



Gerry Greaves

## Society at work Asians and a union

Robert Taylor

"This is not just a dispute about pay. It has to do with the respect and dignity of black people," says Bennie Bunsee, secretary of the Committee of Trade Unions Against Racialism. Bunsee successfully led the striking Asian workers at Mansfield Hosieries two years ago, and he has been active ever since, championing the immigrant worker's case on the shopfloor at other firms, such as Perivale Gutterman in Southall. Bunsee is orchestrating the demands of the 400 or so Asian workers, who have been on strike at Imperial Typewriters' two plants in Leicester for the past month. "This is a familiar picture," Bunsee goes on. "Black workers are in a peculiar position in this country. Whites won't generally support them. Union officials go along with white shopfloor opinion." Bunsee himself is a South African Indian, aged 29; a sociology graduate and a member of the International Marxist Group. Though he is now very active, the strike in fact began a week before he arrived.

Others take a different view of the dispute. "Outsiders are behind this. The whole matter could have been settled in a day or two without them," says George Bromley, district secretary of the Transport and General Workers' union, which has sole bargaining rights for all 1,600 manual workers at Imperial. "We knew before Christmas that Leicester was going to be used as a testing ground by extremists for a national campaign of stirring up racial trouble on the shopfloor. The issue on which the strikers came out on May Day was merely a pretext. They were quite determined to strike, no matter what happened. These militants have got cells in other Leicester factories such as Walker Crisps, Delta Mouldings, AJB Plastics and Barrington Products. This strike is just the start."

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perial management are keeping their heads down, on instructions from their American parent company, Litton, who took over the bankrupt concern in the early sixties. The public intransigence, and the occasional outburst of violent bitterness in the terraced streets of Highfield, round Imperial's premises, reflect the potential dangers of what is happening in this month-old dispute.

There have already been some disturbing signs that the Imperial strike is souring community feeling. It is reckoned that a third of Leicester's entire population are coloured. Despite the pleas of the Resettlement Board, thousands of Ugandan Asians poured into the city in the autumn of 1972 and added to the city's housing and educational problems. In Bromley's opinion, Leicester has had to absorb too many coloured people too quickly. That process of assimilation has not been helped by the attitude of Leicester's monopoly local daily, the *Mercury*. Last week that journal opened its columns to critics of the Imperial strikers. One letter wrote of the strikers: "They should remember that, if they were in India, possibly half of them now would not be alive because of famine, floods and disease. They want to be thankful that we are a tolerant race until roused, as Hitler discovered."

Local union officials of the t&gw are worried that many of their 400 white members at Imperial will become openly hostile to immigrant workers. Certainly, a group of white storemen I spoke to there were annoyed at the strikers. "There never used to be any trouble here," one of them told me. "I used to play darts happily in the Imperial club team with Asians. But I'll never do that again. Now I'm sick of the sight of black faces." White workers at the firm also say the strikers have been misled by outsiders. "You can see them driving up in swanky cars an hour before knocking-off time. [I never saw this myself.] The heavy mob have taken over this dispute, and the strikers have got no idea what the issue is about any more, if they ever knew in the first place." I was even told that white workers themselves will go on strike, if Imperial take back the strikers. "We won't work alongside them any more," one said to me. "If there was any real point at issue, I'd have been the first man out of the

gates in support," another of them said.

Just over a third of the company's coloured workers are involved in the dispute. The remaining 800 are still at work, though it is maintained that some have suffered from intimidation. Police are thick on the ground all day round the factory perimeter, to stop any trouble, and to move on groups of strikers.

Any strike has complex, deep roots. One involving race is doubly difficult to unravel. No side can even begin to agree on what the dispute is about. What started as a grievance over pay, affecting only 39 men in No. 61 section at Imperial's Coptdale Road plant, Highfield, has mushroomed into this full-scale row over racial discrimination. Two separate yet connected issues lie at the core of the dispute, behind the emotive language of those involved.

Firstly, there is total disagreement over procedures for electing shop stewards at Imperial. The strikers insist that this is the key demand. They allege that the local t&gw is adopting a racist attitude towards the demand of those Asian workers who want to become stewards. Both the union and the strikers agree that there are not enough stewards working on Imperial's shopfloor. There are only 16 stewards, which means that each one represents well over 100 workers, often spread through three or four distinct sections of a plant. (That ratio is, however, far above the national average of one steward to 60 workers.) Only three of the stewards are coloured in the predominantly coloured labour force.

One reason for the steward/worker ratio is that Imperial doubled its labour force, through a large expansion programme, in 1972. The vacancies were almost entirely filled by recently arrived Asian immigrants. Despite this drastic change in the firm's labour force, the union has failed to extend its own 30 year old internal structure at Imperial. The chief convenor, Reg Weaver, who has had that job for 21 years, insists that union rules bar any worker from being eligible for election as a steward until he has been a fully paid-up member of the t&gw for two years. This means, of course, that none of those newly recruited coloured workers (half the labour force) have yet become able to take on the job. The rule-book does not appear to say explicitly that



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Firstly, there is total disagreement over procedures for electing shop stewards at Imperial. The strikers insist that this is the key demand. They allege that the local T&GW is adopting a racist attitude towards the demand of those Asian workers who want to become stewards. Both the union and the strikers agree that there are not enough stewards working on Imperial's shopfloor. There are only 16 stewards, which means that each one represents well over 100 workers, often spread through three or four distinct sections of a plant. (That ratio is, however, far above the national average of one steward to 60 workers.) Only three of the stewards are coloured in the predominantly coloured labour force.

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the two-year ruling applies to stewards (as it clearly does for full-time officials). It is left to local discretion to decide.

Two local strike leaders, H. Khetani and N. C. Patel, both assembly-line workers, claim that they have been refused recognition as stewards on the grounds of failing to qualify under the two-year rule. Yet Khetani is eligible from next month, and Patel showed me his fully paid-up union cards going back to 1970. But Patel left Imperial for a month last year; it appears to be being held that he has to put in another two-year stint before he can qualify. This does look like a fairly stringent interpretation of an ambiguous rule. Strikers go on to allege that Weaver, as convenor, decides who is to be a steward, and that he does not provide publicity on when vacancies occur.

Both of these charges are denied by Weaver. He argues, in fact, that the stewards' committee has made energetic efforts to get coloured workers to become stewards, particularly at the Coptdale Road plant where the strike began. "A full-time deputy convenor was drafted in there for a time," Weaver says, but it "gave him a heart attack. He had to deal with 140 or so complaints a day from workers, who did not understand the particular assembly-line system with all its complexities."

The second cause of the dispute lies in the "productive incentive" bonus payment system. This is a highly complicated variant of measured daywork, which arouses a good deal of confusion and animosity among manual workers on the line. "You need to be a mathematician to understand it," admits Weaver, although it was introduced into Imperial by joint agreement. Steps are afoot to try and reform it. There is a fixed bonus rate over an agreed basic weekly wage. This is intended to relate increased output to higher pay. But the strike leaders believe that the system works to the disadvantage of the worker. They argue that workers don't know what their production norms are, and that foremen refuse to show them their time sheets. Wages are said to be in the top third of Leicester engineering, though at around £31 a week for men and £24 for women, this looks low by national standards. Union leaders have just negotiated what they regard as a generous pay agreement, and Imperial will be practising equal pay by next year.

Nonetheless, there are grounds for dissatisfaction. Because of mismanagement, Imperial were not, till recently, providing a continuous supply of components for typewriter assembly from their plants at Hull and Amsterdam. This meant that, for over two years, workers were not getting enough to do. In January this year, the supply problem eased, and Imperial insisted on speeding up the line to take advantage of the plentiful supply of components. In the past, workers had been guaranteed a 15 per cent bonus above their basic rate, though in practice they were not even earning that basic rate. Now they felt that management was trying to increase output

without accepting the need to revise the bonus percentage. The stewards agreed, and negotiated a 25 per cent rate, backdated to 1 January this year. But within ten minutes of that agreement being reached on 1 May, the No. 61 section had gone on strike, demanding a 40 per cent bonus, backdated to the beginning of 1973, because they felt to have been generally underpaid. Both demands are regarded as "unreasonable" by the union officials.

Other issues have cropped up, though they don't look very substantial. Imperial and the union both deny any racial discrimination. The company maintains that while 57 per cent of male workers are non-white, over 60 per cent of the four top-grade jobs are held by non-whites. They also say that 63 per cent of all apprentices are non-white. The strikers say that white workers don't suffer from the same degree of discipline as blacks do, and that there are differences between the two races over such matters as tea breaks and going to the lavatory.

But the strikers have been hard put to it to substantiate these alleged distinctions. As they say in their first strike bulletin, "This discrimination is quite peculiar because it is so hard to nail. It is the racism that you feel but cannot overtly see, that exists at Imperial." Certainly, both management and union deny that there are any restraints put on black promotions and they point to cases where coloured workers are working above white men.

It clearly is a major problem for any firm to absorb a large intake of labour which is unaccustomed to factory discipline or union organisation. Language and cultural barriers are substantial, and there are few signs that either side of industry has yet taken the problem of the integrated workforce seriously enough. New arrivals at Imperial get only a three-day induction course. This looks insufficient.

There is a traditionalist loyalty among Imperial's white workforce. This workforce coalesces uneasily with the inexperienced, often bewildered coloured workers, who now constitute the new majority. "Black workers have a habit of being passive, of accepting what is done to them," says Bunsee. "This is changing. People denounce me as an outsider. But who else will help these people? The bosses want to exploit them, and the union doesn't care for them. So it needs people like me to champion their causes."

Undoubtedly, there is much innuendo that has crept into the Imperial dispute, and the union officials give the impression of being injured innocents. A genuine breakdown in understanding is a more probable cause of the strife than deliberate provocation by either union or company. But it is an easy and wrong way out to pin blame on outsiders. Both Imperial and the T&GW need to reassess their attitudes. The combination of stuffy union restrictionism over the rule book, and a chaotic and badly managed payment system, could do lasting harm to race relations in Leicester and have repercussions elsewhere.

## Notes

### Prison rules

GRAHAM ZELICK writes: The proposals for changes in the Prison Rules announced by Robert Carr as Home Secretary in June 1973, have now been laid before parliament by Roy Jenkins. They come into operation on 1 June.

They are concerned chiefly with penalties (called "awards") for disciplinary offences by prisoners. Carr announced himself satisfied with the broad pattern of dealing with disciplinary infractions, shared between governors and boards of visitors. But he did set up a Prison Department working party to examine the procedural aspects, which is now under way.

The main change is the abolition of bread and water as a punishment. Euphemistically styled "restricted diet," this could be awarded by governors for three days and by boards of visitors for 15. In several establishments, restricted diets have long since been abandoned. Yet nearly 300 "awards" were made between July 1973 and March 1974—though this itself is a significant decline from previous years, in which Wandsworth alone almost reached that figure.

However, if the alternative is to be lost remission, it will not be popular with prisoners. The power of governors to order forfeiture of remission and stoppage of earnings has been doubled from 14 to 28 days.

Whether this move is designed to punish minor offences more severely, or to reduce the number of cases referred to boards of visitors is uncertain. Whichever it is, the lack of discussion, the failure to await the working party's review of procedure, and the absence of any explanation, make it a regrettable change. Even some governors may not welcome having an extended judicial role.

Following the 1972 amendment making any pre-sentence period of imprisonment subject to the usual one third remission, it will now be possible, too, for a prisoner to forfeit that remission as a result of a disciplinary offence committed even before he has been convicted and sentenced, (provided of course that he does subsequently receive a custodial sentence). It had been felt that the powers to deal with intractable remand prisoners were inadequate.

On the "incentive" side, stoppage of earnings may now be expressed as the forfeiture of a proportion of a prisoner's earnings over a specified period of time, in order to maintain the prisoner's efforts at work.

More important, the awards may now be suspended for up to six months, to take effect only if another offence is committed. Governors and boards may remit or mitigate any award, including loss of remis-