

The unemployed struggles of the 1920s - We will not starve in silence!

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Dave Garroch looks at the unemployed struggles between the Wars in a review of two books about the period ? Harry McShane?s ?No Mean Fighter? (Pluto Press) and Wal Hannington?s ?Unemployed Struggles (Lawrence and Wishart).

In March 1921 Harry McShane led his first demonstration, ??a couple of thousand turned up and they were really wild and angry men. Some of them were carrying hand grenades they had brought back from the front ? I also knew that some even carried guns on demonstrations. They were a very militant, threatening crowd.? They had good reason to be. They were among the 1.5 million unemployed in that month. In percentage terms that meant about 12% of those covered by unemployment insurance.

The following month an event took place that was of great significant for the unemployed, the founding of the National Unemployed Workers? Movement (NUWM). Although he himself was not directly involved in its inception, Harry McShane?s life ran parallel with that of Wal Hannington, the founder of the NUWM. Both had, by that time, dedicated themselves to Communism and the fight for the rights of the unemployed. Now, sixty years on, with two million on the dole, that fight has to be taken up again.

At the end of the first world war, those who had survived the carnage were confronted with a crisis-racked world. Hundreds of thousands of the recently demobbed and those from the armaments industry who were no longer needed, found that the ?land fit for heroes? that they had been promised was, in reality, a land of no work and little or no maintenance.

The revolution in Russia, the five years of upheaval in Germany and the militancy of the masses in France and Britain had sent shivers down the spines of the European bourgeoisie. They knew that their very survival depended on smashing down working class resistance to their attempts to impose wage cuts and permanent mass unemployment.

The Twenties and Thirties were years of continuous struggle. True, there were periods of downturn, between 1920-24 and against 1926-28 for example, but they did not contradict the general trend of revolutionary crises and social upheavals that characterised the two decades. The 1926 General Strike was a high point in the British class struggle, but its aftermath was not all gloom and retreat. By 1929, sections of workers, the Durham miners, for example, were again locked in bitter strikes against the employers. While 1926 was a serious defeat, it did not extinguish the fighting spirit of the working class by any means. The events in France and Spain in the Thirties, the mass strikes and civil war, found a less noisy but not insignificant echo in the struggles of the unemployed in Britain.

The courage and determination of the NUWM was an example to the employed and unemployed alike. In constantly fought against attempts to divide the working class and against the treachery of the leaders of

the working class. In 1931 Ramsey MacDonald led a defection to the Tories which led to the formation of the National Government. In the same period the policy of the TUC leaders was 'Mondism' which aimed at the integration of the unions into the State, thus crippling them as fighting organs of the class.

Against this the NUWM took to the streets, mobilised thousands, fought with the police and helped to smash the Mosleyite Fascists.

We can learn from such struggles by re-examining the programme, strategy and tactics that Hannington, McShane and others developed in their struggles, learn from their experience, their triumphs and failures and see how revolutionaries can apply these lessons today.

In 1920, thousands of militants previously active in the rank and file movements of, for example, the Clyde Workers' committee and the National Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee movement, found themselves victimised and among the unemployed.

The first organisation from the unemployed had adopted in the post war period was that of the local Ex-Servicemen's Association. These bodies were primarily concerned with wandering the streets begging for charity. It was no uncommon to see rival demonstrations actually competing for the pennies of the rich in Oxford Street. The likes of Wal Hannington soon put a stop to that. He and others had gone through a communist training in the rank and file movement and they began the struggle to transform these local organisations into a fighting national organisation.

In October 1920, the London District Council (LDC) of the unemployed was formed, helped by a particularly vicious attack by the police on a demonstration in support of a deputation of London mayors, led by George Lansbury. They were demanding an interview with Lloyd George over unemployment. As Hannington puts it, 'The Whitehall baton charge .. had the effect of sharply awakening masses of the unemployed to a clearer understand of their class position and making them realise that they would receive no redress for their plight as unemployed by quietly looking to a capitalist government for sympathy.'

A delegate conference was held and within a few weeks the LDC was meeting twice weekly with representatives from thirty one London boroughs. By February of 1921 the LDC had decided to press for a national organisation, bringing together all the local groups throughout the country which had been formed in the struggles against the Boards of Guardians, in order to co-ordinate and lead these struggles.

The basis of the NUWM was laid down at the first national conference which met on 15th April, 1921. Fifteen months later there were 300 local committees with a combined membership of 100,000, linked up by the NUWM and its fortnightly newspaper 'Out of Work?'. As a result a permanent, well organised mass unemployed movement was established, with enrolled members and accountable leaders.

In the following years the NUWM developed and refined its tactics considerably. The main plank of its platform was to be the slogan, 'Work or Full Maintenance at Trade Union Rates of Wages'.

Later, at the second national conference, the full programme was agreed upon as:-

- i. Work or Full Pay
- ii. Abolition of Task Work
- iii. Relief for Unemployment to be Charged to the National Exchequer administered by the Trade Unions
- iv. Abolition of Overtime

These points were supplemented by additional demands such as, 'No distraint for rent and rates on the goods of an unemployed person' ? important demands in the context of the eviction struggles.

However, key elements of a full action programme for the unemployed were missing. The call for work sharing was posed, later, (in the 'Unemployed Workers' Charter?) as a cut in hours to be determined by 'the requirements of the industry?'. This formulation lets the employers off the hook. A clearer basis to fight on would have been to call for workers' control of the sharing out of work. Similar criticisms have to be made on the absence of the slogan, 'trade union control of hiring, firing and productivity?'.

However, as well as the one penny weekly subscription, NUWM members did have to swear an oath, 'to never cease from active strife against this system until this system is abolished?'. The many thousands mobilised on this basis showed the real revolutionary potential that the struggles against unemployment had.

In fighting for its programme, the NUWM carried out three basic types of activity on a local and national scale. It organised the unemployed locally to fight for their rights and entitlements - the fight to actually get benefit or against eviction. McShane was involved in a number of these, his own included, 'We lived on toast, my wife said her stomach was all scratched from toast with nothing on it. There were many others in just the same situation. I had always said that the unemployed should feed their families and not pay the rent, and that is what I finally did?'.

Then there were the raids and occupations - both for meeting places and as a means of putting pressure on the local authorities. One such occupation, if it can be called that, was of Wandsworth workhouse.

Under the 1834 Poor Law, still in operation, the Boards of Guardians were obliged to give either outdoor relief or accommodation and work. Barbarous as this 'workhouse' system was, the NUWM worked out a way to exploit its provisions to the full. One day 700 people turned up to the Wandsworth workhouse and demanded accommodation until the local Board of Guardians granted outdoor relief. On the second night, a massive demonstration expressed its solidarity. Despite a large police presence, 'from the hall of the workhouse speeches were delivered to the demonstrators outside. Then, to the amazement and jubilation of the demonstrators, about 9 o'clock just as it was getting dusk, we saw the red flag run up on a flag mast over the workhouse?'.

The factory raid was also an important aspect of local NUWM work. From the very beginning, the unemployed saw the need for the employed to come to their aid, just as they were pledged to 'assist in every possible way workers who may come out on strike or who are locked out?'. Thus, raids would usually be carried out on a factory where systematic overtime was being worked or where wages were being paid below union rates. At a given signal, a disciplined squad of unemployed workers would rush the gates, guard the exits and phones, until the police came, and a speech would be made explaining the need to ban overtime, to fight for the going rate and on the need for the employed and unemployed to unite. Major successes were achieved with these tactics in stopping regular overtime and getting workers taken on. However, the demands and tactics were never developed further towards actually agitating for workers' control of the hours.

In 1922 the NUWM was in the vanguard of the struggle against the national lock out of the engineers. Scab factories were raided and pickets were reinforced. The unemployed and locked out engineers demonstrated together for the right to 'outdoor relief' for the engineers - a magnificent example of the solidarity and class spirit of the unemployed.

However, perhaps the best remembered activities of the NUWM locally as well as nationally were the hunger marches and demonstrations. Hannington explains their elementary purpose as the refusal to starve in silence. They certainly broke the wall of silence behind which the bosses' press tried to imprison the unemployed.

The first hunger marches set off from Glasgow in October 1922. After trying the total news blackout, the press lost its nerve and began to shake with indignation as they neared London. Supposedly led by criminals bearing arms, and replete with Bolshevik gold, these 2,000 men were said to be plotting murder and mayhem on their arrival. In fact their declared aim was to present their demands face to face with the Prime Minister, Bonar Law – hardly an insurrectionary act. Nor was the decision to attempt to deliver a petition to George V. Buckingham Palace and Number Ten were barred to them – by thousands of police – but 70,000 people demonstrated with them when they arrived in London. They also received a tremendous reception en route, not of course, from the authorities but from the working class districts through which they passed. As far as the authorities were concerned it is difficult to decide who gave whom the harder time of it. One of the aims of the marches was always to force the local guardians to provide food and accommodation. Local benefit offices and other municipal buildings were therefore, often the target for the marchers.

A feature of the marches that impressed everyone was their discipline. The discipline of the march was self-discipline imposed by the men themselves, in everybody's interests, as McShane puts it. Despite the long and arduous miles in terrible weather, they took good care to preserve it. The value of such discipline was illustrated in Glasgow. On September 23rd 1931, an unemployed march was savagely attacked by the police. The next day a 50,000 strong protest demonstration was staged. This time it was protected by a disciplined corps of 500 unemployed workers, armed with heavy sticks – the police kept their distance this time. Alas, such workers' defence corps did not become a general feature in other cities and the unemployed often paid the price for this with serious injuries at the hands of the police.

Enormous demonstrations were staged in support of the hunger marches when they arrived at their destinations and often these turned into savage battles when the police attacked. The early Thirties saw many street fights between unemployed workers and a brutally repressive state. In Birkenhead, the park railings were ripped up by workers as they defended themselves against unprovoked police attacks. A few nights later the police took their revenge throughout the working class districts, dragging men, women and children from their beds and beating them mercilessly. A report from Mrs. Davin to the International Labour Defence Inquiry revealed the extent of police violence, "My husband got out of bed without waiting to put his trousers on and unlocked the door. As he did so, 12 police rushed into the room, knocking him to the floor, his poor head being split open, kicking him as he lay – I tried to prevent them hitting my husband. They then commenced to baton me all over the arms and body. As they hit me and my Jim, the children and I were screaming and the police shouted "Shut up, you parish-fed bastards"."

The workers in Belfast faced even more savagery. There, the police force was heavily armed and barricades were thrown up when the police opened fire. Several workers were killed and Protestant workers, who believed the Six Counties was "their" state found out to whom the RUC really belonged.

When such bitter class battles were taking place, one might ask, what were the official representatives of the class doing? Where were the TUC and Labour Party leaders? Then, as now, they were holding conferences.

A delegate conference on unemployment was convened by the TUC and the Labour Party in 1921. Hannington's report of it may sound familiar to today's militants. "Many of the delegates had come prepared to vote for 24 hour strike action to compel the government to face up to the question of unemployment. The platform refused to allow the delegates to discuss anything other than the official resolution which they had put forward. This resolution contained no proposals for action, it simply condemned the failure of the government on unemployment and referred to the five parliamentary by-elections which were in progress, urging that the best way in which the workers could express their

opposition to the Lloyd George government on its failure in respect to unemployed was to work for the return of the Labour candidates in these by-elections.?

However, in 1922, the TUC General Council decided to organise a national, 'day of action'. Powerful demonstrations were to be held 'on a Sunday! Hannington, it must be said, fails to point out the function of these 'Unemployed Sundays' (another was held in 1924) which, in fact, kept employed workers out of the direct action struggle against unemployment but at the same time, allowed the TUC to present itself as, 'doing something' on behalf of the jobless.

The TUC consistently refused the NUWM affiliation and equally rejected its call for a '24 hour general strike against the government in regard to unemployment'. In the aftermath of the 1926 General Strike the TUC, in line with its 'peace in industry' policy, severed its connections with the NUWM completely and broke up the Joint Advisory Council which had been set up in 1923. From then on the TUC did its best to sabotage and betray the NUWM's work.

The 1927 miners' march was denounced as a 'Communist stunt' which did not have the support of the official trade union movement. This signalled, as Hannington points out, 'an outburst of violent abuse and excitement from the capitalist press, who called for the government to ban the march and for the police to, 'show no mercy for the political incendiaries who were organising it against the wishes of the respectable elements of the Labour movement'. The police duly obliged by stepping up their campaign of harassment and intimidation.

Walter, later Lord, Citrine went so far as to specifically instruct Trades Councils not to render any assistance to the march.

The marches set out with grim determination nonetheless. The first day's march was to end in Newport, 'Our reception in Newport surpassed all expectations. Men and women of the Newport labour movement overwhelmed us with their eagerness to serve food and provide every possible comfort. Here was the real heart of the labour movement, beating to greet us! Here were the typical men and women, example of the great mass of hard-working folk who really constitute the life and vitality of the movement.?

This support, that ordinary workers gave unstintingly, contrasts dramatically with the actions of the contemptible Citrine and his cronies. Between 1927 and 1933, the TUC repeatedly tried to set up bureaucratically straitjacketed unemployed committees which did nothing for the unemployed. However, the general secretaries were unable to organise in a sphere that was 'non-negotiable' with the bosses. This ensured that even these feeble efforts came to nought. For his services as a saboteur of the struggle against unemployment, Citrine, the TUC leader, was made a Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. As the Daily Telegraph noted at the time, this was a, 'generous admission that those also serve who oppose the government of the day.?' The bosses have always been glad of the service of men like Citrine whose opposition to them is gentlemanly bluff 'but whose opposition to workers defending themselves is real indeed.

The betrayals of the reformist leadership reached their culmination, however, with the Labour government which came to power in 1929. It was this Labour government which refused to abolish task work, which refused to cancel the relief debts of the boards of guardians and which presided over a vast increase in the ranks of the unemployed. These measures were justified then, as now, as 'economies' that were necessary to save the pound etc.

The 1930 hunger march was the first to include a detachment of women marches. Ironically the first woman Minister of Labour, Margaret Bondfield, was personally responsible for the unceremonious ejection

of a deputation of the marches from the Ministry of Labour. She had a long history as an enemy of the unemployed. A signatory of the Blanesburgh Report (1927) which proposed a severe cut in benefits that the Tories had not dared to carry through, she and her ministerial colleagues succeeded where Baldwin and Co. had failed. They did this via the Anomalies Act and the introduction of the infamous Means Test, which deprived the unemployed of £30 million in benefits.

It was an attempt to carry through a further cut that finally split the Cabinet and made even the TUC jib and led to MacDonald's defection (with Margaret Bondfield) and the creation of a National Government. At the same time, Citrine blocked a delegation of unemployed Welsh miners from addressing the TUC at Bristol. When they were baton-charged outside the Congress by the police, Citrine attacked the marchers and praised the police.

As the dole queues grew, so did the determination of the TUC and Labour leaders to defuse the extensive wave of militancy and to preserve the capitalist system that guaranteed them privileges.

The legendary 'Jarrow Crusade' was, in fact, a clear example of how the reformists neutered the struggles of the unemployed. It is no accident that this march is one that is kept alive by the reformists' and the bosses' propaganda, as the symbol of the Thirties. It was one of the smallest marches ever to go to London from the unemployed blackspots. It was organised by Jarrow Labour MP, Ellen Wilkinson who ensured from the outset that it would be a law-abiding, passive, pleading demonstration. It was a far cry from the NUWM marches of the Twenties and early Thirties which set out fully aware that the only official reception they would get was from police truncheons. The non-political nature of the Jarrow march was guaranteed by a grotesque form of class collaboration. Two agents were appointed to arrange the eating and sleeping arrangements - one from the Labour Party and the other from the Tories!

On the other hand, as a result of Special Branch intervention, a CP member was expelled from the march. Fears were expressed that the NUWM might take advantage of the crusade but Wilkinson reassured the authorities by refusing to have anything to do with an NUWM march from the North-East taking place at the same time. The Home office rewarded this respect for the rule of law by organising a tea for the Jarrow marchers in the House of Commons as a 'good way of encouraging and placating them.' (From the Special Branch report on the Jarrow March, 1936).

The Jarrow March, despite the undoubted sincerity of the marchers and many who supported them, was a typical example of the TUC and Labour Party attitude to the unemployed. It was class collaborationist to the core and reduced the unemployed to pitiful objects of charity. Its aim was to provide these leaders with cover for their own inaction.

The mid and late Thirties saw a change in the CP's and NUWM's attitude to the reformist leaders. Between 1929 and 1933, the CP's politics were dominated by the notorious 'Third Period' line dictated by the Communist International. Stalin's famous dictum that Social Democracy and Fascism were 'twins' meant, in Britain, calling the Labour Party 'Social Fascist', striving to create revolutionary unions and abjuring the united front tactic. McShane and Hannington, in practice, ignored the worst lunacies of this line which would have spelt doom for the NUWM. The CP leaders were unable to call them to account because the NUWM and the militant battles it fought were the only mass actions that the CP was involved in.

The CP's change of line in the 1934/5 to the Communist International's 'Peoples' Front tactic (which called for class collaborationist fronts between communists, ILPers, Labour Party members, Liberals and even 'progressive' Tories) blunted the cutting edge of the NUWM. Gone was the merciless exposure of the TUC and Labour Party leaders.

By 1936, the CP's criticisms had become so mild that Clement Attlee was quite prepared to share the platform at a London rally welcoming the march of that year. A contemporary police report remarked, 'speeches were moderate in tone and the communist speakers avoided provocation or extremist remarks'.

Indeed, such an approach undercut the very existence of an independent, rank and file based unemployed organisation. The 1936 march was the last major unemployed demonstration of the 1930's.

Wal Hannington's and Harry McShane's books vividly evoke the atmosphere of the class struggle in the Twenties and Thirties, the poverty and degradation that capitalist crises visit upon the unemployed and their families. They also show the militancy and courage, the pride and dignity that sprang from resistance and organisation. On that basis alone they are worth reading. But there are also lessons to be learnt, and problems to be addressed. One problem with which the NUWM had to grapple, and which is still with us today, is how to unite the unemployed and the employed. The NUWM, correctly, never ignored the official movement despite its sorry record. They continued to demand that the TUC do what it claimed to do ? serve the interests of the working class.

The NUWM consistently fought for the right of the unemployed to take their place inside the official labour movement, in Trades Councils, and at the TUC itself. It fought for the unionisation of the unemployed and against the betrayals of Citrine and Co., who were eager to forget the plight of their ex-members.

The life blood of the NUWM was its local organisations, born out of the struggle against Boards of Guardians. They provided the solid foundation for the hunger march mobilisations, the organised resistance to police brutality in Birkenhead, Belfast, Glasgow and elsewhere. They ensured that the unemployed were mobilised against capitalism ? and not against their employed fellow workers.

Such local committees need to be established today. They need to be built in every town to organise the unemployed, especially the youth, on a permanent basis, bringing them into militant action against the bosses. Such local roots will provide the best basis for national initiatives, marches etc.

A national organisation of the unemployed must be built around a clear programme, clear political answers to the crisis that the unemployed and the employed face together. For they do face it together, and if unity is not welded in action the working class faces serious dangers. There is no doubt that deep frustration and growing despair could develop within the ever increasing army of the unemployed, particularly so in regard to the youth. If that frustration and despair, that anger, is not directed against its class enemy, there is a real prospect of it turning in upon itself in the cancerous form of fascism. Not only the fascists could benefit from a leaderless army of unemployed. The spectre of a chronically weakened Trade Union movement lies before us in the shape of a divided and demoralised working class lacking the strength to even defend, let alone improve, wages, conditions and social services.

Such a prospect need never become a reality provided, at every level of the labour movement, in every town, every plant, every Trades Council, the question of the fight against unemployment is taken up. A mass national unemployed movement, based on uncompromising hostility to the capitalist system and linked to the employed workers, the trade unions can, and must, build in the months ahead.

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