

Effort of the War H52
WOMEN'S CO-OPERATIVE GUILD. C122



LESSONS OF THE
GREAT STRIKE ::

THE great Railway Strike has an importance not only for the railwaymen, but for all the workers in the country, such as no other strike has ever had, and to realise its full meaning we must understand the special circumstances in which it took place.

Two charges were universally made against the N.U.R. in the Capitalist press and in middle-class circles generally—namely that they were responsible for a “lightning” strike, paralysing the whole life of the country at a moment’s notice so as to gain a tactical advantage for themselves by acting quickly, and that it was a “strike against the community,” which was equivalent to direct action and a challenge to the State. Let us look at the facts.

The Lightning Strike.

The Prime Minister publicly admitted a few days after the strike that the Government had foreseen it in February and had been making the necessary preparations for seven months. The Government’s scheme for food supplies was worked out weeks before the Strike. On August 31st for instance, four weeks before the strike began, all London milk retailers were asked to make a return of the quantity of milk they were selling, in order, presumably, that when the strike occurred the available supplies might be allocated to each retailer in proportion to his usual sales. In fact the Government delayed the negotiations till their own preparations were ready, and then having goaded the N.U.R. into threatening a strike (which Mr. Thomas later confessed he never expected to have to carry out), immediately closed the door.

The Strike against the Community.

Nor was the strike a "strike against the community," "an anarchist conspiracy," "a challenge to the State." The strike was simply a strike against the employers. At the beginning of the war the Government took control of the railways, guaranteeing their pre-war profits to the Railway Companies, and themselves undertaking the administration of the railway system. When questions of wages arose, therefore, it was with the Government, who were temporarily acting as employers instead of the railway companies, that the men had to negotiate, and it was against these same employers, who for the time being happened to be the Government, that the men struck. There was no question of "direct action" or "challenging the authority of the State."

Yet because the acting employers happened to be the Government they were able to represent the strike as a "strike against the community" and to use against the strike all the powers which belonged to them not as employers, but as a Government. Hundreds of pounds of public money were spent in carrying on propaganda against the strike. Public funds and all the machinery of Government departments were used to obtain blackleg labour with which to break the strike. Private transport was commandeered to carry out the Government's food scheme. Naval men were used as blacklegs. Armed troops were paraded in many towns. Government detectives followed the strike leaders.

All this shows the very great danger which might arise if the control of any industry were to come permanently into the hands of the Government. It is very important in considering proposals for the nationalisation of industry to bear this danger in mind. While we wish to see all industry owned and controlled by the people and for the people, there are better ways of doing this than by putting it into the hands of the Government. We must build up a system of control by consumers and producers through the Co-operative and Trade Union Movements.

From the first, the importance to the whole Trade Union Movement of the railwaymen's fight was recognised. Mr. Lloyd George said at the Conference the day before the strike began "Whatever we lay down with regard to rail-

waymen, you may depend upon it is going to be claimed throughout the country." The Government proposals would have meant a reduction in wages to the great majority of railwaymen, and all Trade Unionists knew that if the Government succeeded in reducing the wages of the railwaymen, private employers would follow their example and there would be a reduction of wages all round. Therefore all the Unions stood solidly with the N.U.R., and it was their firmness and statesmanship that brought about the settlement by which the strike was ended.

Behind the Government stood the Railway Companies, and with them stood every capitalist interest in the country. If the railwaymen had been defeated it would have been a victory not for the community, but for Capitalism. This was recognised by Co-operators as well as Trade Unionists, and all over the country Co-operative Societies came to the help of the National Union of Railwaymen. When the Government withheld the railwaymen's pay many societies arranged to supply them with goods on vouchers from the National Union of Railwaymen. One society agreed to cash such vouchers so that those not registered with the society could get their rationed goods elsewhere. Another society decided to give a month's credit to their members on strike. The Co-operative Wholesale Society, with whom the National Union of Railwaymen bank, arranged for cheques for strike pay to be cashed at the local stores, where, by arrangement with the local branch of the National Union of Railwaymen, they could be cashed either in goods or money. Numbers of societies put their halls at the disposal of the National Union of Railwaymen for meetings, in many of which officials and members of the society took part.

Preparations were also made for the possibility of an extension of the strike to the Transport Workers. The London Joint Council of Trade Unionists and Co-operators was the first to take action in this matter. A resolution was sent to the National Advisory Council of Trade Unionists and Co-operators urging them to make arrangements with the Transport Workers' Federation to leave men in the employment of Co-operative Societies if others were called out, so that members of Co-operative Societies and Trade Unions might receive their food supplies through the

Co-operative Societies. The suggestion was agreed to, first by the London Transport Workers' Federation, to whom a deputation was sent by the London Joint Council, and later also by the National Federation, and recommendations were made that Joint Committees of Co-operators and Trade Unionists should be set up in connection with every society. In London such committees were actually established.

Lessons of the Strike.

While the Railway Strike has shown us more clearly than ever before the great need for the workers of all sections to stand solidly together, and the great strength which Co-operators and Trade Unionists may be to one another, it has also shown very plainly that there is much to be done if we are to get the full advantage of united action against Capitalism and its supporters.

1. *Every Trade Unionist and the wife of every Trade Unionist should become a Co-operator at once.*

Though Co-operative Societies came forward so readily to help the Railwaymen, if the strike had continued or extended a great strain would have been put upon them, through their having to supply so many more people than usual. More assistants, more stores, more supplies would have been necessary to meet the increased demand. But these cannot be got all in a minute when a crisis arises. Therefore it is very important that all Trade Unionists should understand the need for building up a strong Co-operative Movement and should become Co-operators **at once**, so that Co-operative Societies may be able to increase their activities and be in a position to meet all demands.

Since the strike, thousands of new members have been enrolled throughout the country, but our efforts must not be relaxed until every Trade Unionist is a Co-operator. Guildswomen can best help by working among the wives of Trade Unionists, for it is their custom at the Stores which is the really important thing. Special meetings should be arranged for Trade Unionists' wives as suggested in the circular, "Every Trade Unionist a Co-operator," which Guild Branches have received.

Immediate Action to be taken. Branches which have not had this circular before them should see that it is read at their next meeting and every Branch should take steps **at once** to get up a meeting for Trade Unionists' wives.

2. *Joint Trade Union and Co-operative Committees should be established at once.*

When the strike broke out it took some time to get the Co-operators and Trade Unionists together. The London Joint Advisory Council, which was already in being, was able to meet fairly quickly, and in several places Joint Committees between Societies and Trades Councils were hastily set up. The National Joint Advisory Council recommended the setting up of these Local Committees everywhere, and what is needed now is to see that they are formed **at once** without waiting for another emergency, representing the area of each Co-operative Society, so that they may be summoned to take any local action necessary immediately that occasion requires it.

In addition to these Emergency Committees which would deal specially with strikes, there should be Local Joint Advisory Committees which should meet regularly to discuss problems affecting both movements, undertake joint propaganda work and think out methods of joint action. In some cases the same committee might act in both capacities, in others, as for instance in Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield, where there is more than one society, a different body would be required, representing the whole area. On all these committees it is most important to have women represented, for in many ways it is the women who are most directly and practically concerned, and wherever possible there should be women appointed to each side.

Immediate Action to be taken. Branches should press Management Committees and Trades Councils to appoint these Joint Committees at once.

3. *Co-operative developments must be pushed forward.*

Every effort must be made to press on and assist Co-operative developments. It is useless to enrol large numbers of Trade Union members if the societies cannot cater for them.

Far more Stores, both departmental and others are needed, better delivery services, fresh enterprises such as fish and greengrocery, which might be developed by travelling carts in every area. In many cases more warehouse accommodation is wanted, particularly to enable societies to provide for an emergency.

Immediate Action to be taken. Guild Branches should find out what their Management Committees are doing as regards new developments, and, where necessary, urge them to act.

4. The Co-operative Movement must have a responsible Central Executive.

Another development which the strike has shown to be urgently necessary to the Co-operative Movement is that there should be a Central Executive body which should have power to act quickly and to act for the whole Movement. The week of the Railway Strike was probably the most critical week that we have ever passed through. At any moment it was possible that all the Trade Unions would come out in support of the N.U.R. and the whole industry of the country be paralysed. Yet though common counsel, a common policy and common action by the whole Movement would have been vital, the Co-operative Movement has no body which could have acted in this way, and the Executives of the Union and the Co-operative Wholesale Societies are too big to be easily got together in a crisis.

But it is not only in a crisis that a common policy for the whole Movement is necessary. The Railway Strike has merely made plain a need that existed before. It is very important that every society should give particular attention to this question before the Special Congress called to consider the Survey Report in February, so that at this Congress a definite proposal for establishing a Central Executive (with a paid chairman) may be passed. It would be enough for the Congress to accept the principle and to appoint a committee to think out the exact constitution of the Executive.

Immediate Action to be taken. Guild Branches should get their Management Committees to send resolutions to the Survey Committee for the February Congress Agenda, and to the United Board, urging the need for a Central Executive for the whole Movement.

5. The Co-operative Wholesale Society must join in with the rest of the Movement and the Trade Unions.

Then again the strike has given a new importance to the work of the National United Advisory Council of Trade Unionists and Co-operators. At present this body is composed of members of the Trades Union Congress Parliamentary Committee and the Central Board of the Co-operative Union. But if it is to consider such matters as allowing labour for Co-operative Societies in times of strike, feeding Trade Unionists through Co-operative Societies, investment of Trade Union funds with the C.W.S., all of which are matters referred to it by the Congresses of both movements, it is most necessary that the Wholesales should be represented upon it. The Wholesales are directly concerned in all these matters, and it would be useless for the United Advisory Council to make recommendations about them, which from the Wholesale point of view were impracticable. Therefore societies should at once consider what steps can be taken to get the Wholesales into touch with the work of the United Advisory Council.

One more question for Co-operators emerges from the strike, and that is the position that our own Co-operative employees are to occupy in the movement. We cannot allow the goodwill now existing between the Co-operative and Trade Union movements, and the splendid opportunity for mutual assistance, to be impaired by friction with our own employees, and to remove that we must make up our minds what place the employees ought to hold in a democratically controlled system of industry. It is a big problem, and one which needs much thought and consultation with the Trade Unions concerned, but it is one which it is urgently necessary to consider.

The Need of being Prepared.

Never was there so great a need as to-day of building up and strengthening the forces of the workers, and being prepared for any emergency. The Railway Strike has passed, but the times are grave and critical, and before we know it we may have to face another situation just as serious. Capitalism is daily becoming stronger and more united. It has the power of a Capitalist Government behind it. The workers must unite, and strengthen the common purpose of Co-operation and Trade Unionism by all becoming Co-operators and Trade Unionists.

For us as Co-operators, the first essential is to make our own machinery effective, and for this we must have a responsible Executive uniting the C.W.S. and the Union. And when each movement has put its own machinery into order, the two must be able to take counsel together through a joint body which can speak with full authority for the whole Trade Union and the whole Co-operative movement.

*To be obtained from the Women's Co-operative Guild, 28,
Church Row, London, N.W. 3. Price 1½d.*