power workers' struggle for 35-hour week

NSW power workers in their struggle for a shorter working week adopted worker-control tactics last June. Their struggle became a focal point in the general critical political situation that has arisen. All political and social groupings are more clearly defining their attitude towards the proposition that the 35-hour week is an entirely realisable social reform now. As well, the fact that power workers exercised workers' control over availability of plant and generation of electrical power for four months has raised to new levels understanding by friend and foe alike, of the potentiality of worker-control tactics and relevance to the movement for revolutionary change.

The CPA power branch discussed the experiences of the campaign. This article has been written by the branch itself. We believe what they have to say can help the Left in assessing the lessons to date of this significant and unresolved continuing struggle.


HOW SHOULD THE PRESENT STAGE OF THE STRUGGLE BE ASSESSED?

Power workers, while continuing to campaign for the 35-hour week have, following majority decisions at regional mass meetings, discontinued their control over plant and power output, at least for the present. Some reasons for this can be found in other decisions taken by the 35-hour week committee. It decided to support the ACTU application for shorter hours for power workers under Federal awards in other States, and called on the Australian Government to intervene positively in the case. If successful there could be a "flow-on" to the State award under which they work.

But deeper reasons must be sought in the increasing political character the struggle assumed. It began as an apparently purely industrial one. The Askin State Liberal Government, irrespective of the Electricity Commission and the Industrial Commission, had the power to grant or reject the 35-hour week. If the government had granted it, this would have opened the way for its general introduction. But even this was not the main stumbling block. The self-action nature of the power workers' struggle was a rock around which Askin couldn't navigate. He failed to isolate and break their struggle, though he grew more skilled in manipulating black-outs in efforts to turn the public against them. His attitude hardened in keeping with that of monopoly and establishment opposition to any concession. In NSW Askin was actually assisted by Labor Opposition Leader Hills.
call to power workers to give up active struggle in return for the dubious prospect that he would grant the 35 hour week when Premier. For this and other reasons, Askin announced a snap election adding to the pressure bearing on power workers.

Askin and Co. felt they simply couldn't concede the 35-hour week because this would have been a victory for workers' control tactics, and would have spread these tactics to other industries. The rightwing and some others in the union movement, also didn't like the tactic. These forces "went along" with workers' control because they couldn't do anything about it. As soon as they could, they steered the struggle into another arbitration inquiry, then used the election and the ACTU as a way out for them.

There was plenty that was positive in the situation power workers were in. The unity between wages and salaried division workers was never higher; in self-action they found a power to challenge the Electricity Commission and the government; their fighting strength and organisation were intact; their struggle had involved the Australian Government and the ACTU; their case was better and more widely known, with higher appreciation of the 35-hour week as an essential reform in our technological society. Their example of self-action had won them wide attention and support. All these gains remain, but in our opinion, in deciding against a proposal to themselves implement the 35-hour week, power workers failed at this stage (they could still do so later) to adopt an alternative or additional tactic that would have been an advance in self-action, strengthening their struggle, with favourable nation-wide repercussions.

In Northern NSW, where the main power stations are sited, both wage and salary workers are determined to carry on the fight, to again use the tactics they worked out -- and to develop them further. And not only for the 35-hour week, but for other issues.

THE NSW ELECTRICITY COMMISSION WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN -- BOTH WORKERS AND MANAGEMENT RECOGNISE THIS.

There's an even more general result from the struggle -- the employers and the Liberal Party are forced to put forward "workers' participation" as an alternative to workers' control. The NSW Liberal Party has just put out a pamphlet supporting "workers' participation", quoting what it means -- appointment of union officials like Ducker, Egerton and Hawke to positions on boards of semi-government enterprises! This is contrasted to workers' control. The struggle between these two ideas -- participation or control -- will grow and workers are unlikely to accept this sort of phoney "participation", still less since it is endorsed by Askin and the Liberals.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE DETERMINATION POWER WORKERS PUT INTO THEIR FIGHT FOR SHORTER HOURS -- HOW DID THEY COME TO ADOPT WORKER-CONTROL TACTICS?

We think most significant was the determined resistance of workers to the effects of decentralisation and of ever-increasing technological development of the industry upon themselves as workers and human beings. These effects are compounded by the authoritarianism of the Electricity Commission which reduces all considerations to one: what will contribute best to its continuing to provide cheap power mainly for industrial growth and corporate profits.

The insecurity and limitations of small communities of short life, lonely jobs, jobs carrying increasing strain and responsibility, jobs with increasing purposelessness, and jobs for which workers acquired skills which have disappeared, the narrowing opportunity for promotion, and even jobs at all (e.g. it took 600 men at Bunnerong Power Station to produce 160 megawatts; at Liddell, 200 produce ten times as much). Over all is the feeling of alienation in a huge and growing complex. Add to this the erosion of wage through inflation; the changing nature of job and advances made in outside industry of some marginally better wages and conditions that supposedly once compensated power workers. From all this the 35-hour week offered a tangible gain and became a deeply felt need.

And power workers felt it was entirely reasonable that they should have it. Productivity for them was not only expressed in figures
of a five-fold increase with costs cut by two-thirds, it was all around them, they worked among its manifestations. They also worked among Management and Administrative division of whom 40 per cent already had a 35-hour week. Within the salaried division, the percentage is seventy-five! Is it any wonder that it was the 35-hour week demand that brought salaried and wages division workers into active unity for the first time? "STRIKEBREAKERS" is a key word to describe the barrier to making their now united action industrially effective. The Commission had cultivated antagonism between the two divisions, but its main counter to either, and now both, was the practice of using Professional Engineers, under its direction, to repair "black" plant and operate "black" controls. There was even a special "flying force" to rush to any crisis point. There was, too, among the workers, a strong trend towards the use of some new tactics and away from the traditional strike which would leave the engineers inside, and effective, and themselves outside, and ineffective. In this impasse, a worker from the floor of a mass meeting at Vales Point Power Station proposed they apply to their industry some of the tactics they had read or heard about from Haroo, the Opera House and the Clyde. And this they did, in a new and creative way! It is important to note that they applied worker control tactics to win a specific issue. But it is also important to note that the democratic control over their campaign, established after February, enabled them to discuss, decide and quickly and creatively apply those tactics. Workers' control tactics were not imposed from outside; they were developed almost spontaneously by the workers themselves. WHAT WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENTS AND THE MOST SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF WORKER-CONTROL EXPERIENCES ... HOW EFFECTIVE WERE THE TACTICS? Taking them in order: "work-ins" at the vital generating stations and associated activities that routed the strikebreakers, with Munmorah the focal point. The Commission itself speaks of "up to 200 day-work maintenance men on the premises during the evening .... engaged in a 'sit-in'", etc. Also here took place the invasion of the "flying force" escorted by 70 police to repair a "black" coal conveyor-belt. To avoid violence they were allowed in and they repaired the belt to the accompaniment of verbal comments from maintenance men, only to have the repaired belt declared "black" by the operators! This cemented the new unity in action. Munmorah was literally in the hands of the workers for a period. Similar police-escorted invasions were made at Bunnerong and Pyrmont stations in a desperate bid to extract the maximum megawatts from what are normally stand-by stations. Their reception led to management in each case requesting their withdrawal. The engineers eventually refused to do anything but their own duties. Then came the actual determination by the workers of what power was to be generated within the system, an action as much out of control of the Labor Council officials as it was of the Electricity Commission. Then confrontation with Askin's deliberate blackouts, and forced lay-offs of hundreds of thousands of workers, resolved when metal workers in a few Sydney factories themselves switched on power in defiance of phoney restrictions. Following another "No" from a second Inquiry, the confrontation resumed with a principled decision by power workers to control output so that employers were denied the chance of a mass stand-down of workers, but with Askin more skilled in manipulating blackouts. Large press advertisements blamed the workers but were met by similar advertisements exposing Askin, first by some unions together with the Workers' Control Movement, later and belatedly by the Labor Council. Supporting leaflets and other material began to take effect. The most significant feature was workers' self-action. No one could tell them what to do at the critical stages. More significantly, they didn't need anyone to tell them. They found and applied the answer themselves. There was an instance at one power station of workers restoring plant over a week-end, without pay, so that operators could maintain the level of power the 35-hour week committee had pledged to provide. In workers' control they found tactics giving unprecedented power to challenge the Electricity Commission and the government.
pressed the workers' self-action: rank and file job committees, worked out the forms of action which were organised by rank and file elected co-ordinators (one for each division. Overall decisions were made by job-elected delegates on the 35-hour week committee. The latter body was originally set up by the Labor Council in 1971, assuming its militant role last February after a passive 18 months waiting for the first Inquiry to say "No".

The rightwing Labor Council officials, sponsors of the futile Inquiry, simply had to "go along" with the advanced tactics. But they always sought to divert the struggle into "responsible" channels, even publicly of offering compromises without consulting power workers. The Labor Council inhibited the freest development of self-action. But there was valuable cooperation from some unions inside and outside the industry, notably the AMWU's initiation of metal workers' switch-on in June (but also others not on the Left).

WHAT GROWTH OF CONSCIOUSNESS WAS EVIDENT AMONG THE WORKERS ARISING FROM WORKER-CONTROL TACTICS?

Of the 5,000 men in struggle, those in the vital generating stations were involved directly and continuously, others at different degrees and times, and still others were relatively remote from the action. So participation ranged from "working-in"; controlling plant and output (a highlight was that of the operator ordered by the Minister for Power, Fife, standing beside him, to maintain output, replying that he was instructed by the co-ordinator to cut output .... and did so!). Some others only provided financial support. So the impact of the experiences on workers' thinking was varied. Even so, we felt that the concept of workers' control had been raised in a real way even for power workers far from the point of action. All agree that there is a new sense of solidarity and strength and that future claims will be made from a position of strength.

Clearly, the very vote to apply the new tactics represented a leap in thinking as did each following step up to and including the conscious confrontation with Askin.

A most significant instance was the call from the "work- and sit-ins" at Munmorah and Vales Point Power Stations for volunteers from the metropolitan area to help picketing. All who responded were welcomed regardless of who they were, what they were, or where they came from. Other examples are the firmly disciplined and non-violent action by workers to counter and break the invasion of police-escorted strikebreakers at Munmorah, Pyrmont and Bunnerong. At the latter station some workers were put on special watch over a few of their mates, not so much for their militancy as their hot-headedness, that they might not be provoked.

The "switch-on" by metal workers in June which exposed Askin's phoney restrictions was a tremendous morale booster for power workers. A view was expressed that its lessons were reflected in the majority decision to provide enough power to keep industry going and so defeat Askin's planned provocation to shut down the industry.

WHY, DESPITE DISCUSSION AND PUBLICITY ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY, HAVE POWER WORKERS NOT TAKEN OR IMPLEMENTED THE 35-HOUR WEEK THEMSELVES?

This tactic has been discussed on and off since it was first raised in 1971. Its first appeal came from the fact that this was the way breakthroughs to shorter hours had been made in the past. After February, it was the one proposal among those that launched a democratic action campaign that was not carried out. The idea was discussed of working the shorter week in different stations to demonstrate its feasibility.

Differences in attitudes appeared between the two divisions on the proposal. Many wage men, seeing the key role played by operators thought that only they could make the tactic effective, as they thought that taking it themselves would only give five hours' pay to the Commission. Many salaried men only saw the problem that, with continuous shift work, reduced hours needed more operators to fill the rosters if the previous strikebreakers were to be kept away from the controls.

Views expressed in the discussion were that of necessity and for a time, workers' control over plant and output absorbed the workers
attention and initiative.

Not enough preparation had been given to working out the how, when, where and why the 35 hours should be implemented: that implementation had never been lifted out of its traditional concept and sufficiently related to the actuality of their struggle. This view saw it as the next step in developing workers' self-action and control and a fresh initiative in their challenge to Askin. At only one of the regional mass meetings was implementation seriously debated. Wages men who had participated in the sit-in and what followed discussed taking the 35-hour week for an hour and a half before deciding narrowly against it (by 302 votes to 250).

HOW DID THE LEFT CONTRIBUTE TO THE STRUGGLE ...... HOW SHOULD THE BRANCH ASSESS ITS OWN CONTRIBUTION?

The greatest contribution was the popularisation of the concepts of workers' control and the publication of experiences which showed its immediate relevance. It was ideas taken from what they had read or heard of Haroo, the Clyde, the Opera House and the Newcastle Easter conference which sparked off their own tactic. These were seen as revealing both the capacity of workers and the kind of leadership they wanted.

The lessons from this struggle, all agreed, confirm the relevance of the CPA's policies. Several some-time members and friends of the party in the industry who doubted these policies spoke about how workers' action had shown we were right. Because of these policies, Tribune's coverage alone reflected the initiative and enthusiasm of the struggle.

The branch itself, in 1970, published a pamphlet "What is the Future for Power Workers?". This related the concepts of workers' control to the industry, and its job bulletins since then have continued to do so. They, too, have had a considerable effect.

The Power branch is mainly Sydney-based; that was a weakness. In the North, a CPA member, Ron Ross, was elected wages division co-ordinator, and he played an important part in the campaign.

We think that the CPA branch, and later the Workers' Control Movement, played quite an important part by raising new ideas, from as early as 1967 in raising the new direction the industry had taken. Then came the spreading of the workers' control idea, which was taken up and so creatively developed. We see this as the Party's main contribution, not just in this struggle, but in the whole movement.