



THE RECESSION AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE

The Longbridge sackings are a warning to the whole labour movement.

Nine workers, including four TGWU stewards, were sacked on December 3rd on charges of causing damage or (in the case of the stewards) of being 'ringleaders' during a protest against lay-offs on November 21st. One was reinstated on appeal, on December 15th; but the other eight sackings stood.

The Metro trim and assembly workers struck on hearing the appeal results. After long delays the TGWU made the strike official over Christmas. BL boss Michael Edwardes threatened to sack all 1500 strikers if they did not start back on January 5th after the Christmas break. The TGWU response was limp. Eventually, at a meeting on the 4th, they recommended a return to work — pending a new management/union inquiry. The inquiry formula preserved a total right of veto for the bosses. But the workers, seeing no courageous lead from the union (or the CP-led Works Committee), reluctantly voted to go back. The inquiry later confirmed the sacking of six workers including the four stewards.

The assertion of management power by the brutal victimisation without right of appeal; the singling-out of union

activists; the undermining of the workers' spontaneous response by the cowardly policy of the union bureaucrats; the use of an 'inquiry' formula which just gains time for the bosses while keeping the sacked workers out of the plant — it was all like a re-run of the Derek Robinson victimisation in November 1979.

As one BL worker told *Socialist Organiser* (10th January), "Unless we get ourselves properly organised soon, I can see these sackings becoming an annual event. Every November or December it'll happen. We could call it Robinson Day."

But Edwardes' tactics in BL will be a model for other bosses to follow. Already in British Steel Ian McGregor is using Edwardes' practised technique of bypassing the union, balloting the workers directly on a job-cut plan, and trying to force a 'yes' vote by the menace of widespread closures if the plan is not accepted. The other techniques — unilateral imposition of pay and conditions formulas, the threat of closure or sacking to black-jack any workers into submission, the victimisations — will follow.

Under the Labour Government, too, there was a wave of victimisations, in the dark days of 1975-7: Blackmans (Tottenham), BL Canley (Coventry),

Blackwood Hodge (Northampton), Ford Dagenham and Halewood etc. Then, too, there was the background of economic slump, depressed industrial militancy and working class confidence and a no-fight line from union leaders.

But it's worse now. The slump is worse. One of its results is that union membership is declining seriously. The TUC lost perhaps one million members in 1980: the TGWU 140,000, the AUEW 100,000, the GMWU 40,000 etc. (The worst-hit union, the National Union of Blastfurnacemen, has lost half its membership over the last 18 months). In contrast, union membership, and the number of shop stewards rose steadily even in the worst days of the Labour government.

And of course the Tory government is aggressively assisting the bosses in their drive against union organisation. Almost certainly the Robinson sacking, at least, was agreed beforehand with the Government; so were the sackings at Brixton dole office. The defeat on Robinson and the victory at Brixton dole show the difference that a militant response and militant leadership can make.

The strike figures show the problems we face. 1979 had the biggest total of