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BUILDING WORKERS PAY DEAL

SOLIDARITY (North West) PAMPHLET No. 2

THIS PAMPHLET WAS WRITTEN BY MEMBERS OF
THE EDITORIAL BOARD OF 'RANK AND FILE',
PAPER OF THE MILITANT BUILDING AND CONS--
TRUCTION WORKER.

THE PAY DEAL

In the past the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives has signed some pretty bad agreements. Since the name was changed to the National Federation of Construction Unions, they seem determined to do even worse. Incidentally this name change is very significant in itself. It is no longer a federation of operatives, but rather of unions. The new Wages Agreement which has just come into effect is unquestionably the worst in the history of the building industry. This pay deal is in fact a complete re-write of some sections of the National Working Rule Agreement. The implications are so far reaching that we must seriously question the role of those union representatives who signed it.

We don't intend to go through this document clause by clause, but instead we will pick out those parts which are the most dangerous. The first section deals with wages, and in some respects is the least important! Not because wages are not important in themselves, but because the kind of pay rise we will get under this agreement bears no relation to the price the employers are demanding in return. The whole deal will only give us something in the region of £4, spread over 16 months, and this at a time when Ford car workers have rejected a £4 straight increase as inadequate. Nor does Victor Feather's £28 a week rise make us any happier with our pittance.

Even if the increase were to be paid in one piece it would still not be anything like enough to compensate for the loss of conditions and work practices which have been bitterly fought for in the past. The trading away of conditions is something to be fought against at all times, anyway. Once your conditions are sold they are gone forever - and the increasing cost of living will erode your pay rise in a very short time. And what will a £20 basic wage be worth by June 1971? Even today a man with six children who only brings home £20, after deductions, is classed as a hardship case, qualifying for free school meals for his children!

To add insult to injury many members won't even get the whole rise. Anyone working on a job which pays a plus rate is liable to find this is to be absorbed into the increase! So if you are working for a shilling an hour over the rate you may find that you get nothing under the first stage of the rise and only 9d. in November, when stage 2 takes effect. In short, under this agreement, a skilled man will get a weekly basic wage of £17.11.8 from February 2, 1970, rising to £18.10.0 in November 1970 and £20 in June 1971. The corresponding rates for labourers will be £15, £15.15.0 and £17.

THE "GUARANTEED WEEK"

The second section deals with the new '40 Hour Guaranteed Week'. Well, that IS progress, isn't it? Well... not really. The guaranteed week is full of opt-out clauses for the employers. Basically it is the old 36-hour guarantee with the strings tightened up.

One question we must ask ourselves, particularly in the light of the current American financial troubles (which will inevitably affect us), is whether the bosses will really have a go at implementing many of these restrictions more stringently than they have done in the past. A money crisis usually means tougher bosses.

Under this clause, if you are late you can lose your guarantee! The point is that you must be available for work every day to qualify, and this is very clearly defined as 'presenting himself for work each weekday at the usual starting time' and remaining 'available for work throughout the normal working hours'.

You must also be prepared to take on any job that the employer thinks is suitable. Furthermore if you miss a day (or are even late going by the book), then any wet time* in that week will be paid at HALF the rate. Billy Turnbull, 50 years old, and burnt out from a lifetime in the game, can turn in on time each morning for four days and be cabined up each day because of rain. Comes Friday morning and it's still raining. He's had enough of sitting around in a cold draughty hut, so he stays in bed. Next pay day he draws not four days' wages but two!

In addition any stoppage of work due to industrial action by others renders the guarantee null and void. And the guaranteed week is only good for one week anyway. If you are frozen off for a full week and it's still bad the next Monday, then off you go to the Labour Exchange. We have seen better guarantees than this on 5/- toys from Hong Kong!

THE THIRD WEEK'S HOLIDAY

Section 4 of the deal brings us to holidays. Hooray! At last we've got our third week's holiday. Well... almost. It's really only three extra days. These are to be added on to the two days we already have at Christmas. Our extra holiday will be in December, which will suit the employers very nicely indeed. And we won't even get this until Christmas 1971. Still on the subject of holidays, we will in future have to work at least three days in any week to qualify for a holiday credit. It used to be one day.

DISPUTES

Section 5 deals with disputes procedure. This has been jazzed up a bit, and at local level it is better than the old one. But there are still plenty of loopholes which an employer can use to drag out a dispute for weeks when it suits him. Incidentally there is nothing in the new agreement about the status quo operating when a dispute occurs.

* Time in which inclement weather prevents work on site.

FLEXIBILITY

Section 6, dealing with 'Flexibility in the Use of Labour' is the one in which the real dangers begin to show. In this piece of double dealing it is clearly stated that 'where operatives of the trade or craft specified are not available, the employer shall not be in breach' of agreement 'if he arranges to engage on the operation operatives of another trade or craft who are skilled and qualified to carry it out'.

This raises a number of questions. For instance what is meant by 'not available'? Does it mean not available on a particular site, or within a particular firm, or within a particular town? If the signatories are under the impression that there is a shortage of skilled building workers they should write to us! We can supply them with a long list of highly skilled men who are on the dole in just one of the major cities! We would have thought that the job of our union negotiators was to fight for more jobs for us, rather than finding ways of eliminating existing ones.

It seems that what the bosses are after is simply a chance to cut down their labour force. They obviously won't need to employ as many men if they can virtually switch us from trade to trade just as they wish. And of course if we raise any objections we will be dealt with, under breach of agreement, by the employers' policemen in the trade unions.

This section also allows the boss to cut down the number of mates, and even in some cases do away with them altogether. Every chippy will be his own labourer.

APPRENTICES AND TRAINING

This question of craftsmen and mates leads us on to the part of the agreement which deals with 'Training for Skilled Building Occupations'. In effect this section means the end of the apprentice scheme as we know it. This is a very tricky point, and will no doubt lead to much bitter argument. As socialists we do not wish to uphold privileged positions for craftsmen as against labourers. But having said this we must raise very strong objections to the new scheme.

Whether we like it or not it is a fact that we live in a society which is run by, and for, the bosses. Any change in the craft system is not intended for the benefit of unskilled building workers, but rather for the benefit of the profit margins. The trend is towards the module system, in which men are trained to carry out a single aspect of a trade. Instead of all-round joiners we are likely to see men trained as shuttering operatives or first fixers. This will produce a generation of building workers who are not much more skilled than today's labourers. Just for the record

the average building labourer is not an unskilled man anyway. He is a damned good all-rounder. Under the module system men will be taught just one small section of a trade and when they are looking for a job they will be very restricted in their opportunities.

On the face of it, it may seem to many labourers that they are being given a chance to become skilled men. But in reality they will be turned into semi-skilled operatives at a time when a skilled man's job won't be worth having anyway. At the same time the demand for unskilled labour will drop rapidly, with tradesmen doing their own labouring, and the end result will be even more unemployment than we have now.

Another aspect of the 'battery-produced' building worker is safety. Of course all employers pay lip-service to this, but there are literally thousands of pirates who will seize this chance of using half-trained men on work which will not only endanger themselves, but every other man on the site. Have you ever seen a big shutter collapse under pressure?

INCENTIVE SCHEMES

Certainly the most diabolical part of this whole document is contained in Notice No.4. Incentive Schemes and Productivity Agreement. This Notice undermines the most basic principle of industrial organisation: collectivity. Paragraph 3 (5) states: 'The number of operatives to be treated as a unit for bonuses should be as small as is operationally practicable. Bonus should not be paid on a trade or site collective basis except where there are exceptional circumstances and it has been jointly agreed.'

The union officials who signed this clause have acted totally against the highest ideals of the working class. What the employers are getting out of this is nothing less than a legitimised form of 'the lump'.* As far as we on the sites are concerned we will be faced with all the disadvantages of lump working without any of the advantages (no discipline, no tax, no stamp to pay, etc.). We are to be set against each other on a dog-eat-dog basis. Men will work in gangs and pairs and the older men, unable to stand the pace, will go to the wall. Unity and solidarity will be replaced by the laws of the jungle and the survival of the fittest.

A TWO AND A HALF YEAR DEAL

The final clause in the new agreement deals with the duration of the settlement. This says that the Joint Council 'shall not be required to consider any application for a change in standard wage rates, or for a change in conditions of a major character, which would have effect before June 1972.' (our emphases). This means that once again we have been tied

* The system of Labour Only sub-contracting.

down to a long package deal, this time for 2 years and 4 months. The last increase envisaged under this agreement is in June 1971, and we can't even START asking for more till a year later, in June 1972.

This then is the great new deal that has been signed 'on our behalf'. The first offer the employers made was rejected as being too low. Almost at once the offer was more or less doubled! And who can be surprised? For what they are getting they would probably have paid far more. The very fact that a nominal 26% increase has been allowed by the P.I.B. is confirmation, if confirmation is needed, that this pay deal is going to cost the workers in the industry very dear.

THE BACKGROUND

This agreement, like all others, didn't just pop up out of the ground overnight. There were prolonged negotiations on it. These were conducted in such secrecy that rank and file members of the unions were kept completely in the dark. In the final analysis this agreement is totally in the interests of the employers and their shareholders.

Even so the bosses will use this agreement as they have used others in the past. They will adhere to it when it suits them and ignore it when it doesn't. Only a few days before the new agreement was due to take effect we had a classic example of the cynical attitude of the big boys. Laing's sacked 19 carpenters from their £6m contract on the St Thomas' Hospital site in London. They intend to replace them with workers allegedly from Labour Only sub-contractors. According to the Financial Times (30.1.70) 'The ASW* is annoyed that just a few days before the building industry's new national agreement - designed to eliminate plus rates and help provide incentive schemes - comes into operation, Laing has, in the union's opinion, gone against the principles of the agreement and sub-contracted work to non-union people at plus rates without incentive payments'. If the ASW high-ups are surprised at this, then they are even more naive than we thought they were. Or are they?

If this is the action of a 'reputable' firm then think what a field day the little scab firms are going to have. The leaderships of the unions must know that both local and national leaders of the employers, men who sit on joint negotiating committees, are the same men who do not scruple to use the lump and the sack and the black list against militants (who are after all only doing the job that union leaders are paid to do).

*

Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers.

THE ROLE OF THE UNIONS

The unions have played a very deep game throughout the whole of these negotiations. Only three weeks before the agreement was signed a member of the TGWU Executive Council stated quite categorically that no strings had yet been even discussed, and that rumours about the ending of the apprentice scheme were completely without foundation! If he was telling the truth as he knew it, then we are left wondering why the hell we have Executive Councils, and just who, in the union structures, is in the know about what is going on. Certainly delegates to local NFBTO branches were kept completely in the dark.

THE A.S.W.

The ASW did hold a series of regional Delegate Conferences to discuss the employers' first pay offer. But these were a complete sham. The only resolution that the delegates were allowed to vote on was one to the effect that the offer should be rejected as the cash offered was not enough. Amendments regarding possible strings were not allowed. And when the proposal was carried, as it obviously would be, the union leadership used this as a mandate to accept the next offer the employers made, without any further reference to the membership!*

There is one thing about which we must congratulate the ASW. This is the promptness with which they informed their members of the terms of the agreement, once it had been signed. The January edition of the union's paper 'Viewpoint' gave full coverage to the deal. Some of their editorial comments were quite offensive to the workers. For instance in their comments on the Guaranteed 40 hour week they say (in Note 4): 'Where an operative does not make himself available for the FULL WEEK he will be paid for only HALF the time during which he has signed as being available. Before criticisms are raised that this point is a new restriction we must ask ourselves whether we are really concerned with spending time and money on negotiations favourable to "skivers" and "double jobbers". We will, of course, continue to defend members' rights under the guaranteed week for sickness and other genuine reasons for non-attendance, and against unreasonable interpretations by employers.'

So now you know. If you have a day off because you are pig sick of the cold and the rain and the frequently appalling conditions on the average building site in winter, you are a skiver. And you have the unbiased opinion of a desk-bound bureaucrat to tell you so! As far as 'unreasonable interpretations' are concerned, whoever heard of a boss being reasonable anyway -- unless it suits his purpose at the time?

* See SOLIDARITY (North West), vol.I, No.1.

THE A.U.B.T.W.

The role of the AUBTW is, if anything, even less worthy than the joiners. The January issue of the union paper 'Building Worker' contains among other things a children's story by an 11 year old girl (we are not knocking the story itself - it is far better written than a lot of the stuff they print), an article on racing pigeons and a piece on parents and road safety. On the front page, in the bottom corner, there is a bare announcement of the 26% rise, spread over 18 months. NOT A WORD ABOUT THE STRINGS.

It seems in fact that the AUBTW has not been in much of a hurry to tell any of the membership about the new deal. Branch secretaries received copies of the agreement on Thursday, January 29, only 4 days before the agreement came into force. The actual signing of this document took place on December 17. Why did it take so long for members to get any information? Was it that the leadership were worried at the consequences? Did they deliberately hold back information until the last minute to prevent an uproar breaking out before the agreement took effect? When matters of importance are to be discussed in branches it is customary to send out notices to members informing them of this. As most AUBTW branches only meet fortnightly it was quite impossible for any discussion to take place in the branches until well after the agreement was in force.

The AUBTW Executive Committee did discuss the first employers' pay offer at some length. Like the ASW, they opposed the offer. And on the same grounds: the cash wasn't enough. They wanted £20 in 1970 but they said nothing about any strings.* This is very interesting. There are at least 5 Communist Party members on the E.C. We wonder where they were when all this was going on. This kind of deal is expected from right-wingers like George Lowthian, the General Secretary, but the C.P. members keep telling us that they are left-wing militants! Once again the old cry of 'elect left-wingers to union office' is exposed as a sham. Once these 'left' careerists get into office they just seem to vanish into oblivion.

WORKING RULE 7

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this whole unsavoury affair is the way the ground was carefully prepared for it.

In May 1969 an amendment to National Working Rule 7 was promulgated. This is the rule which deals with the recognition of trade union officers. The effect of this change of rule was to undermine the position of stewards and put more and more control into the hands of the full-time officials. Under the new rule a steward, once he has been elected, must

* AUBTW Quarterly Journal, December 1969.

have his name submitted to the management who then decide whether or not to recognise him. In addition to this, management has the right to withdraw recognition of a steward. There are several other clauses, all of the same type. All are aimed at taking control away from the lads.

There was a good deal of shouting about this amendment at the time. Not only about the content, which was bad enough, but also about the underhand way it was brought in. The first any of the membership knew about the amendment was when copies of the promulgation came through the letter boxes of the Branch Secretaries. Once again we had been presented with a fait accompli.

As a matter of fact not only the rank and file members were kept in the dark about this one. The General Secretary of one of the unions affiliated to the Federation claimed he knew absolutely nothing about the change of rule until he received a letter from one of his branches protesting about it! He didn't actually see a copy of the new rule until after the Annual Conference of the NFBTO, in June.

At the time the new rule seemed pretty bad. Looking back on it, in the light of the new pay agreement, it seems positively diabolical. The task of foisting this new deal on the men will obviously be made much easier if job organisation has previously been weakened, and this is precisely what was done under the amendment to Rule 7. The obvious lesson to be drawn from the whole rotten story is that the people at the top of the building unions see their role as helping the bosses make the capitalist system work a bit more efficiently, even if this means acting diametrically against the interests of the men on the sites.

THE RAT'S PROGRESS

To return to the AUBTW paper 'Building Worker' for a moment. On a number of occasions in the past there have been moves to have an elected Editorial Board. These attempts, predictably, have led to nothing. The leadership has presumably felt it inadvisable to allow ordinary members to get within reach of any official publication. After all they might even say things which could offend people, especially the employers. So the editor of the paper is appointed. We want to take a brief look at the career of one such editor.

Prior to 1949 William Samuel Hilton was a railway fireman. In that year he became a Labour Party agent. This job took him through to 1952, when he was appointed Research and Education Officer in the AUBTW. Two years later in 1954 this worthy took over the editorship of the 'Building Worker'. By 1966 our pal was ready for another step up the ladder. He successfully contested the Bethnal Green parliamentary seat as a Labour and Cooperative Party candidate. Once an M.P., Hilton's rise gained momentum. He soon became Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister of Public Building and Works. Two years later he had a book published about

labour relations in the building industry.* This was so well received by the employers that Hilton was offered a Directorship by the Master Builders Federation! He promptly resigned his Parliamentary Private Secretaryship. Just one more example of a careerist union bureaucrat going openly over to the other side. To further his own disgusting ends this creature was prepared to do just about anything -- except perhaps work on a building site.

If this is an example of the kind of intellectual advisers we are paying to work on our behalf, then the sooner we kick them out and get back to our cloth cap image, the better. An honest man, who may make a few mistakes, is one thing. A careerist who is using the union as a stepping stone on his way to the top is altogether something else.

Reading Hilton's book gives an interesting insight into the way his mind works. He is full of suggestions for organising people. He wants to organise the employers into an association which would eliminate the inefficient and the inexperienced. He wants to organise the men into a proper labour pool. With everyone put neatly in compartments it would then be much easier for Hilton, with his police mentality, to devise ways of disciplining anybody who deviated from his norm. There would be a place for everyone, and everyone would be kept in his place.

ANARCHY?

What people like Hilton will never be able to understand is that there are compensations in the 'anarchic' state of our industry. At least this has been so in the past. We have never been amenable to the disciplines which factory workers accept as normal. We all know the foreman who turns a blind eye to lateness on a Monday morning. He's done it himself after a rough weekend! This sort of thing is now on the way out, as employers, backed up by self-righteous and puritanical union bureaucrats, try to foist more and more of the disciplines of factory life on us. The trouble with this is that, as usual, the bosses want two bites of the cherry. They want to retain their own casual approach to labour. Never mind what they say about wanting to improve labour relations. As and when it suits them they will carry on with their policies of lay-offs and sackings. They will still provoke the unwary into taking strike action to get them (the bosses) out of trouble when they are behind on a contract. They will still regard skilled men as nothing more than items of plant, which must be made to pay for the expenditure laid out on them. Don't let anyone take you in with all the nonsense about two sides of a team pulling together for the good of all. To a capitalist, however nice a guy he may be personally, a workman is just one more item in the production tables. They have accepted that the system operates on a predestined set of natural laws, and people must be bent to fit the pattern.

* 'Industrial Relations in Construction'. Pergamon Press, 1968.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

In the end there is only one way to end the exploitation of the men in our industry. This is to take the whole lot out of the clutches of the robber barons who have made vast fortunes from the blood and sweat of generations of building workers. Not to mention the small time chancers who bow in and out of the game, often leaving a trail of unpaid wage bills behind them. We are not talking about nationalisation either. We don't want to follow the miners and the railwaymen who threw one lot of parasites off their backs only to have them replaced by another lot. We are talking about an industry run by the men who work in it. An industry run for the benefit of society as a whole and not just the benefit of a privileged few. This of course lies in the future -- our immediate concern is what to do to protect our interests NOW.

ACTION - OFFICIAL and OTHERWISE

There are two courses of action open to us: official - and the other kind.

As far as official action goes there are a number of courses open. We could perhaps vote for 'lefties' at the next union elections ... and then wait for them to do something. We could also try praying - this would probably be just as effective in the long run. Yet another course of 'action' would be the sending of resolutions to the various Executive Councils. This again we feel to be a non-starter. The E.C.s are not likely to do very much about resolutions which are aimed directly at them. The only place it is at all worth sending resolutions to is the Delegate Conference of your union. Of course the agendas for these conferences are already in hand, but you can still put forward emergency resolutions. It is up to us all to bring such pressure to bear on the delegates to these conferences that the leadership will be forced to pay attention.

As far as the resolutions themselves are concerned there is no point in wasting time with amendments to this or that clause. The whole agreement is so bad that it should be rejected in its entirety, pathetic pay rise and all. Not only this but we must call for the expulsion from the unions of those responsible for signing the agreement. They have acted totally against the interests of the membership and there is no place for them in the labour movement. These Judases have trampled over the deepest principles of the workers, particularly in the clause on gang bonuses, and in return have offered us a few miserable shillings. They have placed themselves beneath contempt.

When the Delegate Conferences come round we must organise massive lobbies and demonstrations to show just what we think. But in the end this battle is going to be won, or lost, on the sites. Already rumblings of anger are being heard from jobs which have not, in the past, been noted for their militancy. Workers at some smallish firms in the Manchester

area have been told they won't be getting a rise - their shilling plus-rate is to be 'absorbed and overtaken' into the new rate. As the full implications of the new deal become apparent to lads all over the country the balloon will really go up. The danger here is that a mass of small, isolated struggles will be easily smashed. What we need immediately are links between jobs all over the country.

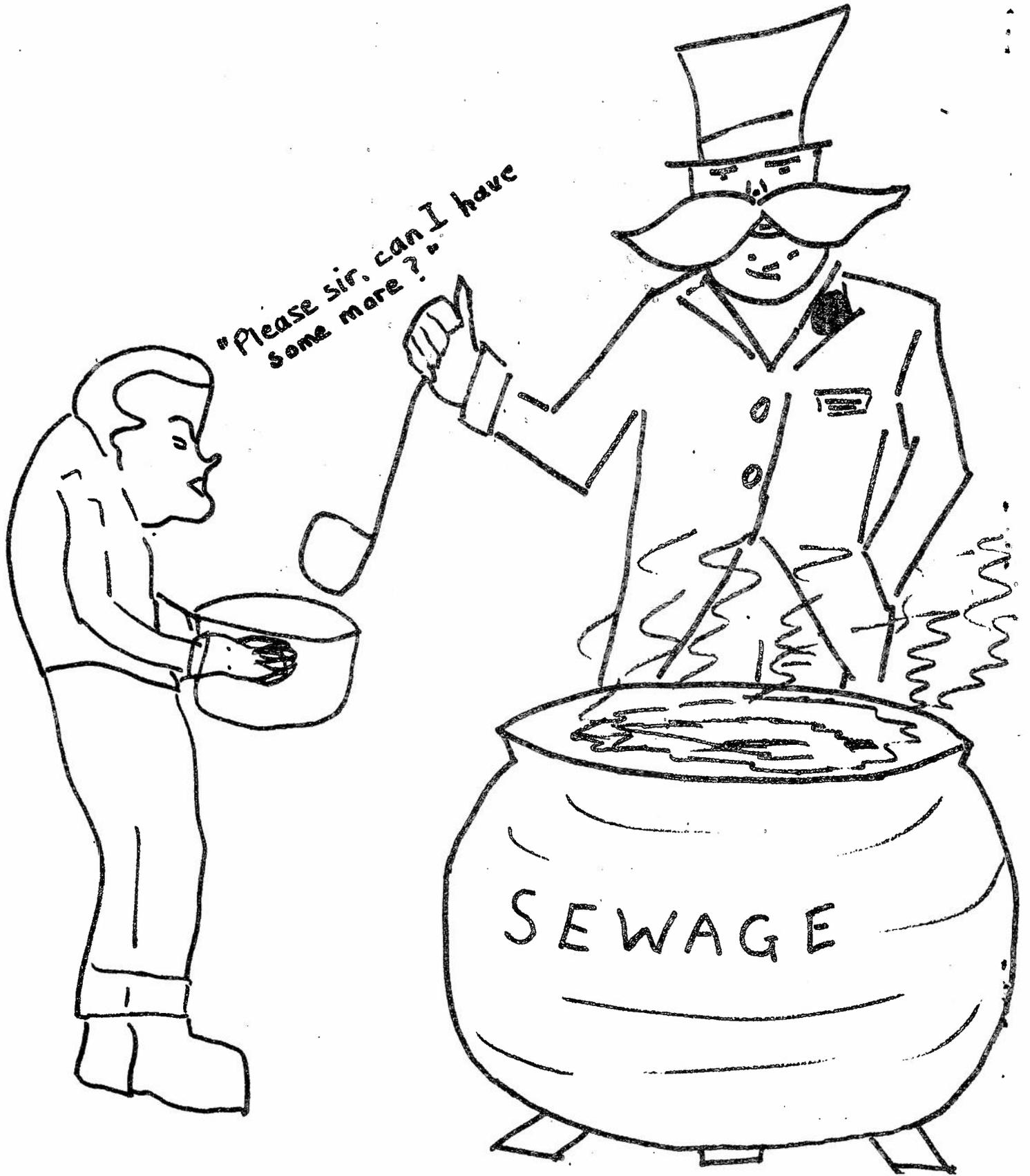
The first step is to form local organisations for the purpose of linking up disputes in each district and exchanging information. There are already such bodies in existence in London (Joint Sites Committee), Manchester (Building Workers' Forum) and Liverpool (Stewards' Committee). This pattern must be repeated elsewhere, with the next step: national link-ups. At the time of writing arrangements are in hand for a meeting between London, Manchester and Liverpool militants.

In the final analysis the fight against the agreement will begin when the first building workers refuse to implement some section of the new working rule. When this happens, we must give immediate support. There is no need either to create a new bureaucracy to carry on the fight. There are valuable lessons to be learned from the Barbican struggle when building workers all over the country linked up, without any top heavy organisation, to give financial and other support to the lads who were waging the longest and bitterest dispute the building industry has seen for many long years.

The fight itself must be fought on a basis of outright rejection of the agreement. To attempt to argue with the employers on fine points of interpretation is to fight them on their own terms. This fight must be on OUR terms. In a phrase: 'YOU CAN TAKE YOUR AGREEMENT AND STUFF IT.'

BUILDING WORKERS WHO WISH TO KEEP IN TOUCH
WITH THE STRUGGLE IN THE INDUSTRY SHOULD
READ 'SOLIDARITY' (North West). IF YOU WISH
FOR INFORMATION ON HOW THE FIGHT IS TAKING
SHAPE OR YOU WANT TO BE PUT IN TOUCH WITH
MILITANTS IN YOUR AREA, WRITE TO US.
SOLIDARITY (North West), c/o Janet Harris,
96 Doveleys Rd., Salford M6 8QW. Telephone:
061-PEN-2895.

NATIONAL JOINT NEGOTIATING COMMITTEE.



"Please sir, can I have some more?"

SEWAGE