

From The London End

The Dock Strike

London, July 16

IT IS a week since the Government declared a state of emergency in the London docks, and appointed a committee of five to manage the traffic on Thames-side. During this period, Sir Stafford Cripps has ordered a retreat to austerity. Dollar imports are to be cut by £100 million, in an attempt to bridge the ever-widening gap. Milk is back on ration, and so will the sweets and chocolates be on August 14. There will be a cut in tobacco, and timber and paper—though not in meat, thanks largely to the Anglo - Argentine agreement. Alongside of these, Sir Stafford is conferring with his opposite numbers from the Dominions—who may evolve a formula less nebulous than the one evolved by the Commonwealth Prime Ministers. But none of these has succeeded in taking men's minds off the dock situation. The matter of the moment is, really, the seething unrest in the docks, which is yet another symptom of the deep-seated malaise in British trade unionism today.

That such a deadlock should have developed just when the financial crisis was acute, is unfortunate. It tends to mix up issues and makes the treatment of the basic malady difficult. To go on strike now is "treason", says the obstreperous Sir Hartley Shawcross, the Attorney-General. The Minister for Labour, Mr Isaacs, is as thoroughly convinced as Mr Arthur Deakin of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) that Communists are using the simple minded dockers as a catspaw, in an effort

engineered by the Communist-led Canadian Seamen's Union, which to intensify the crisis. He is so sure of it that he has lost his commonsense. Even Mr Attlee, despite his knowledge of dockland and the docker's affection for him, has chosen to treat the situation as a political challenge to Labour. Given this attitude, and the financial crisis, it is not surprising that he should have resorted to the drastic measure of declaring a state of emergency. Even though the idea was much canvassed at the time of the last dock strike about twelve months back, one has to go back to the black days of the General Strike in 1926 for an actual promulgation of it.

The issue is quite simple: the dockers consider that they have been locked out, because they refused to do what nobody, in their opinion, has any right to expect the dockers to do—*viz.*, work on "black" ships. The Government, the TGWU officials, the port employers and the press insist that the two Canadian ships in respect of which the trouble arose are not "black". In a most unconvincing speech the other day, Mr Isaacs chose as the main theme, "Wiho said (these ships were black?" The 14,000 dockers on strike believe that the Canadian ships are black because the crews have gone on strike alleging that the ship-owners have double-crossed them. Moreover, the two ships have been in the port of London for nearly two months without the Government or the TGWU denying that they were black. Mr Isaacs and others, on the other hand, have tended to talk down to the wor-

kers. Their main argument has been that the strike has been disaffiliated by the Trades Union Federation of Canada. The dockers are thus told that there is no "real" dispute so far as the two ships are concerned, and that by working them the dockers would not be encouraging black-legging in any manner.

Clearly this is not an issue on which arbitration in the normal sense works—for either a ship is black or it is not black. There is no question of a third party devising a compromise formula more or less acceptable to both parties. The dockers sincerely believe that to unload these ships is to break one's faith with one's males and that means in dockland the meanest thing on earth. Since the present stoppage is due to the insistence of ship-owners that the Canadian ships be unloaded before others are touched, it is held—not merely by dockers but by others as well—that what the Government should have done under the circumstances was to have used troops or voluntary labour to clear these ships first, and then to take up other matters.

Such a policy would have been justified against the background of the financial crisis, and the immediate necessity for keeping up exports. But the Government has chosen to bring up fundamental issues. To have used the troops to unload the *Beaverbrae* and the *Argomont* would have meant the implicit acceptance of two things: (a) that these two ships were in fact "black"; and (b) that any small section of

dockers has the right to decide which ships are "black" and which are not. Apart from the question of losing "face" in regard to the first point, the Government have aired reasons which arise directly out of the muddle in international trade unionism. Whatever the *rationale* of such a stand, the more important point from the point of view of what is being said here and now, is the latter.

Mr Deakin, who should be in East End talking to the strikers, has instead chosen to sermonise from afar—even accusing the dockers of gross abuse of the right to strike, and of endangering the Dock Labour Scheme, which had done so much good to them by decasualising dock labour and for which the Labour Government was totally responsible. The press in general has gone berserk at the irresponsible manner in which the dockers are holding the country to ransom, to satisfy some whim of their own. The dockers on the other hand do not consider standing by one's mates as an outmoded principle. To them, it is the essence of trade unionism—the principle which makes sense of the term collective bargaining. And while they fully realise the good that the Dock Labour Scheme has done them, they maintain that it is irrelevant to the present issue. They insist, therefore, that it is not they who are undermining trade unionism; it is those people who are so out of touch with the rank and file of workers, and who are thereby widening the gulf between the Labour Party and Labour in general. It is the trade union official 'class' composed of Mr Deakin and others of his kidney, who have convinced themselves that the primary duty of a trade union official is to fight the Red menace. And

they are further convinced that by so doing, they would succeed in gaining the 'floating' vote at the next election for the labour party. How right they are in this viewpoint is a different matter. But a direct consequence of it is that they are very alert in disowning responsibility for strikes, or protests of (all types, even when many thousands of their numbers are involved. How big this 'class' of trade unionists is is seen by the average opinion about Mr Figgins, the Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen. He is dubbed as an irresponsible mischief-maker, an opportunist, a Communist stooge and what not.

Out of all this has started a debate on a matter of supreme importance. Have workers in an essential industry the right to strike? Influential journals like *The Economist* are advocating the denial of such a right, while a very large section are pressing for a substantial limitation of it. It would indeed be a crowning achievement for a Labour Government to do either! At this very moment, Mr Chiefley's Labour Government in Australia has done it. It has practically succeeded in crushing the miners; and probably Mr Atlee's Government will break the dockers soon. But does it augur well for socialism in either country? It is surprising—perhaps not so surprising to a Marxist that the suggestion to deny some workers the right to strike should be received without a cry of horror in a land so proud of its tradition of freedom and liberty of the individual. One of the arguments used against collaboration with Soviet trade unions is that they are not strictly speaking trade unions because their members have no right to strike! And yet, people are advocating such a measure in

the case of "essential" industries. One might as well ask what our "essential" industry is, in an economy which is being mobilised to eliminate all waste in the utilisation of resources. A cynic would, perhaps, say "one in which there is a trade dispute!"

I should, however, like to mention before I close, a bright suggestion made by the *Manchester Guardian* the other day. That is, instead of making all strikes illegal, how would it work in the immediate context if measures were taken to make the trade unions responsible for strikes engineered by any section of their membership? How would it work, in other words, if all strikes were made legal? Mr Deakin would then be unable to keep out of the dock strike by fathering it on somebody. He would then realise that a trade union official is not so much an officer as a representative. Perhaps the suggestion would work.

**ALL INDIA
GENERAL INSURANCE
CO. LTD.**

Transacts
**LIFE, FIRE, MARINE,
MOTOR INSURANCE**

Subscribed Capital:

Rs. 1,25,00,000

Paid-up Capital:

Rs. 31,25,000

Chairman:

RAMDEO A. PODAR, ESQ.

General Manager:

S. B. CARDMASTER

Head Office: Fort, BOMBAY.