solidarity
FOR WORKERS' POWER

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'Solidarity' is particularly interested in meetings of rank and file workers. Parliamentary cretins can dismiss this as apolitical syndicalism. On the contrary, if workers are to transcend the limits of a narrow syndicalism and to produce political solutions to their problems, it is necessary for them to organize independently of the trade union bureaucracy. Industrial conferences are an indispensable method of linking up existing struggles. But most so-called 'rank and file' conferences are stage-managed by factions, who are more concerned with their own narrow, organizational interests than with aiding working class struggle. In vol.IV, No.9, we published an account of the conference of the SLL-controlled 'Oxford Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions'. Here is an account of the Conference held by the Communist Party-controlled 'Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions' in the Seymour Hall, London, on Saturday, February 17, 1968. It was written by a delegate.

Some 700 delegates attended, representing a wide range of industry. Unlike the SLL-sponsored Oxford Conference these delegates were not kids new to industry. Most of them were industrial workers.

Those delegates who weren't Party members expected perhaps that the Conference would give a lead in organizing the defence of all trade unionists under attack. But it soon appeared that some trade unionists - like some of George Orwell's animals - are more equal than others.

The Conference opened with Bill Jones, a London busmen's leader, in the Chair. He read out the agenda and Declaration of Purpose - but was rudely interrupted by several people standing up and shouting. When the initial shock was over, it appeared that the 'disrupters' wanted to know why a shop steward had been refused entry. The steward in question was Brother Bill Hunter of Joseph Lucas (Fazakerley), a well-known Trotskyist. He was on 'official' strike and had credentials entitling him to attend, but had been excluded on the grounds that he had attempted to distribute strike committee literature in the main hall.

The platform was visibly embarrassed by this false start. Things like this shouldn't happen at 'their' well-orchestrated conferences. You could almost read their minds: 'a few years ago we would have slung 'em out on their ears, etc.' But, alas, times have changed. The conference secretary, building worker Jim Hiles, proposed: 'Either we let the Brother in to sit at the back as an observer, or he can stay out'. The delegates endorsed this 'democratic compromise'. So much for the defence
of trade unionists on strike, when their politics happen to differ from those of the Platform. A 'Committee to defend trade unions' which prevents a trade unionist from appealing for support because of disagreement with his politics should consider changing its name.

The 'Declaration of Purpose' was a highly original document. It rejected the wage freeze. It attacked profits and rising prices. It deplored unemployment. It called on the TUC to fight for its own resolutions - including the muddled one simultaneously asking for increased efficiency and productivity (under-capitalism) and the maintenance of full employment. It declared its support for resolutions in support of these principles. There wasn't a word about challenging managerial prerogatives or linking up struggles at rank-and-file level.

Delegates from the floor were given 5 minutes to speak. Being a democratic meeting this rule was relaxed occasionally, depending on the politics of who was speaking. Some speakers were allowed 15 minutes or more, others a bare three minutes.

The first speaker to attack the platform was one Vivienne Mendelssohn, of the SLL. She claimed, wait for it, that anyone thinking that the policies of the Labour Government could be changed was living in Cloud Cuckoo Land - not long ago she'd have been expelled from her own outfit for such a speech! The young lady then made an unexpected plea for democracy: she pointed out that the Declaration of Purpose left no room for either an alternative set of proposals or for amendment of any kind. Just as she was about to produce more surprises, she was stopped by the platform.

The next speaker vigorously attacked her remarks. He reassured the delegates that the overwhelming majority of workers still had great faith in the Labour Party. Therefore talk of revolution (which no one had mentioned) was out. 'Unity on the broadest basis' was the solution.

The next delegate spoke of the need to give solid support to the brave 24 'Left' MPs who after all had abstained on health charges. Others gurgled in the same key.

Several others spoke about the growth of profits and the increase in unemployment - their solution (like the platform's) was a change of leadership. To a man they all clung to the idea that getting the right fellow in as a union official and lobbying MPs was of prime importance. These militants are shackled and stiffed by the deadweight of the Party and its reformist policies. They sat like zombies, predictably applauding at the right moment, like a well-trained TV studio audience.

A delegate, worried no doubt that someone might have taken friend Mendelssohn literally and declined to vote Labour, attacked her remarks about Wilson. Whom did she wish to put in his place? Callaghan? Brown? I glanced at the group of SLLers. They sat silent, but one could observe a nervous twitch on their lips. To a man they seemed to be muttering: 'Healy'!
One old man, white-haired and almost toothless, seemed to think he was at a presentation ceremony. He stuck out his stomach in a proud gesture and told the delegates he'd been a trade unionist for forty five years. A great contribution to the conference that was!

The show is never complete without its star turn, and we were not to be disappointed. It turned out to be Jack Dash, the dockers' leader. He denounced those who attacked Wilson and Co. - 'It's the policies of the right wing, that's what's got to be fought!' With his rich cockney voice he yelled into the mike his attack on anyone who dared criticize the sacred Liaison Committee. 'We didn't bleeding well need 'em', he cried (referring to the dock dispute) 'but they was there and helped us no end, arranging things'. (A pity they couldn't have arranged a link-up between the dockers and the lads at Sunley's or Myton's, but then they had been very busy: a total of three lobbies had been arranged in the two years since the Beaver Hall meeting.)

One must, I suppose, pardon the Committee for allowing their 'golden boy' three times the normal speaking period.

Speaker after speaker stressed the need to 'change the leadership' as the only way of bringing about different policies. The parrot-cries 'Nationalise this or that industry' and 'Make the left MPs fight' were heard again and again, just as at Oxford, only this time coming from more mature throats. One might as well have made a tape recording.

The role of the rank and file is apparently not to think for themselves or to act on their own initiative. According to Tony McLelland, Chairman of the Merseyside Defence Committee, the only role of the rank and file is to 'develop the power below which will strengthen people like Scanlon for their fight at the higher level'.

Possibly the only speech anything like worthwhile was that of Bernie Panter, who told the delegates that without the help of fellow trade unionists no struggle could be won.

If the 700 people there had decided to get down to the job of linking up workers' struggles, the conference could have marked an important new phase in industrial struggle. But the conference organizers think that their job is to organize the rank and file into loyal supporters of the 'left' bureaucrats. They are wrong even on their own terms. The 'left' bureaucrats might display a little more militancy if they occasionally saw a rank and file movement independent and critical of them.

The delegates spoke of everything bar linking up industrial struggles and organizing the massive strength of the working class. The depressing thing is the thought that the Stalinists can still manage to draw 700 stewards and convenors together to do nothing that will shake the employing class or in any way challenge their rights to
Capitalism develops unevenly. In the era of automation there are still areas where 19th century problems have yet to be solved.

I have just returned from a trip into the past. It is surprisingly easy to get there. Anybody can go, and no passports or Wellsian time machines are necessary. You simply take a train or bus to any corner of rural England and get a job on a farm.

My point of departure from the present was a little place in North East Kent, not far from Canterbury and only fifty or so miles distant from London. The farm I chose was on the edge of the Swale estuary, facing the Isle of Sheppey just over the water. It consisted mainly of flat, low-lying reclaimed marshland, and the soil was rich and fertile. The type of farming was very mixed, and there were large hop gardens, extensive orchards and fields of wheat and barley as well as considerable numbers of cattle, sheep, and pigs.

The farmhouse where I applied for employment was a magnificent pink and white mansion, with an avenue of chestnut trees leading to the front door, and a large and extremely well-kept garden. Only a few yards away from the house was the farmyard with its barns and cattlesheds, and in the middle of the yard, surrounded by tractors and dung spreaders, stood an ancient grey church. It looked neglected and disused, and the gravestones in the churchyard were half hidden by the long grass and the brambles. At one time there had obviously been a village there, and the church was all that remained of it. Something, most probably the Enclosure Act, had depopulated the place.

Scattered haphazardly over the farm, at varying distances from the yard, were a dozen or more tiny, isolated, cottages. Some of them were quite old and very picturesque, and the largest and most remote of them had the narrow leaded windows and steeply pitched roof typical of the seventeenth century. But the majority of them were small, dark, gloomy, Victorian hovels.

The owner of all this was an elderly retired gentleman who spent most of his time driving to and from the nearest market town in a very large car. I was told by my workmates that the old fellow had worn himself out with years of chasing foxes, hares, and other elusive little creatures around the countryside in and out of season and with a noble disregard for rain or snow. He appeared to be very hale and hearty for his sixty-odd years,
and habitually wore a complacent and self-satisfied air which suggested that
he had succeeded in catching most of the quarries he had so energetically
pursued. The management of the farm was left to his two sons, and to his
wife, who looked after all the accounts.

THE MEN

The actual work on the farm was done by a permanent force of about
twelve men, though a few casuals like myself were taken on during the summer.
They all lived on the farm, in the tied cottages already described, and fully
half of their number were over what is normally regarded as retiring age.
The oldest was well over seventy. My first reaction to the sight of these
old men still performing hard physical labour at an age when most people are
pottering in the garden or relaxing in deckchairs was one of astonishment.
I thought how healthy agricultural work must be to keep them so fit. It was
only later that I found out that they keep working only because they live in
tied cottages and cannot retire. A farmhand simply cannot save up the sort
of capital sum needed to buy a house. His wage is too pathetically small.
So he either works until he dies, or he retires and renders himself and his
wife homeless. As for the fitness of these old men, they may appear to be
splendidly healthy in the summer, but in winter many of them are crippled
with rheumatism and bronchitis. But they still have to keep on working; and,
on the farm where I worked, a sick man's pay was never 'made up' by the
employer. All pay stopped, not from the day, but from the minute he went
sick. He must rely on Government handouts. I assume, though I don't know for
sure, that this applies to the majority of farms.

A farm worker's basic rate is just under ten guineas a week, but
some employers pay ten shillings extra as tradesman's rate. In return for
this ten shillings a man is expected to be a tractor driver and a mechanic as
well as a labourer. There were machines for nearly every job on the farm.
Without them it would be impossible to run the place with such a small
labour force. There were combine harvesters, balers, dung spreaders, fork
lifts, rotary sprayers, augers, and elevators. These machines were never
properly maintained as there was nobody whose specific job it was to look
after them. If something went wrong in the middle of a job, whichever man was
using it was expected to fix it, and if he could somehow improvise a repair
and finish the work, the machine would then be left in that state until it
was wanted again. Next time it broke down somebody else would have to fix
it, and so it would continue until it was past repair. Then the well-
subsidised farmer would buy a new one. There was a particular tractor that
had to be towed a hundred yards every morning before it would start, and
once started was never stopped until evening, and there was another that
started only after a solid half-hour of coaxing every day, and stank the
place out with half-burned diesel fuel.

There were just two machines on that place, however, that really
were looked after. They were the two lotus Elan sports cars belonging to
the farmer's two sons.
THE WORK

I started work on the farm in August, in the middle of the harvesting, so I was not entirely surprised to be told that I would have to work overtime. But I was surprised to discover that there was so much overtime. I had anticipated working just a couple of hours extra and finishing at seven instead of five, but these men worked right through till sunset. At that time of the year a twelve-hour day, from seven a.m. till seven p.m., was almost the minimum. Some of the men were working fourteen or fifteen hours for six days of the week and doing eight or nine hours on Sunday. As for August bank holiday, it didn't mean a thing. They simply worked straight through it. I wouldn't, but all the others did.

The eagerness of the men to work these incredibly long hours was due mainly to their natural desire to earn some real money while they had the chance. There is no guaranteed all the year round overtime on a farm, and in the winter there is none available at all. In July, August, and September, the harvesting, hopping, and fruit picking all have to be done more or less at the same time, and there are never enough men. So they work every hour of daylight, and are fairly glad of the chance to do it. But if they didn't like it they would still have to do it. The work is there. It has to be done. The boss wants everybody working late till it is done. And the boss is also the landlord.

Naturally at this time of the year there is a pressing need for casual female labour. The fruit picking especially is essentially a job for women. The wives of the farm workers form a very convenient pool of labour for the farmer. Very few of them have full-time jobs away from the farm, partly because they would have to travel an inconvenient distance into the town to find them, but mainly because they, like their husbands, are too dependent on the farmer because of the iniquitous tied cottage system. And the younger ones have children to look after and could not, in any case, be away from home all day. Because their cottages are so isolated they have no neighbours to help them, and their menfolk are rarely home before sunset, so they have to be at home. The farmer can ask them to do any job and pay them whatever he thinks he will, but at least they can take the children with them, and the additional income, however small, is always welcome. He need fear no competition for his private labour market.

The daily routine for the men was as follows. At seven o'clock we would all assemble at the farmyard, and at seven o'clock and never a minute later the manager, the farmer's elder son, would come out to give us our instructions. He addressed all the men by their surnames, or else simply as 'you'. There were no first names and no camaraderie. By five minutes past seven we were all starting our various jobs and he was back in the house presumably having his breakfast. We had our breakfast break from eight to half-past. Dinner break was from twelve till one, and those who were working late, which meant everybody, had a break from five to five-fifteen. Those were all the breaks we were allowed, but naturally most of us used to take a flask of tea out to the fields with us.
They were a very friendly and decent lot of blokes to work with, and fairly cheerful despite their unenviable lot. They certainly resented their position as the lowest paid of all workers, and they hated the system that tied them to their jobs, but they were not particularly bitter about it. They accepted it as something that they could not hope to change. This attitude was not caused by stupidity, for they were intelligent men. It was based more on a long, bitter, and hopeless experience that went back right through their lives, and might even have been handed down to them from their fathers and grandfathers. The farmworker has always had a bloody rotten deal. The younger ones among them all told me the same thing, that they were there only because they knew no other way to get a home. Some had actually tried to escape, but had returned to farming with bitter experiences of life in furnished rooms with exorbitant rents, or of squabbles with in-laws with whom they had tried to live. Even a tied cottage was better than that. But the dearest dream of all of them was to have a 'free' house, by which they did not mean a house of their own, but merely one that was not tied, so that they could go and get jobs in town that paid wages rather than pittances. The fact that they paid low rents for their cottages was no consolation. A pound saved in rent doesn't cancel out a fiver lost in income.

Their dependence on the farmer did not make them servile. I have met crawlers in factories and offices, but I met none on the farm. There was one man who acted as 'back door boy' at the farmhouse, going there every evening after he finally finished work, to do the gardening and various menial jobs, but it wasn't really servility. He needed the money.

HOPPING

On the first day of September the hopping season began. Hops are the Kentish farmers' most lucrative product. A single pocket of good hops is worth well over a hundred pounds, and the farm's total harvest was about two hundred and forty pockets. A pocket is a sack roughly seven feet long and four feet across, into which the dried hops are pressed into a tight, almost solid, mass. The hops have to be picked at exactly the right time, not too early nor too late, and have to be dried for exactly the right period at exactly the right temperature or they can be ruined. It took six weeks to pick and dry the whole crop.

During the whole of this time four men had to remain permanently in the oast house. They worked around the clock, day and night, snatching a few hours sleep when they could and cooking scratch meals over the open fire. Apart from the odd couple of hours on Sunday, they never got home to see their families during the whole six weeks. When the hopping was finished they went back to their normal work straightaway without even taking a day off to recuperate. It was all part of the job and it meant extra money. For working a twenty-four-hour, seven-day week they could earn all of twenty pounds.
The actual picking of the hops is no longer done by hand, and so no large casual labour force is required. The work of feeding the machines in the east house is done by the farmworkers' wives, that ever available pool of cheap labour. Out in the hop garden the vines are cut down whole and piled on a trailer by a team of three men while the tractor chugs slowly between the rows. The men doing this job wear p.v.c. aprons, rubber gloves and goggles. Without these aids the vines would cut your hands to pieces and the sulphur in the hops would blind you. Yet the men had to provide their own gloves and goggles. The farmer only provided the aprons.

Farm labourers are expected to work in all weathers, and this applies particularly during hopping. There were some really bad days when it came down in torrents from morning till night. They kept on working. Employers are supposed to provide oilskins, souwesters, and leggings at such times. There were, in fact, a few sets of oilskins provided, but they were ages old, worn out, torn and without buttons. So the men bought their own oilskins. They also had to provide their own wellington boots. Not that it made much difference. Pulling down hop vines in the rain is the wettest job in the world. No matter how many waterproofs you wear, the rain gets down your sleeves and inside your collar and soaks you to the skin just the same.

THE UNION

This sort of thing made me wonder what sort of a union the farmworkers had. When I worked several years ago for one of the London Borough Councils I was issued with overalls and a donkey jacket as a matter of course. For work in water or heavy clay, wellingtons were provided. And when it rained we took shelter. These things were years in advance of anything the farm workers had, and nobody considers the Municipal Workers' Union a specially progressive one. I made a few enquiries. Most of the men did not belong to the Union, and neither knew nor cared much about it. But when I did find a member he wouldn't hear a word against his Union. His attitude was that the Union organizers did their best, but there was very little they could do because their membership was so small and their funds so low. He stressed the fact that while there were millions of transport workers or municipal workers there were only a few thousand agricultural workers. I was not entirely convinced by this, though his second argument, that it was almost impossible to organise a group so widely scattered as the farmworkers, I thought a bit more valid. He also claimed that the Farmers' Union was one of the most powerful and reactionary employers' organizations in the country, with which I could entirely agree.

At that time the Agricultural Workers' Union was actually pressing for a wage increase of at least a pound a week for its members, and not long after the news came through that they had been awarded six shillings. I thought there would be an angry reaction. None came. There was simply a placid acceptance. I couldn't understand it.
MODERN SERFDOM

The local newspaper carried an article recently, warning that "in another twenty years there would be no men left on the farms". But if the tied cottage system were abolished now there would be no farmworkers left in two years. If the farmers were forced to 'free' the cottages, or if the rural councils built a sufficient number of homes for rent at a reasonable rate to house the people in the cottages, nobody would stay on the farms at the present rate of pay. The living standards of these men are half a century behind the average workers. A pint in the pub is a once a week treat. A farm labourer's holiday means a couple of days out, the rest of the time he and his wife spend at home. A fortnight by the sea is about as attainable as a fortnight on the moon.

English farming is kept going in its present form by an institution almost as old as slavery and morally little better. That institution is serfdom.

These men are serfs. How else can their condition be described. They are not peasants, for peasants own the land they work. And they are not free labourers, for they are not free to sell their labour. Despite the fact that they are literate and educated, despite the fact that they drive tractors and operate complex machinery, despite the fact that they live in the twentieth century in a highly industrialised modern state, these men remain serfs.

Sometimes, as we tugged at the hop vines in the pouring rain, or pulled up mangel wurzels from the cold ground with fingers frozen by the biting East wind, I looked at these men, and their wives, working doggedly and persistently and never stopping to talk or take breath, and I wondered just which century they were living in. I felt that if I mentioned the name of Wat Tyler or John Ball to these men they would stop work, and straighten their backs, and break their silence to tell me what it was like to be there when for a few short weeks the common people of Kent shook off the bondage of serfdom. I felt that they would take pleasure in describing to me the features and manners of the leaders of the great revolt, and in reminiscing about the things they said and did. I felt that I was right back in the Middle Ages.

Before the winter really set in I had seen enough of farm work, so I left and returned to the modern world. But those men are still there, working stolidly from dawn till dusk through the short winter days and the long summer days, tied to the land on which they work until the day they die. Do they wait for another Wat Tyler to lead them? No, they just pin their hopes on the football pools.

BRIAN WHITBY
WORK STUDY

CONDUCT AND ATTITUDE REPORT ON MR. C. FISHER

Clock on 7.55 a.m. Commence work at 8.05 a.m. Grease pillars on Tool No. 196 AH/16. Slow walk to cupboard for micrometers. 8.10 a.m. converse with Bill Mundee and Brian Crookes until 8.12 a.m. Return to work. 8.14 a.m. walk up to Bill Hammond quick word - walk back. 8.15 a.m. walk in direction of Toilet, return at 8.33 as witnessed by Mr Cornwell. Apply Rozalex to hands 8.35 - converse with Brian Crookes and Norman Barrett. 8.37 return to work until 8.55 a.m. 8.55 until 9.00 reading at bench. 9.00 work until 9.50 - off to Toilet to wash cup - return at 9.56. Slow walk to Apprentice Section to borrow Height Gauge and Clock (remind him to put Stripper on Tool sent for grinding to protect punches). 9.58 converse with Harry James until 10.02. Return to bench, rolls arrive, open rolls, spread contents more evenly, apply sauce, return sauce bottle, return to bench, sit meditating die section whilst eating roll and drinking tea until 10.13. Work until 11.08. Converse with Joe Eckett and Clem Ward - back to work 11.10 until 11.30. Wage cards arrive, collapse on stool to check card. 11.34 return to work until 12.23. 12.23 until 12.27 sitting down. 12.27 until 12.28 work furiously with Hacksaw. STOP. Already through outer door when finishing Hoetor sounded.

Return at 1.32 p.m. Work until 2.50, off to Toilet, return 2.55 in time for tea. (3.30 discover two die buttons missing, third one damaged Delivery Date jeopardised). Work until 4.20. Slow walk to drinking fountain and Toilelet - return at 4.30. General rundown until 4.50.

As reported to me during the day by Mr A McMinn and observed by myself at various times during the same day.

(Signed) R.B. VERROKEN.

The above document at first appears very funny. With its concentration on time spent in the lavatory or on spreading sauce on a roll it could be seen as an example of the pettyness pervading industrial supervision. But this biased time study 'report' resulted in the sacking of a worker at Linton and Hirst's engineering factory at Swindon. It clearly illustrates the arbitrary nature of industrial discipline. The
man was sacked on January 8, 1968, after surveillance of which he knew nothing, without notice and without any opportunity to defend himself or rebut the charges.

Fortunately life is not as simple as that. The other workers in the plant immediately started a 'sit-in' and were only persuaded to return to normal working on condition that the dismissal be lifted while the matter was negotiated. But on January 15, without warning, Brother Fisher was stopped working by his foreman and told to 'pick up his tools at the security gate, as he was finished, and that his wages and cards were in the post'.

On January 17, that rare bird, an official strike, was sanctioned by the Swindon District Committee of the AEF. The strikers still badly need money, which should be sent to Brother G. Philip, 19 Ravenscroft, Covingham Park, Swindon.

We reprint this document because it shows clearly the sort of surveillance to which industrial workers are increasingly subjected. This is what all the flannel about 'industrial efficiency' means. It means that men are being subordinated to production. They are being driven into the ground or on to the street. The older techniques of increasing exploitation such as time study, work study, job evaluation, etc., are being used more extensively and they are being reinforced by newer methods of domination such as closed circuit television and electronic methods of work control. Resistance to this offensive inside the factory and the defence of rights to be a human being at work should be the number one priority for militants and socialists. They must get together to publicise those new managerial techniques and also methods of resisting them.

KEN WELLER.

WILSON'S 'CONSENSUS'?

'A free and prosperous society depends on the activities of three distinct classes: a political elite trained by the study of humanities to take a broad and enlightened view about ends and means, a technical elite willing to exercise its skill in obedience to the community's will and a proletariat with enough mechanical intelligence to respond to managerial direction.'

Although I have no particular wish to defend an 'apostolic succession' of anarchist thought, I feel I must question the side-comment on Kropotkin in the review by M.B. of Avrich's book on The Russian Anarchists (Solidarity, vol. IV, No. 11). The reference is to Kropotkin's 'notions that "cooperation rather than conflict is at the root of the historical process..."' (a cooperation that clearly transcended the barriers of class)'. The parenthetical assumption is inaccurate, and does no justice to Kropotkin's thought. His theory of mutual aid applied to evolution rather than to the stages of historical development, and is opposed to the idea of 'survival of the fittest' (an aspect of Darwinism that has proved its usefulness to fascist theoreticians) rather than to Marxist concepts of class struggle. Kropotkin believed that groups cooperating successfully, not the strong preying on the weak, tended to survive. In primitive societies there would be no question of cutting across class barriers; and when class conflicts arose at a later stage, few socialists could dispute that organization in a cooperative manner becomes essential for the insurgent classes if they are to overthrow their oppressors and survive.

The extent to which Kropotkin was aware of the nature and potency of class conflict in history is manifest in his volume on The Great French Revolution (English edition 1909). A massive work, in which a solidarist could certainly pick out evidence of 'muddleheadedness', it nevertheless gives a comprehensive and supremely class-conscious account of events from the first stirrings of the revolution in the 1780s to the 'triumph of reaction' in Thermidor 1794. The description of bourgeois methods, using workers and peasants against king and nobles, then turning to repression if popular movements threatened to get out of their control, is probably unequaled in the historiography of the French Revolution; and Kropotkin's constant, unequivocal sympathy with the betrayed, defeated and still oppressed people is anything but 'genteel'!

Debunking 'apostles' is all very well, but when founded on such unreasonable grounds it is more likely to rally 'disciples' to the defence than to disillusion misguided ideological heirs.

L. S., Aberdeen.
M. B. Replies

Kropotkin's theory of 'mutual aid' may or may not be a more plausible interpretation of the facts of biological evolution than Darwin's theory of 'natural selection through the survival of the fittest'. This has little to do, however, with the main issue, namely whether Kropotkin's theory has any relevance to the understanding of the historical process, i.e. to human history.

Kropotkin himself certainly believed his concepts of 'mutual aid' were relevant to sociology as well as to biology. (L.S. seems in two minds on this point: she first states that Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid applies 'to evolution rather than to the stages of historical development' - but then proceeds to give examples clearly drawn from the realm of sociology.)

In my opinion the sociological relevance of Kropotkin's theory is limited to relations within a class (he vividly describes the sense of solidarity within certain social groups). The concept clearly does not apply to the struggle between classes. And since the days of slavery class struggle has been a constant feature of human history. Unlike most animal species the genus Homo sapiens has from an early stage been divided into classes, these being determined by the relations men come into with other men in the course of economic life. The class struggle (and not 'mutual aid' between classes) has moulded the face of history.

Did Kropotkin's ideas of 'cooperation' transcend the class barriers? In the ultimate test of Kropotkin's own political life they clearly did. But they did so in his earlier writings too. These are full of 'sweet reason' rather than anger. His aim is to convince and reason with (rather than to overthrow) those who oppress the masses. He does not really understand the class struggle. In 'Mutual Aid' (Pelican edition, p.229) he could decry 'the teachings of mutual hatred and pitiless struggle which came, adorned with the attributes of science, from obliging philosophers and sociologists'. The book received rave notices in the journals of the Victorian Establishment. It is no accident that so many of Kropotkin's supporters today are either pacifists or anarchists of the 'back-to-the-simple-country-life' type. There is, in all this, an internal coherence.

It is true, as L.S. says, that Kropotkin's book (The Great French Revolution, 1789-1793) reveals the 'extent to which Kropotkin was aware of the nature and potency of class conflict in history'. But this assertion is doubleoded. The major work analysing this tremendous upheaval from a class point of view remains Daniel Guérin's 'La Lutte de Classes sous la Première République' (Gallimard, 1946). This outstanding work contains a brilliant analysis of the historiographers of the French Revolution, from conservatives such as Thiers, via liberals such as Michelet (incidentally much admired by Kropotkin) down to stalinists like Mathiez. Of Kropotkin, Guérin (now an anarchist) says: 'Just like Jaurès the social-democrat, Kropotkin the libertarian
has not entirely freed himself from modes of thought inherited from bourgeois democracy'. Kropotkin's failing is hardly surprising. At a time when the understanding of history was being revolutionised, he could make the inane statement that 'modern socialism has added absolutely nothing to the ideas that were circulating among the French people between 1789 and 1794' (loc. cit. p.580).

There is nothing as painful as getting to grips with new ideas - or as supplementing emotion with understanding. Anarchist abstentionism in both these areas seems, alas, to be as old as the hills.

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**CALLING ALL COMMITTED SOLIDARISTS**

A SOLIDARITY Conference will be held in Birmingham on the weekend of March 30 - 31.

The purpose of the Conference is to clarify some of our basic ideas and to decide the most fruitful areas where they can be put into practice and how this can best be done.

We are not interested in holding a political jamboree or - at this stage - in a simultaneous public debate with a variety of other tendencies. We wish seriously to discuss some of our own problems (the division of labour between London Solidarists and those in the provinces; the production and distribution of leaflets during disputes, the collection of articles for our paper, a systematic journals coverage, methods of building up sales, and how best to establish a SOLIDARITY political presence on a national scale.

For copies of our basic statement of aims 'AS WE SEE IT' (Solidarity vol.IV, No.6) and further details and information concerning accommodation, etc, write to:

Frank Pearce, 35 Blenheim Terrace, London N.W.8.
about ourselves

Over the last few months we have attempted to hold regular meetings in London and these have met with varying success, some generating more heat than light. Audiences have varied from 20 to 45. Meetings have been addressed by some Vauxhall militants on the situation at Luton, by Lou Lewis on the Myton Dispute, by Ken Weller on What's Wrong with the Unions, by Selma James on Black Power: USA and UK, and by Peter Fryer on The Underground. Solidarity speakers have during the same period addressed meetings at Bangor and Warwick and also one organized by the Socialist Society of London University's Institute of Higher Education.

We have also been active in the developing campaign against factory closures in both North and South London. Leaflets were produced and have been fairly widely distributed in both areas. The leaflet given out in South London. Some 1500 were distributed at the big AEI-GEC march on February 7. They were well received by the crowd of some 5000 who marched out en bloc from the works at Woolwich to attend a packed meeting at the local Town Hall.

This particular distribution had interesting repercussions. People who agreed with the leaflet wrote to us, useful contacts were established and a campaign is being planned in North Kent, where many factories are threatened with closure. There is very strong feeling in the area and people are beginning to see that there is little point in appealing to MPs when the government itself is financing the 'rationalizations' as a result of which workers are being made redundant. Attempts are being made to link up threatened factories in North and South London - and also threatened factories with those not immediately in danger but likely to be affected in the period ahead.

Some of our comrades have also helped the recently launched 'London Workers May Day Committee'. In this issue we publish their appeal for a May Day Demonstration.

Last year the Association of Rank and File Printworkers called for a May Day march, held on May Day itself (i.e. May 1st, not just the first Sunday in May). The demonstration was a modest success (see Solidarity; vol.IV, No.7), given that it was denounced by Communists and Trotskyists alike (it was 'premature', an 'adventure', etc.) and that it was opposed by the leadership of the printworkers' union. We feel the call will meet with a much bigger response this year. The political credit of the Labour Government is quickly running out and more and more workers have seen what the wage freeze and the attacks on the unions really amount to. We call on all our readers to give this demonstration full support. Copies of various leaflets concerning the demonstration and directed at different sections of workers can be obtained from the May Day Committee, 29 Love Walk, London S.E.5.
FIGHT THE CLOSURES!

Today employers everywhere are seeking to 'rationalize' their concerns. Hence the mergers. To maintain or increase profits they must reduce production costs. You are one of their main production costs. Labour is cheaper outside the London area. So are ground rents. Hence the move to the North. As for you, you're just a pawn on their chess board.

Some workers will move out to the new factories. Others will be made redundant. The dole queue threatens us all. Militants who have worked hard over the years to build their shop organizations certainly 'won't be required' in these new factories.

Older workers 'won't be needed on the voyage' either. Their position is very bad. They are considered 'too old' to learn new jobs... and some 20 years too young for a retirement pension. Their future is a damming challenge to the so-called 'affluent society'. There simply aren't enough alternative jobs for them in the London area.

The AEI - GEC merger will make thousands redundant in South London. Several hundred will also be thrown on the streets when Norton-Villiers move up to the Midlands. In North London UDEC have just sold out to Capper-Neil Ltd. They propose to move to St Helens, 400 men being left on the cobbles. Over the last few years Napier and BLSP (Rootes) have been shut down. So has Kempe. ENV has almost been shut down. So have many smaller factories. As regards engineering, North and South London could become depressed areas.

Why should we always be at the receiving end? Why should we be pushed around all the time, employed at their convenience and sacked as they see fit. Are we just objects? Or are we human beings with homes and families?

What can we do? It's all very well to approach local MPs (or others in the Westminster 'Gas Works'). But remember it was at Westminster that the merger was authorised. The Government knew perfectly well what the consequences would be. They even financed the whole venture to the tune of £400,000. To appeal to Parliament is like the man about to be hanged appealing for reprieve to the man who signed the execution decree.

We are not against listening to all their speeches and all their well-rehearsed apologies or promises of what they're going to try and do for us. But let's not kid ourselves. Speeches, resolutions, letters, petitions and demonstrations won't halt the employers. Not one factory, anywhere, has ever been kept open by these methods. But our industrial strength could halt the employers.
We must unite now for a joint resistance. Never again should we stand aside and see our fellow trade unionists isolated in struggle and defeated piecemeal. A couple of bob in the collecting box - when another factory is threatened - is useful. But for many of us it tends to be the limit of our solidarity. The struggles in BLSP and at ENV (both highly organized factories) were waged in isolation. This mustn't happen again. Petty sectional jealousies and a viciously anti-working class press have in the past helped the employers to defeat trade unionists. So did our own weakness: in particular our reliance on others to fight our battles for us.

Workers in both North and South London must realise that it could soon be their turn. DON'T LEAVE THINGS TO OTHERS. Form committees around your shop stewards. Link up the threatened factories. Contact all convenors and stewards in your area. Hold meetings. Get the facts as widely known as possible. Don't let the union officials divide you from one another, and then sell you out as they usually do. Don't let them confuse you with double talk. Our wages and conditions (such as they are) were all fought for. Now they must be defended. Nothing has ever been gained - or maintained - without a struggle.

IT IS UP TO US. We must start thinking and acting for ourselves. To start with we should stick to normal duties (no stock-taking, etc.). We should refuse transfers. We should refuse to do anything that could assist the closures. And we should consider new methods of struggle: 'sit-in' tactics can be far more effective than walkouts. Whose factories are they anyway? Don't we, who sweat our guts out in them day after day, have any rights? Why not start discussing how we could run them ourselves, if the employers can't, without throwing thousands on the scrap heap?

We don't suggest that by such means the factories can necessarily be 'saved'. But a united resistance could delay matters. It could make the proposed moves damned expensive for the bosses. And, after all, they want to save money, not spend it!

No employer has or can have the interests of the working class at heart. His moves to the areas of peak unemployment are motivated by the attraction of cheap, green, often non-union labour, plus the added incentive of low land rates. Don't believe the sob stuff about relieving unemployment. They are robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Only when workers realize that they are all workers and that the struggle in one area is the concern of all, will the employers really be effectively challenged. We must help build this consciousness. Let's start right now.

FIGHT THE CLOSURES!

Published by SOLIDARITY, a paper for rank and file industrial militants, c/o H. Russell, 53A Westmoreland Road, Bromley, Kent.
CALLING ALL LONDON WORKERS!

DEMONSTRATE
DEMONSTRATE
DEMONSTRATE
ON WEDNESDAY
MAY 1st

Are you REDUNDANT - or likely to be?
Are your wages FROZEN?
Are you a Council tenant with a CLIMBING RENT?
Are you being FLEECED for bad accommodation by a private landlord?
Are you FED UP TO THE TEETH with Government?

This is the situation of most London workers in 1968 under a so-called Labour Government. Something can be done about it.

DEMONSTRATE IN A GREAT ANTI-GOVERNMENT MARCH
AND MEETING ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 1st

Show this Government - and all governments - that the workers have had enough of being pushed around and now mean business. STOP WORK ON MAY 1st and march for security of jobs, decent housing, low rents, and high wages.

Who says the country can't afford it when we watch the rich get richer every day?

WHY MAY 1st?

Because May 1st is MAY DAY - WORKERS' DAY - the day which has been set aside since 1890 for workers to demonstrate their solidarity and their determination to win a better life for those whose labours produce all the wealth of society.

This MAY DAY RALLY will assemble at 11.45 am at Tower Hill, near the Tower of London. Details of the march will be announced later. Meanwhile, raise the idea of the MAY 1st MARCH in your place of work and trade union branch. For further details get in touch with the LONDON WORKERS MAY DAY COMMITTEE which is composed of rank and file printers, dockers, engineers, and building workers. The address is printed below.

STOP WORK ON MAY 1st, 1968

Published by May Day Committee, 29 Love Walk, London S.E.5.
To expect the mass participation of the people in revolution is a pipe dream and to wait for it really means the unconscious support and tacit acceptance of the capitalist system. There has never been mass-conscious revolution. Even the 1917 Revolution was a coup.

As we all wait for the millennium, factions of the 'Left' engage in holier than thou internecine struggle whilst the profiteers, proprietors, exploiters and speculators wax richer, laughing like hell! Pigs will fly before the masses have political consciousness, brother. You and I will be long dead and still they'll be taken for a ride, whatever happens.

B.C., London S.E.4.

* * * *

'I've been chatting to my mates in Imperial College Boiler House. I leave 'Solidarity' in our mess. After 6 months a chap came up to me and said that if we all really stuck together, the bosses couldn't make us do anything we didn't want to.

'May be there's hope after all...!' Gordon C., London WC1.

'There is plenty of evidence of 'integrated' looting and sniping. The Detroit newspapers were full of pictures of Negroes and Whites entering and leaving stores side by side. The first sniper killed by the police (there are very few identified or documented snipers) was a white man. Our own experience in our neighbourhood was of Negroes and Whites helping each other to loot stores, etc. However, it should be clear that although that establishes a fundamental class basis, it was essentially a racial explosion. Negroes began it and dominated it. Even middle class Negroes (although on a smaller scale) participated. But it was not properly speaking, a "race riot". There were no confrontations of mobs of blacks vs. whites. There were isolated beatings and such but the main confrontation was with the police - attacks on police, on police stations, etc. The Newark riot actually began with a demonstration attacking a police station.

'The thing was obviously national in scope. But Detroit is crucial. Because of the nature of Detroit, the wide extent of the Negro ghetto, the auto industry, Detroit makes clear that American Negroes, as industrial proletarians, (not some rural serfs or peasants, now a distinct minority) have a considerable weight in American society and are leading the American working class toward a transformation of the society.'

Martin G., Detroit, USA.
The day after we arrived back we joined a CORE sit-in at the Public Housing Authority in Richmond, California, an industrial suburb of 60,000 people. CORE had a list of charges about discrimination in public housing, but this sit-in was just to force the Commission to discuss the question with CORE. The Commission had stalled for quite a while, and finally granted CORE fifteen minutes and promised another fifteen minutes the following month. CORE obviously wouldn't take that, so they staged an all-night sit-in. In the course of the sit-in several city councilmen and a "human relations" priest came by to urge moderation. The city councilmen looked too much like the stereotype of the great white father; sixtyish, portly, and dull-eyed. So they wisely stood back while a young, sharp public-relations man put their case. When he was finished giving his assurances, a Negro teenager brushed past him, shoved his finger in the face of a rotund city councilman, and said: 'You, what's-your-name, what have you got to say for yourself?'. The councilman did his best to repeat what his bright young man had said along with a show of indignance for being so rudely challenged. What had sounded reasonable in the mouth of the bright young man was quickly identified as the same-old-run-around when the city councilman said it. So Richmond CORE held a meeting on the spot and voted to keep the sit-in going all night.

'I was very impressed by the sharpness and irreverence of the Negro teenagers (and some of their parents, for that matter). All my Bolshevist-Leninist friends are more polite and respectful of authority.'

Marvin G., Berkeley, USA.

Yesterday I was sacked from the supermarket where I am now working for refusing to operate a cleaning machine which has caused the redundancy of the cleaners in our store and in other supermarkets throughout the country. Boys are made to use the machine on compulsory overtime (at flat rate). I contacted the union organizer some weeks ago but he did not come near us. (No Branch officials for USDA in London - only full time bureaucrats now.)

Eventually on being told to use the machine I had no alternative but to strike on my own. The organizer then came - and told me that he would tear up my union ticket for taking unconstitutional action. The rank and file in the supermarket are pretty fed up and disillusioned.'

Pete C., London SE18.
This is the report of the fifth conference on workers’ control organised by The Week and Voice of the Unions and held at Coventry, in June 1967. I attended the fourth conference, at Nottingham in 1966, and this one seems to have followed the same pattern. Part of the time is devoted to speeches from "militant union leaders" and academics; the conference then splits up into seminar groups to study the application of workers’ control in particular industries; the full conference finally reconvenes for the presentation of reports and discussion.

The idea of convening conferences to bring together rank-and-file-activists and supporters to discuss their problems in the context of the struggle for workers’ control of production is a very good one. Unfortunately this does not seem to have happened at these particular conferences.

Take the guest speakers at the 1967 conference. John Hughes spoke on the Labour Party’s recent report on "industrial democracy". In the process he managed, at one stage, to use the term "workers’ participation" no less than twelve times in just over one page of the book. And yet the organisers of the conference, Ken Coates and Tony Topham, are the authors of a pamphlet which seeks to expose the trick of "workers’ participation" for the deception it is; while the cover of the report shows a worker carrying a banner saying "Control not Participation"!

Stan Orme, MP, brought fraternal greetings from those elusive, nay invisible, persons, the Left MPs (whose concern for workers’ control is, to say the least, not readily apparent).

Hugh Scanlon, now President of the AEU, made an impassioned plea for workers’ control, singling out the need for workers to control their own institutions. BMC workers will be rather sceptical of all this. They will remember that the same Hugh Scanlon was one of the signatories of the infamous "Declaration of Intent" on Job Evaluation and Measured Day-work, signed without the consent or even knowledge of the workers involved and
with the express intention of destroying shop organisation throughout BMC. Presumably what Scanlon means by workers' control is that "Scanlon's law" rather than "Carron's law" will prevail in the AEU from now on. Of course, it's likely to mean much the same thing in practice, but we'll no doubt be told that Hugh is a left-winger... 

Bill Jones of the TGWU was chairman of the conference. The report records a burst of applause when he entered the hall. Apparently there were some busmen there; those who want to see how some other busmen feel about the men at Transport House could refer to Bob Potter's article in *Solidarity*, vol. IV, no. 1.

The point of all this is not to heap personal abuse on individuals. It is to clarify something about which the organisers of the conference seem to have been in some confusion: the role of the trade union official in modern capitalism. The struggles in recent years of car-workers, dockers, busmen, building workers — you name it — have been as much against their own 'representatives' (the union officials) as against state or management. This is not because of the personalities involved, not because Bill Carron was a papal knight or Les Cannon is a megalomaniac. It is an inevitable feature of modern capitalism, whose best defence against the working class, has proved to be the absorption of the upper levels of the unions.

The continued belief in the "militant union leader", perhaps the most dangerous illusion that workers can have today, is apparent in almost every page of this report. An almost deferential attitude is adopted to people who have absolutely nothing to do with workers' power. Jones, Hughes, Orme, and Scanlon hold court while the loyal subjects sit in awe at the feet of the great ones. Brother Jones, who is on the General Council of the TUC, seems to be particularly revered.

To be fair to the participants, a lot of criticism seems to have been voiced. (It is a pity that a large part of the discussion seems to have been omitted from the report.) The contributions from the floor were almost invariably more sensible and more relevant than the prattling of the "wise men" — but then socialists have always claimed that the workers, in the long run, know best.

One is forced to ask why the great ones were asked in the first place. From this report, you'd never think that workers at Wytons, at Roberts-Arundel, and so on, were engaged in bitter struggles at the very time of the Conference. There'd have been no shortage of speakers!

This divorce of theory from practice is most blatant in those parts of the report which deal with the "blueprints" for workers' control under capitalism discussed by some of the study groups. The real problems, the defence and enlargement of existing areas of encroachment on the
"prerogatives of management" and their consolidation into a general movement for the overthrow of the existing order seem (on the evidence of this report, at least) to have been entirely neglected.

Looked at from this point of view, the conference can have done no good. It could possibly have done a great deal of harm in fostering dangerous illusions as to the nature of modern capitalism and the means of destroying it. The book represents a large number of "might-have-beens". The conference might have been an opportunity for workers to share their experiences and discuss the lessons to be drawn from them. This seems to have been the desire of many of the floor speakers. Instead, they got the empty platitudes of Orme and Scanlon, of Jones and Hughes. Instead you can read of the sterile drafting of blueprints for reconciling the irreconcilable (which is as good a definition as I know of utopianism).

Ken Coates and Tony Topham are intelligent and dedicated socialists. But they have an enormous amount of dead wood to shed before their annual conference on workers' control will come to life.

JOHN KING

SOLIDARITY WITH THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE AGAINST U.S. AGGRESSION

International Solidarity Demonstration

SUNDAY MARCH 17TH 2.30 PM

TRAFA LGAR SQUARE

MARCH ON U.S. EMBASSY

Published by SOLIDARITY, c/o H. Russell, 53A Westmoreland Rd., Bromley, Kent.