute.

LESSONS OF THE CBR LOCKOUT.  1. In 1967, an employer can still exploit labour, imposing a minimum 72 hour week at half Union rates. There is no statutory, and no effectual Trade Union, remedy.
2. There is no protection against Trade Union victimization. ILO Conventions 87 and 98 require implementation.
3. Small Unions may need to amalgamate before they can be effective nationally without incurring disputes which they cannot win.
4. In at least one Union, the conduct and settlement of a dispute is not democratically controlled by the members in dispute.

WE ASK YOU TO: Please write to us, saying what you think about the present outcome of the Lockout. We should like to know.

If a NUHKW fellow-member, express your views to your collector, district committee members, and officials. Write to us. Move a resolution that the settlement is unacceptable to NUHKW members; CBR undercuts Union firms; if the NUHKW cannot crush CBR, your job may be endangered by such firms.

CONTRIBUTIONS ARE NOW NEEDED MORE THAN EVER TO CONTINUE THE CBR LOCKOUT

Please contribute to the CBR Appeal Fund: Treasurer, 21 Vale Avenue, Patcham, Brighton, Sussex.

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