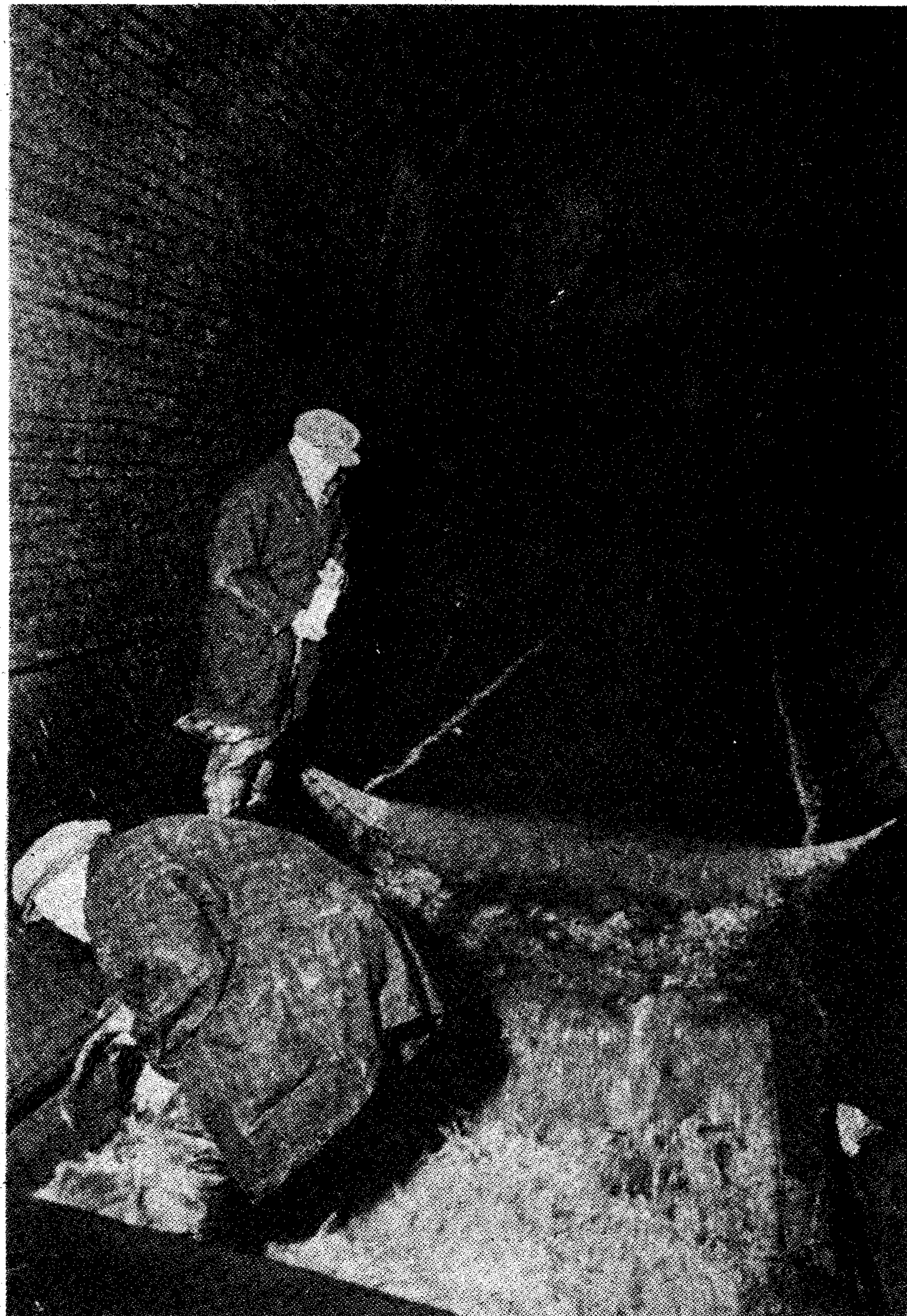


Socialist Organiser

INDUSTRIAL SPECIAL

5p if sold
separately

SUPPORT THE WATER WORKERS!



FOR the first time since the 1980 steel strike, the whole of a major industry is on all-out indefinite strike. After many long months of lengthening dole queues, cuts and closures, struggles stopped halfway, and the Tories riding high on 'Falklands factor' jingoism, an opening has been created for the labour movement to see that the tables can be turned. The Tories can be beaten.

The previous Tory government also had a string of victories — though less dramatically — in 1970-72. Only after the 1972 miners' strike was it put on the defensive.

The water workers in 1983 can do what the miners did in 1972 — if they can develop the same sort of strong rank-and-file organisation, which can stop the top union leaders backtracking, and if the labour movement gives solid support.

Rally round

Tony Benn MP

I would hope that the whole labour movement rallies behind the water workers. This is an attempt to enforce a Government pay policy on a group of workers who have slipped behind and who perform essential work. And everyone should be on the look-out for the sort of attacks upon these workers that we've experienced in the past, as with the health workers and the miners.

FBU call

The Executive Council of the Fire Brigades Union at its meeting on January 19 unanimously agreed to support the water workers in their struggle.

A circular has been sent to all branches instructing members not to carry water other than as part of their normal duties. It also calls on members to take part in activities supporting the water workers.

The FBU fought a similar battle in 1977 to bring its wages up to the 'upper quartile' of manual workers' pay

"Health workers should support"

by Andrea Campbell, Broad Left candidate for general secretary of the health union COHSE.

THE Tories have gone from one major public sector dispute — the health workers — to another one — the water workers.

The similarity is clear. Both we and the water workers are vitally necessary for the health of the country, and both groups do dirty work for very low pay.

We could have won the 12% claim if we had had the right kind of leadership. The water workers, claiming 15%, can win, and have at least started off on the right foot by taking all-out strike action.

As a health worker I will be campaigning for support for their struggle in my trade union.

Health workers now know how important solid-

arity action is. It meant a lot to us when workers from other sections came down to our picket lines. We must now ensure that that solidarity is returned, with health workers picketing with the water workers and sending messages of support and donations.

The Tories are using the same threat to break the strike as they used with the health workers — the troops. Thatcher has become more arrogant with each strike she breaks, and there is no doubt that she will not hesitate to bring in the troops.

The links which were made during the NHS pay dispute must be built during this strike. All health service stewards should get resolutions passed in their branches, districts/regions and nationally in support

of the water workers.

It is important that low pay remains an issue in the minds of the public. Last week there was a report in the papers of a top executive getting a £2,000 per week increase. Meanwhile thousands and thousands of workers providing for the health and welfare of the country are living on the poverty line.

Our fight is the same fight as the water workers — against low pay, exploitation and the policies of the Tory government.

All health workers should be out there supporting the water workers, just as they supported us.



WATER WORKERS TURN

A fight against Tories

THE water workers' strike is a struggle directly against the Tory government.

The Tories intervened right at the start to push the employers' offer down to 4 per cent. And they are also pushing through legislation to abolish the National Water Council as from September 1983.

This will mean that *all the present national agreements* will be torn up, to be replaced by regional agreements. Jobs and conditions will be at threat across the board.

And wage negotiations are to be regional, not national. In this way the Tories hope to break up the tremendous power of water workers united nationally.

From the local water workers' strike in the north-west in 1979 the state machine concluded that "as long as the strike was localised, and as long as managerial and supervisory staff kept working, such a strike could be beaten". But they're not so sure about a national strike!

What the water workers face is only another application of the Tories' general strategy:

*To 'sweat out' the crisis, using unemployment as a weapon to bludgeon union organisation and to force wages down and profits up;

*To use public sector workers as a pace-setter in keeping wages below price inflation, with the current 4 per cent norm;

*To chop public services, with the aim of redirecting resources to private profit.

United nationally, the water workers are strong — strong enough to defeat the Tories' plans. Their strength could be doubled by a common front with gas and power workers.

Both these groups have pay claims confronting the Tories' 4 per cent norm — 13% for the gas workers, 8% for power. The gas workers have already turned down a 3.9 per cent offer.

By coming out now alongside the water workers, they could win their claims — and deal a devastating blow to the Tories' anti-working class strategy which, with the aid of the slump and the feebleness of the top trade union leaders, has scored far too many successes recently.

The Tories could even be forced into an early election.

Some local Labour Parties are already ~~organising~~ to support the water workers. The whole labour movement, including the national Labour Party and TUC leadership, should be throwing its weight behind the strike.

An active labour movement which supports and develops every militant struggle can drive the Tories from office — and win the general election, and fight to hold a Labour government to serious measures against the power and privilege of the capitalist class.



What they are demanding

What is the claim?

A 15% rise to bring water workers in line with higher-paid manual workers (the 'top quartile') in other industries and in electricity and gas.

Isn't 15% too ambitious?

No. Water workers' basic pay is at present between £78.20 and £85.85, and their average gross earnings about £134 a week.

To keep up with inflation and have the same real value as their £61.80 average earnings in 1975, water workers would have to be getting about £160 a week now — or rather more, since tax would take a bigger cut from their pay. That means an increase of 20% or

more.

Where their own money is concerned, the bosses don't consider 15% rises as over the top. British Oxygen boss Richard Giordano got a 21% increase last year — a rise of £2,000 a week!

Thirteen top British Oxygen directors shared an overall increase of 15%, and 15% was the figure, too, for Coal Board chairman Norman Siddall, who pocketed a handy £150 extra each week.

What's the offer?

The National Water Council originally wanted to offer 6%. The Tories refused to let them go over 4%.

In the last-minute... was bumped up to 5%... mean a wage cut in real...

Haven't they been offered...

Yes — but over 16 months is worth no... 12. Besides, the longer it fits in with a trend in elsewhere — means long eaten away by inflation union comeback.

Economic experts at rise again over the com... factory-gate prices are all

Link up with power

UP THE PRESSURE

**Rank
and
file
must
control!**



re

Wading in untreated sewage every day, doing repair work in decayed Victorian sewers sometimes as narrow as the narrowest seams worked by coal miners, working waist-deep in icy water on jobs at reservoirs, regular spells of being on call 24 hours a day — water workers' jobs are often among the most difficult and dirty anywhere.

For those working at sewage plants, illnesses and infections are a regular occupational hazard.

Fleet Street editors will be holding forth against water workers 'holding the nation to ransom'. But would any of them do the job themselves — even for twice the pay?



negotiations the offer
%. That would still
terms.

d 7.3% now?
onths. And 7.3% over
more than 5.9% over
period deal — which
the NHS, in BL, and
ger for wages to be
n without any trade

expect inflation to
ing year. Import and
ready rising sharply.

and gas workers

Strike committees have been set up at water and sewage plants, organising picket lines, ensuring that the craft workers respect those picket lines and that NALGO members hold to their union's national instruction not to cooperate with scabbing.

Control of emergency cover — for hospitals, for dialysis machines, and for the fire service — will also be an important task for these strike committees. It should be firmly in the hands of the rank and file, to ensure that 'emergencies' are not used as a pretext for strike-breaking.

Many water workers are also arguing that negotiations should be under the control of the local strike committees, or rather of a national strike committee elected by them and accountable to them.

While the employers' representatives have been militant and ready for a fight, the union representatives have been practically apologising for the strike, and constantly ready to negotiate on almost any basis.

Socialist Organiser Alliance

Get Organised!

Socialist Organiser is not just a paper. We fight to organise workers in the struggle for a new leadership in the labour movement.

If you agree with what we have to say, you can help. Become a supporter of the Socialist Organiser Alliance — groups are established in most large towns.

To 'Get Organised' in the fight, or for more information, write at once to us at 28 Middle Lane, London N8.

Name

Address



Socialist Organiser

INDUSTRIAL SPECIAL

THE STATE'S ARMED BODIES OF SCABS

Plans for strikebreaking by troops have been prepared and perfected over many years. Harry Sloan reports

"CALL off the rail strike, or we'll call an air strike", gloated one of the slogans of Thatcher's returning Falklands Task Force at the height of the jingoistic fervour last summer.

And now that the union leaders' fear of their own rank and file members has plainly outweighed their fear of action against the government, Thatcher is counting upon a revival and continuity of the "Falklands spirit" to crush the water workers.

This includes the preparation of a 15,000-strong army "Task Force" including drivers, technicians, command and control staff, and general duty soldiers.

The use of the army for strikebreaking activity is of course nothing new in Britain.

Since the turn of the century there have been repeated occasions on which troops have been brought in and states of emergency invoked by the government of the day to smash strikes.

In 1910 troops were sent on the orders of Winston Churchill to Tonypandy valley in South Wales to assist police protecting imported blackleg labour during a miners' strike. Nine months later in 1911 troops in Llanelli gunned down four strikers, while virtually the whole army was mobilised along the rail network to combat the first-ever national rail strike.

Docks

In July 1911 during a docks strike in which several thousand pickets had fought pitched battles with police and with scabs, 800 cavalry and infantry troops moved into the Lancashire town of Salford, taking up positions guarding the bridges leading into Manchester.

During the rail and police strikes of 1919, there was

also a show of armed force by the government.

And in 1926, the General Strike saw troops used to convoy food from the docks to Hyde Park, while warships ferried supplies to Liverpool, and army units were held in readiness should the police and special constabulary fail to protect the scabs.

The use of the military in the General Strike was further facilitated by the implementation of the Emergency Powers Act of 1920, passed in the immediate aftermath of a massive strike wave and angry demonstrations by unemployed ex-servicemen.

Emergency

The Act — the same that will be used if Thatcher proclaims a state of emergency to combat the water workers — gave the government power to break up any large strike said to be "interfering with the supply and distribution of food, water, fuel, light or with means of transport."

In reality it offered a blank cheque for police and

scabs to baton, ride down and beat up pickets.

Under the Emergency Powers Act, the government was empowered to seize land, buildings, food, vehicles and other essentials, and issued licences to take over docks and railways and control gas, electricity and water.

A statement issued by the government at the start of the General Strike declared:

"All ranks of the armed forces of the Crown are hereby notified that any action which they may find it necessary to take in an honest endeavour to aid the civil power will receive, both now and afterwards, the full support of His Majesty's Government."

To further protect the value of the military as a strikebreaking instrument, the Incitement to Disaffection Act (1934) made it illegal to seduce any member of the armed forces from their duty.

Though the war period brought a dramatic vote by Montgomery's largely con-

script Eighth Army to uphold the right of workers to strike even during the war itself, the post-war period saw army strike-breaking once more the order of the day — this time under Attlee's Labour government.

Nine times

Nine times between 1946 and 1950 workers in dispute were confronted by army scabbing. Smithfield meat workers, Ministry of Works employees, London dockers, Avonmouth dockers, power workers in London and Belfast, and gas workers all saw troops drafted in to smash their disputes — though in most cases the arrival of soldiers led to a hardening and escalation of the strike.

Harold Wilson's government elected to office in 1964, was by the summer of 1966 invoking a state of emergency and a massive anti-communist witch-hunt to confront the seamen's strike.

In 1972 it was the Tories

turn once again to bring in the troops, during the dock strike.

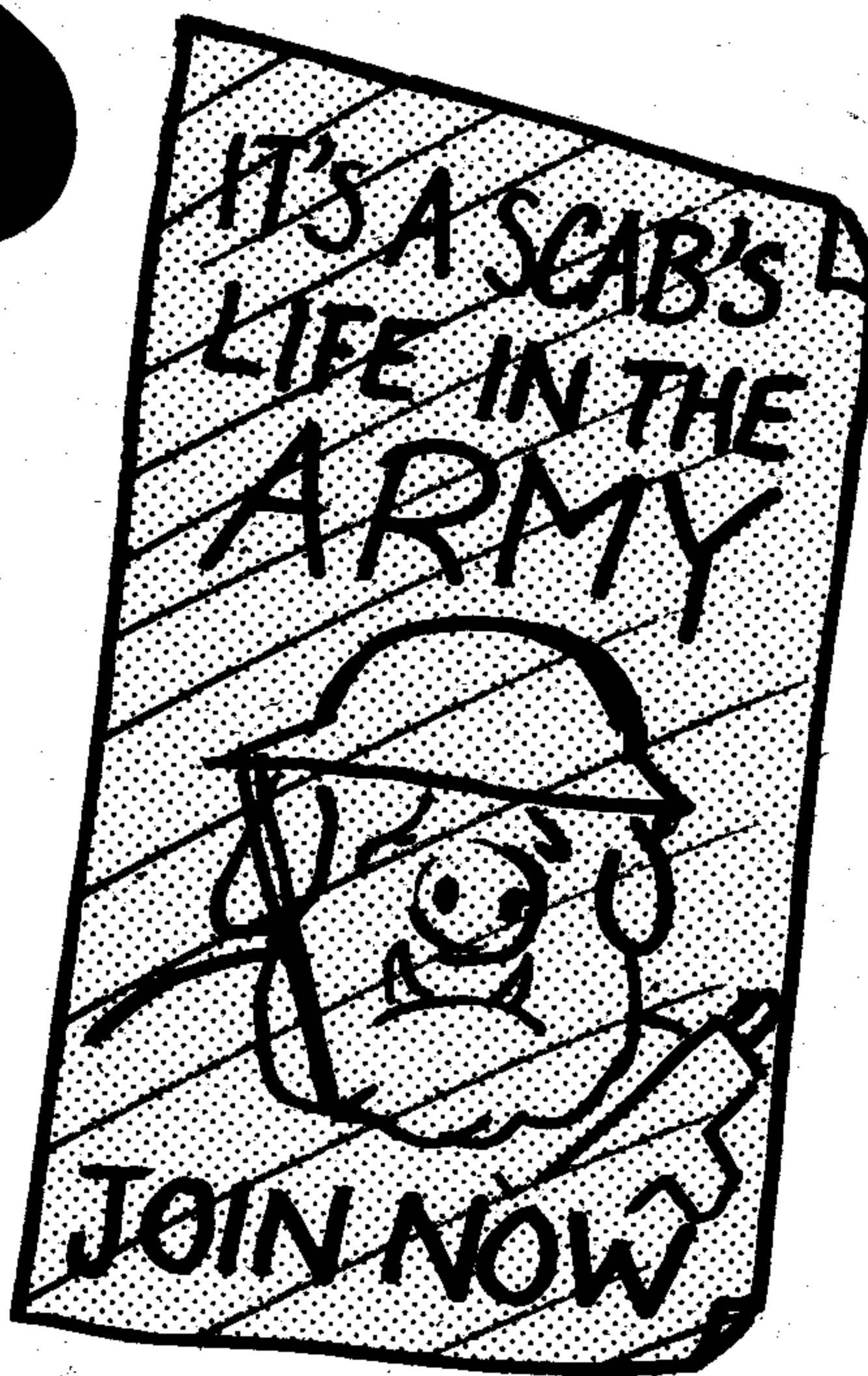
A new twist to strike-breaking activity emerged in the aftermath of the miners' strike of 1972 which delivered a stinging defeat to Edward Heath's Tory government.

A new committee, the Civil Contingencies Unit, was set up, with a brief of preparing measures to reduce the potential social and economic impact of strikes by small but powerful sections of workers, such as the miners, the power workers — and the water workers.

At first chaired by Lord Jellicoe and then by Jim Prior, the CCU also continued during the Labour government, masterminding strike-breaking efforts by Wilson and Callaghan.

It is now headed by William Whitelaw, and backed up by a secretariat led by a Brigadier, Tony Budd.

It seems no coincidence that the Thatcher government has seen the introduction of the divisive



area-by-area bonus scheme in the mining industry, designed to split the strength of the NUM, while legislation now completing its way through Parliament will abolish the National Water Council — and thus national agreements and the possibility of national strike action by water workers by September 1983.

Water workers will then find themselves divided into no less than ten different regions with negotiations only on a local level.

Disputes which break out in this set-up would be more vulnerable to isolation — and to military strike-breaking.

The 1973-4 miners' strike which eventually toppled the Heath government, brought an even higher degree of police/military preparation.

A special "Anti Picket Unit" was established headed by Commander John Gerard, to coordinate action against the miners' dispute. In Yorkshire alone a squad of 800 police were on permanent standby throughout the strike while a special unit kept tabs on 'known extremists'.

Previously inactive 'Home Defence and Emergency Planning Committees' were drastically expanded. These are committees that would oversee wartime or peacetime emergencies.

The plant producing army riot helmets was specifically exempted from Heath's 3-day week restrictions.

There were special appeals to rail workers to join the Territorial Army, while army HGV drivers were warned they may be recalled from Xmas leave.

And in December 1973 Heath put on alert the alternative government apparatus which would take over the country in the case of extreme national emergency. The secret bunkers housing the regional seats of government were put on standby.

As we know, these measures — like so many of the previous attempts to crack strikes by military and police intervention — failed to save Heath or his incomes policies.

This did not deter the returned Labour leadership from further exercises in army scabbing.

The Glasgow dustmen were the first to suffer this attack when troops moved in to clear rubbish during their strike in 1975.

But it was the fire fighters' pay strike of 1977-8 which brought the most concerted and prolonged army strike-breaking exercise seen this century.

For eight weeks, amidst a barrage of adulatory press publicity, thousands of troops were deployed with their "Green Goddess" fire appliances

in an effort to crack the militancy of the first national strike against Labour's wage controls.

In the event, though the immediate deal forced in by the FBU leadership fell short of the original claim, the whole scabbing exercise failed to prevent the firefighters from securing a long term boost to their wage levels.

The careful cultivation of an "acceptable" face of mass scabbing — the use of troops to break a strike by emergency workers who provide a vital public service — was to be seen again however during the ambulance workers' struggles in early 1979, and again under the Tory government. The working class will pay heavily if it relaxes its guard against each and every form of military intervention and exercise in mass scabbing.

In recent years the development of the savage Special Patrol Group and analogous bodies within the police force has to a large degree avoided the necessity to deploy soldiers to protect scabs and smash picket lines.

The prime role of the military in strikebreaking is now as an obedient workforce that can be ordered in to fill the jobs of strikers.

In this role however the largely unskilled manpower at the disposal of the armed forces restricts its ability to break strikes in — for instance — the railways or the power industry.

In the water strike the army effort will be dependent upon the cooperation of supervisors and white collar staff not directly involved in the dispute. Solidarity action by NALGO and the other unions covering these workers could swiftly paralyse the scabs and create conditions for the defeat of Thatcher's plan to crack a major section of workers.

Key

But the other key to defeating the army strategy is the mobilisation of those other public sector workers whose claims are still outstanding — the power and gas workers. Attacked on three fronts, Thatcher's "Task Force" could not keep all three industries ticking over.

Above all, the last 80 years' experience shows that if confronted by a solid and determined working class and sufficient supporting action beyond the immediate section in dispute, the army scabs can be beaten.

The task before the water workers is to reach out at once to their fellow trade unionists and the wider labour movement — and ensure that their leaders are given no room to retreat from a crucial struggle.



Harry Sloan is a socialist writer and journalist. He has written for the Socialist Organiser and other publications.