

# What the building strike achieved

DURING THE FINAL phase of the marathon twelve-week strike in the building industry virtually every site on Merseyside was at a standstill.

And about 100 firms agreed to the workers' demands for £30 for a 35-hour week, which reflects the success of militancy in the area.

Most of these firms, admittedly, were only small, but three belonged to the National Federation of Building Trades Employers.

Not surprisingly, the negotiated outcome caused anger and bitterness amongst the Merseyside shop stewards, and the rank and file. Just two days before the union leaders bowed to the employers' pressure, 8,000 Merseyside workers voted to stay out until their full demands were met.

But however great the bitterness there is little doubt that the struggle has been a milestone in the building workers' movement. Even on Merseyside, which is an area noted for its successful unity and militancy.

"Whatever the outcome, the gains have been tremendous," said Bill Jones, a member of the Merseyside rank and file Charter movement.

"So many young and non-activists have taken part that we cannot

go back to the situation before the strike started. Thousands have joined the union."

The rank and file strike action committee which was set up as soon as the selective action started, formed a number of area committees, and sent pickets to areas as far away as North Wales, where a number of lump sites were persuaded to come out.

## NO SCABBING

The local action committees kept an eye on sites in their area to ensure there was no scabbing. They were so thorough that even self-employed people working in groups of twos and threes were encouraged to stop work. Regular meetings were held to keep everyone in touch.

There was a rumour that the ruthless millionaire builder Derek Barnes would try and import workers to his Field Lane site, Fazakerley, where his Northern Developments company are building 1,000 private houses.

The next morning at 8 a.m. 50 building workers arrived to picket the entrance, and no attempt was

made to send men in.

The success of the building workers in creating a total stoppage of work on Merseyside reflects the organisation and militancy which has grown up here over the years.

This is all the more remarkable when it is realised that the construction industry is the only major manufacturing industry which is organised on a casual basis throughout most of the country.

Only about one-third of the 1,200,000 workers are in a union, and about 300,000 are employed on the notorious lump system.

Under the lump, employers, including the giant companies, subcontract work out to small firms. These firms employ groups of workers who are paid a lump sum for doing a job. This means they are technically self employed, and the employers do not have to pay S.E.T., deduct tax or give holiday stamps, and can avoid all the statutory duties of an employer... such as ensuring safe working conditions.

In 1970 workers started their own rank and file movement, called the Charter, to fight conditions such as these, and to stop victimisation and blacklisting.

One of the reasons why they



Pickets outside Derek Barnes' Northern Developments site at Fazakerley.

were forced to take this action was the failure of the building unions to tackle the employers.

Even the Financial Times said on 27 June 1972: "For years the National Federation of Building Trades Employers has enjoyed what can only be described as a cosy relationship with the unions."

The paper added: "Most contractors have apparently little interest in establishing normal trade union contacts..."

## NO SURPRISE

The sell-out of the rank and file on Thursday September 14 by the leadership of the newly formed Union of Construction and Allied Trades and Technicians and the other building unions came as no surprise to the Charter group.

At the beginning of August the UCATT executive actually voted to accept an employers' offer of a basic £23 plus £2 guaranteed bonus. Only a stream of telegrams from regions all over the country made them change their minds.

The final offer, which was accepted, was for only £26 basic for craftsmen, rising to £32 by June 1974. And there was no reduction in the 40-hour week.

Workers see a cut in hours as a necessity because of the rising unemployment in the industry, and the need to protect jobs.

As one steward says: "Every day new building techniques are being introduced. And the time spent on jobs is being drastically reduced. Whereas once it took two days to pour a certain amount of concrete, it would take two days now, and the adhesives being introduced are fantastic."

"But none of the lads are getting the benefit from these techniques. The employers need less men to do the same amount of work. We need 35 hours a week, not only to reduce unemployment, but to protect the jobs of those who are working."

Every day more building workers are joining the unemployment scrap-heap. In May 1972 there were 26,000 fewer employed in the building industry than in May 1971.



Mr Green with the rat he caught.

## Sewer rat caught in family's home

LIVERPOOL'S Housing Department were far from pleased with the parcel delivered by one of their tenants. For inside it was a dead rat.

Mr Henry Green, a docker, told the Free Press his wife had found the rat - alive - in a cupboard in the kitchen of his prefab home in White Street.

She had seen its tail sticking out under the cupboard door and Mr Green and a neighbour had battered it to death.

A rodent inspector identified it as a sewer rat and thought it a 'stray' which had probably come in through the front door and then the kitchen door. The Greens think it came through a hole in a wall or floor.

Although their home is spotlessly clean, they have been troubled with vermin for the last two years.

Some of their previous 'visitors' may have been mice, although they think some were young rats.

The Greens' house is supported on bricks above a concrete base, leaving a gap where rats or mice could live.

Mr and Mrs Green, who have three children, have lived in the two-bedroom prefab for over eight years. The house is so crowded that their two boys, Stephen (9) and Raymond (8) have to sleep in a double bed in one room.

In the other bedroom, where there is a double bed and the baby's cot, there is not enough space to open the door fully. And to make their own bed, Mr and Mrs Green have to move the cot out first.

They are hoping to be rehoused but have been told there are more urgent cases.

# Life inside Walton

"It's mostly three to a cell now, you have to make special application for single cells, they go to medical cases. There's definitely overcrowding and understaffing. Three in a cell causes a lot of tension and arguments. Everyone gets bored with one another. The cells smell, and there are rarely any windows. They have just been painted, but it makes no difference, they still smell and are dirty inside.

## WARDERS

"You don't get much trouble from the older ones, all the older cons know them. But the young ones like to intimidate you, to show you the power they've got. And they don't know how to deal with prisoners.

The protest in June 1970 was over the way they took a man to solitary, they threw him down the stairs, and beat him up when they got him into the solitary. Everyone banged and shouted. They suspended one officer, but there were about five involved.

They promised a Home Office inquiry but we never heard the result.

You get some consideration from the older ones, but even they have some bad ways. They are understaffed and can't cope. Their only answer is to lock everyone away. You're just left in your cell. If you want to go to the toilet and ring a bell they just shout "Get off the bell!"

One particular screw, when you go to the toilet, keeps shouting:

A wave of protest has broken out in prisons throughout the country recently. At both Walton Gaol and Risley Remand Centre, Warrington, there have been protests, sit-ins and demonstrations on the roofs.

Little of the press coverage has given the reasons for the demonstrations, or pointed out that 90% of prisoners have committed nothing more than petty crimes.

So here we print an interview with a former prisoner of Walton, who has just come out after a sentence of 2½ years.

There are over 1,800 prisoners in Walton, most of whom live three to a cell which measures just 13ft by 7ft. Even the former governor, Major George Bride, has described Walton as "The worst prison in Britain."

"Hurry up! Hurry up!" and throws water under the toilet door. There's no privacy, some of the doors are off, sometimes they come in and look at you and say "Come on, what are you doing?"

## WORK

"The lack of work is another thing. Short termers have no chance of getting work, and if you are a long termer they may just throw you in the metal shop, where you earn 22, 30 or perhaps 40 pence a week. And with that you have to buy soap, tobacco... everything.

Long termers of two years and over go into the workshops, or the tailoring shops, where they do government contracts

Then there's the mat shop, the copper shop and the mailbag shop.

You can earn top money in the tailoring shop where I was... 70p a week. This is one of their biggest assets. It brings a lot of money into the prison.

To earn 70p you have got to finish a task - as it's all piecework. If you don't finish you just get 22p a week.

In the wire and copper shop it's pure physical work. You are banging away filling holders full with lead and copper. It's a dirty job. Your shirt soon gets full of grease and oil. And you only have one change a week at the most.

If you start work on Thursday, you are covered in oil by the end of the day. It won't wash off. But you have to wait until the next Wednesday for the next bath night. You are stinking and rotten by then.

There's almost no training, even for long termers. They could make you experienced tailors, if they let you make other things besides overalls, such as suits, because they have got all the right machinery.

If you know every one of the machines you can call yourself a good tailor machinist. But no, they just sit you on one of the machines most of your time.