

*From The London End*

## British Railwaymen Restive

THE Railwaymen have swung into action. They have chosen a novel way of bringing pressure on the Railway Executive without resorting to total strike. And they have timed it well, too. The Labour Party is having its Annual Conference next week, and the crisis on the railways will compel the party bosses to think more in terms of a national wages policy than in terms of the "floating votes" at the next general election.

As it happens, two separate demands have got mixed up, and have had the unexpected effect of raising a whole hornet's nest. Railwaymen in the North West and Midlands have adopted a "work-to-rule" policy, as a protest against the dilatory tactics of the Executive in dealing with the demand for a general increase of 10 sh. per week in their wages. In the North-East and Eastern Section—that is, the main line between London and Edinburgh—the men have refused to work the new "lodging-turn" system. This new system has been put forward by the Executive with a view to increasing the long-distance fast services, for men and exportable material. Should this come into operation, about 96 men will have to take their turn of staying away from home for a night—either in hostels provided by the railways or in private hotels. The protest of the men—which, unfortunately, lends itself to misinterpretation as unwillingness to serve the public better—is two-fold. Firstly, they are dissatisfied with living conditions in such hostels as do exist; and where they are not available, the men have to seek accommodation in private hotels, thus incur-

ring extra expenditure. Secondly, they feel that it is the thin end of the wedge and that soon they may be asked to spend more than *one* night per week in lodgings.

What has happened in this mix-up is that the National Union of Railwaymen finds itself in a bad jam. In the first dispute, that regarding wages, the N.U.R. is embarrassed only because the men have acted without waiting for its official blessings. The second dispute is, however, over a system which has had the approval of the N.U.R. The men striking on Sundays as a protest against the new system are thus expressing their disapproval of the stand taken by their own Union, the N.U.R.!

The question naturally arises: how come that the Union accepts a scheme without finding out how the men who are likely to operate it feel about it? The Executives stand is as could be expected from a management which is national only in name. The men take on an unofficial strike and we don't take heed of their demands unless they put them forward through the proper channel! And the proper channel in this case would be the N.U.R., which has approved the arrangement. In such an impasse, the men had only one option—that of direct action, which focusses attention on the general malaise in Trade Unionism in this country, viz. the growth of a class of Union officials, who have lost touch with the rank and file. These officials revel in long and intimate negotiations with the management, to settle all questions relating to labour. And while perfecting

the machinery of "settlement" by negotiation, they are slowly undermining one of the cherished possessions of organised labour, the right to strike. No sooner do organised workers decide to go on a strike, the trade unions tend to disclaim any official responsibility for it. And it becomes easy for any calumniator to hold up the labourer who strikes as an anti-social being, or as the stooge of communists. As in the case of the railwaymen today, the press pours scorn on these bad fellows, who are trying to hold the public at ransom—just because they do not want to stay away from home for a night!

Once the trade unions disclaim responsibility for protests by their members, the strikers are labelled as "irresponsible" trouble makers. May be the, men who have been disgruntled for a long time about their Wages are excitable; may be they prefer the quick method of direct action to the bureaucratic hob-Mobbing of the trade union secretaries and labour relations officers. But even the most partisan of critics should admit that the railwaymen have shown, in their demand for a wage-raise, exceptional forbearance. When they asked for a flat raise of 12sh 6d a week, a couple of months back, they met with a flat refusal. Later, the Executive offered increases from 6d. to 2 sh 6d per week in different grades, which aimed at increasing the wages of the lowest paid more than that of the higher grades.

The N.U.R. could not agree to the proposal, because even at his distance, the Secretary, Mr. Figgins knew the men would not accept it. Subsequently, when the N.U.R. brought up another claim for an increase of 10 sh. per week and time-and-a-quarter for work on Saturdays, the National Executive refused to negotiate

unless this specific demand was dropped! The procedure suggested by the Executive Was arbitration through the recognised channel, with the decision in regard to the actual changes in the wage-schedules to rest in the hands of the arbitrators. The Executive was evidently playing for time, and was trying to interpret all agreements according to the letter rather than the spirit. Faced with such an attitude, the N.U.R. had an awkward situation to deal with, Mr. Figgins, a true Labourite, could not call for a strike, that too in a nationalised industry.

And it was at this juncture that the men in Manchester and London decided to take a lesson from the National Executive itself. They decided to interpret the rules regarding work in the yards and stations literally. In effect, this meant observing regulations which on common sense grounds could be dispensed with; or, refusing to work overtime on the

ground that it was purely "voluntary". Such action does not constitute a strike because the men do not break their employment contracts. But it does dislocate work enormously, because many depots and yards had reduced the number of men on duty by arranging on the basis of "gentlemen's agreements" that those on duty should put an extra ounce of labour whenever necessary. Now that the railway men have left no doubt about their willingness to go by the letter if the Executive wants it so, many unkind things are being said about them. It all sounds puzzling. If these honest stalwarts who decry the railway men find nothing wrong in the Executive's stand, why should they feel outraged by what the men do? Perhaps the general attitude of the British Press towards the Berlin Reichsbahn strike is a clue to this strange reaction.

The crisis on the railways

brings to the fore problems which have been sadly neglected by the Labour Movement in general. While the Government has to think quick and substitute a rational wages policy for the admonitions of the austere Chancellor, all Labour men, in the Government or out of it, have to revise their ideas about workers' participation in the management of industries—especially nationalised industries. Characteristic of this prevailing myopia in this field is the statement made by Mr. Hugh Gaitskell, the Minister for Fuel, sometime ago. Talking of Workers' Control in nationalised industries he admitted he could not see how labour could sit on both sides of the table at the same time. One would have thought that one of the objectives of nationalisation, was to remove that piece of table. It is distressing that so important a member of the Government should accept the table as a permanent fixture.

---

## **THE NEW FACTORY ACT**

RAJA KULKARNI

IF the textile mills of Manchester were built on the loot and plunder of the wealth of India by the agents of the East India Company, it was left to the British working class to repay Britain's debt to India partially by fighting successfully for the rights of Labour in their own country. Workers in Britain, along with their confreres in the industrially advanced countries of Europe fought the battles for the workers in India too. Resistance, legal and illegal, organised and unorganised, open and underground, parliamentary and extra-parliamentary, was offered by the British workers against the evils

of the factory system in England. The latter faced bullets, and spilt their blood to secure those rights and privileges without which they could not lead a life of human dignity. They won many a battle and marched a long way towards securing better working conditions and raising their own standards of living from the subnormal standards of animal existence. Their sacrifices paved the way for the working class in India for better working conditions and a better standard of living. Labour legislation in Britain was the basis and the forerunner of labour legislation in our country. Whatever scanty and scrappy labour legisla-

tion exists today in India bears the imprint of the script and ink of the labour legislation in Britain in particular, and in Western Europe in general.

This fact stands out when one reads the story of the Factory Acts passed from time to time by the Indian legislature during the last seventy years. The first Factory Act passed by the Indian Government in 1881 was enacted, as is well known, at the instance of the Lancashire millowners who brought pressure upon the Government to fight the menace of competition from the Indian Mills who could produce at cheap rates because of cheap labour, lack of