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TRADE UNION POLICY AND  
THE 1852 LOCK-OUT IN THE  
BRITISH ENGINEERING INDUSTRY\*

I

The task of this paper is to examine trade union policy and the 1852 lock-out in the British engineering industry. The focus of attention will be upon the development of worker militancy and how this led to the lock-out. Although a history of the British engineering worker has long been extant,<sup>1</sup> the causes of the 1852 dispute remain controversial. In *The Story of the Engineers*, J. B. Jefferys emphasizes the opposition of workers to systematic overtime and piece-work.<sup>2</sup> Henry Pelling, in a more recent work, attributes the dispute to the opposition of skilled men to the employment of unskilled labour.<sup>3</sup> I hope this paper throws more light on the origins of the 1852 lock-out.

Trade union policy does not develop in a vacuum. This is the critical factor to consider with regard to the origins of the 1852 dispute. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the first engineering workers had been a labour aristocracy.<sup>4</sup> This was the result of labour-intensive production methods which demanded a high level of skill. Engineering workers had an unmistakable craft *milieu*; local trade societies were founded. But the period 1830-50 saw the diffusion of new capital-intensive techniques which undermined the workers' position. Machine tools in particular simplified many jobs to such an extent that employers found they could substitute cheaper unapprenticed men for the more expensive skilled workers. This led to an influx of unskilled men into the engineering industry after 1830.

In boom periods demand was sufficient to maintain employment. But during depression years, after a period of major investment in new techniques, skilled workers had to compete for jobs with unapprenticed men in a contracting market. During the years 1847-51, the engineering industry was in a depressed condition: the mania of the

\* This paper is a sequel to one entitled "Technological Change and the 1852 lock-out in the British engineering industry", which I wrote for the *International Review of Social History*, XIV (1969), Pt 2.

<sup>1</sup> J. B. Jefferys, *The Story of the Engineers* (1946).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (1963), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> The discussion which follows is based on my previous paper, *loc. cit.*

1840's boom had ended in a slump of great severity. Skilled workers, who had constituted a labour aristocracy, found themselves in a weak bargaining position.

The diffusion of machine tools had made possible an influx of cheap unskilled labour into the industry. And the slump had created a reserve army of labour in all grades of skill. The result was a period of worker militancy in the engineering industry. In 1850-51 the skilled men formed the national Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) from the local trade societies. They hoped this would strengthen their bargaining position vis-a-vis the employers. It initiated a chain of events which culminated in the 1852 lock-out.

## II

In 1851 the time seemed ripe for a counter-offensive by engineering workers. The depression had reached bottom and the economy moved into a period of recovery. Unemployment among engineering workers had fallen. In 1849 the Journeymen Steam Engine, Machine Maker, and Millwrights' Friendly Society had 1,000 members out of work, in a total membership of about 7,000.<sup>1</sup> By 1851 unemployment in the ASE, its successor body, was less than 3% of the total membership.<sup>2</sup> Unemployment payments fell and the improved financial position encouraged the ASE to embark upon an aggressive policy. The skilled men were determined to be rid of "abuses" like systematic overtime and piece-work which had become widespread in preceding years.<sup>3</sup>

The mounting number of disputes during 1851 reflects the confidence and aggressiveness of engineering workers. Most of these were local, led by rank and file workers, although there is no evidence to suggest that they did not receive the support of the ASE Executive. One of the first was a strike which began at the works of E. B. Wilson & Co., the Leeds locomotive builders, on December 16, 1850. The strike, involving 1,100 men, arose over a system of fines introduced by the management.<sup>4</sup> This followed the appointment of a Mr Steatham as works manager.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Operative*, 19 April, 1851, No 16, pp. 249-50; *Trades' Advocate and Herald of Progress*, 27 July, 1850, No 5, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Offices of the Amalgamated Engineering Union*, London: Monthly Reports [...] A.S.E., 1851.

<sup>3</sup> These had followed the spread of capital-intensive techniques in the engineering industry during the period 1830-50. Their effect on skilled labour is discussed in my previous paper.

<sup>4</sup> *The Operative*, 4 January, 1851, No 1, pp. 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> *Leeds Intelligencer*, 21 December, 1850, p. 5.

He had formerly been with Sharp, Roberts & Co. of Manchester, one of the pioneers of capital-intensive techniques.<sup>1</sup>

On the morning of December 16, Steatham found a man who had been working the previous night "skulking" at his lathe.<sup>2</sup> The man was standing with his elbow on the lathe-head, with his head resting on his hand, while he watched the progress of the slide-rest over his work. When this man went out to breakfast he discovered that he had been fined one shilling. This caused a mass walk-out by the men. The strike lasted until December 23 when the firm withdrew the system of fines.<sup>3</sup>

The workers had won an important victory. It is significant that the man fined for "skulking" was employed at a self-acting lathe, an innovation of the period 1830-50.<sup>4</sup> The firm hoped that the system of fines would contribute to the intensive working of expensive capital equipment. The success of the strike meant that the men had re-asserted their "rights and privileges".

In June 1851 there were two important victories for engineering workers in Lancashire. Early in June the Bolton firm of Metcalf and Dobson withdrew a man on piece-work after a protest by a delegation of ASE members.<sup>5</sup> Later in the month a dispute arose at the Manchester firm of Elce and Cottom over piece-work and the employment of boys in the shop. The men claimed that there were 47 boys employed, compared with 89 journeymen.<sup>6</sup> The men demanded the restoration of the customary 4:1 ratio of journeymen to apprentices: the surplus of boys would have to go.<sup>7</sup> The men also objected to piece-work. They claimed that the foreman refused to show them the work books and failed to divide the profits equally.<sup>8</sup> The victory of the men in both these disputes reflects the stronger bargaining position of skilled workers in 1851.

The summer of 1851 marked two further victories for engineering workers, this time in the West Riding of Yorkshire. The first took place at Carr's, the leading shop in Bingley. It employed 22 journeymen and 19 apprentices, and labourers were often taken on to learn the trade.<sup>9</sup> Twelve of the journeymen were ASE members. The men objected to low wages. Journeymen were paid 20s. per week, and some just out

<sup>1</sup> See my previous paper, especially Graph B.

<sup>2</sup> *The Operative*, 4 January, 1851, No 1, pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See my previous paper.

<sup>5</sup> *The Operative*, 7 June 1851, No 23, p. 360.

<sup>6</sup> *The Operative*, 28 June, 1851, No 26, pp. 409-10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 July, 1851, No 29, pp. 21-22

of their apprenticeship received only 14s. weekly.<sup>1</sup> The men demanded an increase of 4s. a week, for both society and non-society men, and a reduction in the number of apprentices.<sup>2</sup>

This would not only mean higher wages for all the men employed, whether they were ASE members or not. It would discourage the practice of employing unapprenticed “illegal men”, since the wages of both society and non-society men would be the same. The employers would have no incentive to hire non-society men as cheap labour, which the diffusion of machine tools had made possible. The effect would be to strengthen the demand for skilled labour.

The men’s demands were presented to Carr’s by a deputation from the Leeds branch of the ASE. But the firm dismissed the deputation out of hand.<sup>3</sup> A strike of both society and non-society men began on July 16.<sup>4</sup> It was short-lived. On July 18 Carr agreed to an immediate advance of 4s. per week for all the men and a reduction in the number of apprentices by five. A return to work followed.<sup>5</sup>

A second dispute in the West Riding during the summer of 1851 also ended in victory for the men. Workers struck at the Wakefield firm of Millner and Ellis when the employers hired an unapprenticed man as a machinist at 11s. per week.<sup>6</sup> The firm discharged the man and the rest of the men returned to work.<sup>7</sup> Both the Bingley and Wakefield disputes ended in victories for the skilled man. They had both stemmed from “encroachments” made possible by the spread of capital-intensive techniques.

Later in 1851, a dispute began at Harrison’s of Blackburn over wages. It started in September when several journeymen were discharged and replaced with boys after they had asked for a wage increase.<sup>8</sup> This was a direct threat to the “rights and privileges of the trade”, a result of technological change. According to *The Operative*:

“It was the duty of all men to get as much wages for themselves as possible, but when the general rules of the trade were infringed by men being discharged for asking for more wages, and boys placed to supersede them in their employment, the workmen

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. In the depression year of 1849 the average weekly wages of mechanics in Huddersfield were 23s.6d. See Returns of Wages, 1830-1886 [Parliamentary Papers, 1887, LXXXIX], Pt II, p. 460.

<sup>2</sup> *The Operative*, 2 August, 1851, No 31, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> *The Operative*, 19 July, 1851, No 29, pp. 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2 August, 1851, No 31, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 16 August, 1851, No 33. pp. 52-53.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20 September, 1851, No 38, p. 93.

considered that it was time to take means to prevent the recurrence of such aggressions...."<sup>1</sup>

The result was that the rest of the men left work and refused to return until the boys were removed.<sup>2</sup> An ASE deputation from Bury met with Harrison but no agreement was reached. It was not until mid-October that the dispute was finally settled, after the firm had removed the boys and granted an increase in wages.<sup>3</sup>

### III

The succession of victories won by the men brought a hardening of attitudes among the employers. They were determined to stop the rot. The workers, on the other hand, were encouraged by their victories to continue with an aggressive policy. This was the makings of the 1852 lock-out. There were, however, some preliminary skirmishes. A lengthy dispute began in the summer of 1851 at Kitson & Co., the Leeds locomotive builders. The year 1851 marked a recovery in demand after the previous depression.<sup>4</sup> And Kitson was set to maximize his share of the market. This he intended to do by keeping costs down at depression levels. In the late 1840's, for example, the wages of boiler-makers had been "considerably reduced".<sup>5</sup> Kitson was intent on keeping them so, but the men realized that the recovery in demand during 1851 had improved their bargaining position and they pushed for a wage increase.<sup>6</sup> The firm refused to negotiate and the boiler-makers went on strike.

In the face of the strike, Kitson resorted to the following tactics. He attempted to get erectors, fitters, turners and smiths to do the work of boiler-makers.<sup>7</sup> Technological change made this possible. The diffusion of machine tools had reduced the skill content of the many crafts in the engineering industry, which made for easier mobility between one job and another. The firm also imported workers from Newcastle-upon-Tyne to help break the strike.<sup>8</sup> But Kitson's actions encroached upon the "rights and privileges of the trade". His disregard of the demarcation between one job and another infringed upon the specialist skills of apprenticed workers. It was upon apprenticed skills

<sup>1</sup> *The Operative*, 20 September, 1851, No 38, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 October, 1851, No 42, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Hunslet (Holdings) Ltd., Leeds: Kitson locomotive order book.

<sup>5</sup> *The Operative*, 6 September, 1851, No 36, pp. 76-77.

<sup>6</sup> *The Operative*, 6 September, 1851, No 36, pp. 76-77.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Leeds Intelligencer*, 20 September, 1851, p. 8.

that workers depended in order to sell their labour in the market at the most remunerative rate.

Kitson's actions united skilled men of all crafts in opposition. On August 23, 1851, two erectors refused to do the work of boilermakers and were dismissed.<sup>1</sup> Two days later the rest of the men agreed not to do the work of boiler-makers.<sup>2</sup> On August 27 a deputation from the ASE Executive met with Kitson, but the firm refused to back down and the men were locked out: about 150 workers were affected.<sup>3</sup>

Work continued despite the lock-out. Kitson was able to make up the numbers locked out by using imported labour and "illegal" men. There was much bitterness and the dispute came to the brink of violence. At the end of September, two men were charged with "intimidation" in picketing but were subsequently acquitted for lack of evidence.<sup>4</sup> By October the boiler-makers had been on strike for 10 weeks and the other society men had been locked out for four weeks.<sup>5</sup> The dispute had still to be settled at the close of 1851 when, meanwhile, it had been overtaken by events elsewhere.

Another dispute which began in 1851 was to become part of the 1852 lock-out. In the 1850's Hibbert and Platt of Oldham was one of the largest engineering firms in the world. It consisted of two plants which together employed more than 1,500 men.<sup>6</sup> Its capital assets exceeded 150,000 pounds and during 1851 it made a profit of 45,000 pounds.<sup>7</sup> The firm was a model of capital-intensive operations: the "abuses" which aroused the hostility of the skilled man were most evident there. According to J. B. Jefferys: "The degree of specialization possible in a firm of this size made the piece-work and 'illegal' men problems particularly prominent."<sup>8</sup>

Piece-work and "illegal men" were among the causes of the Hibbert and Platt dispute. Both were the result of technological change.<sup>9</sup> The problem was that the firm had a different policy in each of its two plants. In one, apprenticed society men were employed to operate machine tools, while in the other, "illegal men" attended to the machinery.<sup>10</sup> In the plant where "illegal men" were employed, skilled apprenticed workers acted as piece masters.<sup>11</sup> They set the machines for the unapprenticed men to operate. *The Operative* described these men as

<sup>1</sup> *The Operative*, 6 September, 1851, No 36, pp. 76-77.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*                                    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *The Operative*, 4 October, 1851, No 40, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Jefferys, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *The Times*, 19 January, 1852, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Jefferys, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> See my previous paper.

<sup>10</sup> *The Operative*, 3 May, 1851, No 18, p. 282.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

“those workmen who raised a little above their fellows, have succeeded in taking jobs by the piece, and then resort to these unseemly and unmanly means of sapping the foundation of their own trade to feed their own aggrandisement [i.e. by employing ‘illegal men’ as machine operators]”.<sup>1</sup>

Systematic overtime was also in effect at the firm.<sup>2</sup> Both systematic overtime and the employment of “illegal men” reduced the demand for skilled labour.

On April 10, 1851, the skilled society workers laid three demands before Hibbert and Platt:

1. the abolition of piece-work;
2. the abolition of systematic overtime;
3. the dismissal of “illegal men” from the machines.<sup>3</sup>

The men set April 21 as the deadline for these demands to be met. Otherwise they threatened strike action.

These demands stemmed directly from the consequences of technological change. According to one engineer:

“In self-acting machines, in planing machines, for instance, a man may set upon a machine; he may set the machine at work, and the machine would work for half an hour or an hour without his paying any attention to it, so that he may go to another machine  
....”<sup>4</sup>

Once a skilled man had set up a machine tool, it was often the case that only an unskilled “illegal” operative was required to mind it. One skilled man could set up many machines, and one unskilled or semi-skilled operative could often mind more than one machine. James Nasmyth, for example, was able to transfer an “illegal man” working one machine for 16s. per week to working six machines for 21s. per week.<sup>5</sup> Profits and productivity were greatly increased, while the marginal addition to the operative’s wage served to attract unskilled labour into the industry. But this weakened the bargaining position of the skilled man. Even at 21s. the weekly wage of Nasmyth’s “illegal man” was no more than half that of the all-round millwright earlier in the century.<sup>6</sup>

The skilled workers were aware of the connection between technological change and the influx of cheap unskilled labour into the industry.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Masters and Operatives: Report from the Select Committee on Masters and Operatives (Equitable Councils of Conciliation)* [Parliamentary Papers, 1856, XIII], p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Jefferys, *op. cit.*, quoted on p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> See my previous paper.



*The Operative* examined the consequences of this at Hibbert and Platt:

“For some time it has been apparent that unless a stop was put to the practices complained of, the trade would entirely slip from the hands of the mechanic. It must be borne in mind that Messrs. Hibbert and Platt are perhaps the largest machine makers in the world – that they have within a few years considerably extended their manufactory, and have perhaps adopted machinery [...] to a greater extent than any other employers [...] We are not enemies to progress in any shape, but we cannot be cognizant of the fact that boring machines shall be made to bore three holes at once, and that the planing machines shall work three tools at once, without feeling that if labourers are continued at these machines, and they are still further adapted to the performance of work which has hitherto been done by the skilled workman, that there will ultimately remain so little for the mechanic to do, that he must be thrown out of employment, and the remuneration of his trade [...] considerably reduced.”<sup>1</sup>

Hibbert and Platt agreed to negotiate and the men lifted their April 21 strike deadline. Platt met with the men on May 6-7 and acceded to all their demands except the dismissal of “illegal men” from the machines.<sup>2</sup> Platt maintained that it was impossible for him to do this because

“the mechanics had given them up years ago, and the practice of employing labourers was held in every district of the country, and he could not give way [...] The deputation [of the men] acknowledged that although there had been a feeling amongst the workmen against working these machines; but since they had become of such universal practice, and since so much of the best part of the work was being performed at them, there was a feeling in the contrary direction...”<sup>3</sup>

One of the skilled men explained why this was so:

“We have everything to gain by this agitation; we have lost so much that we have nothing further to lose; and now, that a greater union exists amongst us, now, that we can speak as the voice of one man, let us say that we will be free. Look at our late struggles, they have been nothing but petty grievances; but those grievances which at first were nothing but a smouldering heap, had arisen to a

<sup>1</sup> *The Operative*, 31 May 1851, No 22, p. 344.

<sup>2</sup> *The Operative*, 17 May, 1851, No 20, p. 316.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 318-19.



gigantic flame, and unless it was speedily extinguished, the prediction would be fulfilled, that mechanics, like labourers, would be compelled to work for 15s. per week.”<sup>1</sup>

Both sides remained adamant. Hibbert and Platt refused to dismiss the “illegal men” from the machines and negotiations with the men broke down. The ASE members at the firm voted that strike notice be given for May 17.<sup>2</sup> The margin was 450 to 120 in favour. The following is the text of the ultimatum delivered by the men to Hibbert and Platt:

- “1. That the whole of the planing machines, slotting machines, shaping machines, and boring machines, be at the service of the mechanics;
2. That in the event of Messrs. Hibbert and Platt conceding that request, the removal of labourers take place as soon as other hands can be conveniently obtained;
3. That in the event of Messrs. Hibbert and Platt refusing to comply with our request, the deputation on our behalf tender in our notice to leave their employ on Saturday, the 17th [May] inst.”<sup>3</sup>

Further consultations took place. On May 16 an agreement was reached. It marked the complete capitulation by Hibbert and Platt to the men’s ultimatum. All the concessions, made previously, were re-affirmed.<sup>4</sup> And the firm agreed that planers, slotters, shapers and borers were to be worked by apprenticed men as they fell vacant. Christmas was set as the deadline when all these machines were to be in the hands of apprenticed workers. The issue would again be open to discussion if a majority of the society shops in the same line of business refused to conform within three years. The men at Hibbert and Platt voted their agreement to the settlement by an overwhelming majority.<sup>5</sup>

The employer’s capitulation on such a crucial issue requires explanation. The recovery in demand during 1851 may have encouraged a more easy-going attitude. But another factor was more important. The May 16 agreement between Hibbert and Platt and their men had been preceded by a meeting of engineering employers at Manchester on May 13. This meeting pledged the support of its members in helping Hibbert and Platt resist any “interference in the management of their

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>2</sup> *The Operative*, 17 May, 1851, No 20, p. 319.

<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 27 December, 1851, quoted on p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> *The Operative*, 24 May, 1851, No 21, p. 334.

<sup>5</sup> *The Operative*, 24 May, 1851, No 21, p. 334.

business".<sup>1</sup> An Association of Employers was formed immediately for mutual aid which had an initial membership of 21 firms throughout Lancashire.<sup>2</sup>

With the support of the Employers' Association, Hibbert and Platt found it expedient to reach a quick settlement, although it meant the complete capitulation to the workers' demands. This avoided an untimely work stoppage in a period of rising demand, and the firm was in a position to disregard the settlement when the time came to implement it. The inevitable happened. The Employers' Association met at Manchester on December 16, 1851, and pledged to lock out their men if the workers at Hibbert and Platt struck in support of their demands.<sup>3</sup> This was in spite of the fact that Hibbert and Platt had already acceded to their workers' demands in the May 16 agreement, particularly the dismissal of "illegal men" from the machines.

#### IV

It was at this point that the demands of the rank and file workers at Hibbert and Platt parted company with the policy of the ASE Executive. The point of departure was the "illegal men" issue. As early as May, 1851, the ASE Executive had repudiated the dismissal of "illegal men" as a Society aim.<sup>4</sup> This was a local issue which involved Hibbert and Platt and their employees, not the ASE as a whole.<sup>5</sup> The Engineers' Executive apparently made no attempt to discipline its members in the Oldham firm who demanded the dismissal of "illegal men". What it hoped to do was to rally members in support of an official campaign for the abolition of piece-work and systematic overtime. These had also been in dispute at Hibbert and Platt, although they had been conceded by the firm before the May 16 agreement.

The official campaign of the ASE Executive began when "an aggregate meeting of the trade", held at Manchester, agreed that systematic overtime be banned in the locality after November 1, 1851.<sup>6</sup> *The Operative* noted that overtime working was widespread in Lancashire, often until 10 at night, while men were being discharged from the very same firms for lack of work.<sup>7</sup> Together with piece-work, overtime

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Operative*, 27 December, 1851, No 52, pp. 207-9.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hughes, *Account of the Lock-Out of Engineers, 1851-2* (1860), cites minute book of ASE Executive to this effect, dated May 5, 1851, on pp. 8-11. The original is no longer extant.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 29 December, 1851, p. 84, contains a letter from William Newton, a member of the ASE Executive, which confirms this.

<sup>6</sup> *The Operative*, 25 October, 1851, No 43, p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> *The Operative*, 25 October, 1851, No 43, p. 133.

reduced the demand for skilled labour. On November 24, the ASE Executive circulated a questionnaire among the branches throughout the country. This was in the form of two resolutions: that ASE members refrain from piece-work and systematic overtime after December 31, 1851.<sup>1</sup> The replies to the questionnaire show an overwhelming majority in favour of both resolutions.<sup>2</sup>

The facts suggest that the official leadership of the Engineers' found the "illegal men" issue rather an embarrassment. This explains its repudiation by the Executive and its exclusion from the official campaign for the abolition of piece-work and systematic overtime. The "illegal men" issue highlights an important aspect in the development of British trade unionism – the differentiation of the official union leadership from the rank and file. Why did this occur when it did in the engineering industry?

First of all, the structure of the industry was extremely complex. Although there had been a diffusion of new capital-intensive techniques since the 1830's, there were still many engineering firms whose market situation enabled them to persist with traditional methods, long after a Nasmyth or Whitworth had made these obsolete. The survival of backward firms provided a haven for obsolescent skills and applied the brake to industrial conflict when these were threatened. This meant that while the "illegal men" issue might appear crucial to rank and file workers in an advanced firm like Hibbert and Platt, it seemed less decisive to the ASE Executive in London. Progressive firms which carried innovation to its logical conclusion were small in number, although they employed an increasing proportion of the total workforce.<sup>3</sup> Even Hibbert and Platt only employed "illegal men" in one of their two plants. There were also regional differences: most of the progressive firms were concentrated in Lancashire.<sup>4</sup> Workers in London were unlikely to see things in exactly the same way as their counterparts did in Oldham. Thus it is not surprising that the ASE Executive refused to include the "illegal men" issue in its campaign, and in fact repudiated it as a Society aim.

There were also the pressures of prevailing opinion. The opposition of Hibbert and Platt's workers to the employment of "illegal men" was a radical claim for control over the production process. This conflicted

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 November, 1851, No 48, pp. 173-75.

<sup>2</sup> L. Brentano, "The Growth of a Trades Union", in *North British Review*, October 1870, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> The 1852 lock-out was confined to Lancashire and London, and not all firms there were involved in the dispute, especially in London. It was a minority of large and progressive firms in Lancashire and London which locked out their men. See my previous article.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

with the view current at the time that the individual is completely free to do what he likes with his own property.<sup>1</sup> An Act of 1825 had restricted trade union activity to questions of wages and hours of work.<sup>2</sup> And capitalist ideology has traditionally maintained that the employers' authority must run unchallenged throughout the firm.<sup>3</sup> The "illegal men" issue was an open challenge to these notions and the ASE Executive did not want to risk a direct confrontation with the established order. There was also the problem of the "illegal men" who were to be dismissed from their employment. This was not likely to endear the ASE with other workers.<sup>4</sup> Opposition to piecework and systematic overtime, on the other hand, was far more likely to gain public sympathy. Here abuses of long-standing were widely recognized.<sup>5</sup>

The official campaign of the ASE, nevertheless, became linked with the Hibbert and Platt dispute, despite the Executive's disclaimer of the "illegal men" issue. The Oldham firm had agreed to the abolition of piece-work and systematic overtime before the May 16 agreement. Officially then, there was no dispute between the ASE and Hibbert and Platt. What was new about the May 16 settlement was that the firm had agreed to dismiss all "illegal men" from the machines by Christmas 1851. But this was only a matter between Hibbert and Platt and their men, and was not part of official ASE policy. Yet the Employers' Association, formed as a result of the dispute, claimed that it was. In a circular the Association maintained that the dismissal of "illegal men" from the machines was one of the official demands of the ASE, together with the abolition of piece-work and systematic overtime.<sup>6</sup> A resolution of the ASE Executive, dated December 24, 1851, repeated that the "illegal men" question was a local issue between Hibbert and Platt and their workers<sup>7</sup>. From the beginning, official union policy had confined itself to opposing systematic overtime and piece-work.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. Vansittart Neale, *May I not do what I will with my own?* (1852), discusses the 1852 lock-out in light of prevailing opinion.

<sup>2</sup> 6 Geo. IV, c. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Fox, "Managerial Ideology and Labour Relations", in: *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, IV (1966).

<sup>4</sup> In the event, the ASE did receive considerable support from other trade societies during the 1852 lock-out, but it was not enough.

<sup>5</sup> For a wider discussion of these see my "The influence of technological change on the social attitudes and trade union policies of workers in the British engineering industry" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 1970), pp. 254-63.

<sup>6</sup> This circular is reproduced in *The Operative*, 27 December, 1851, No 52, pp.

<sup>7</sup> *The Times*, 29 December, 1851, p. 84. [207-9.

<sup>8</sup> This is the view of Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-11. The latter reproduces a letter from Henry Whitworth, the Secretary of the Central Association of Employers, which does not contradict it: see the preface, p. iv. This is also the view of Jefferys, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

The misrepresentation of the facts by the Association of Employers was important in that it won public sympathy and gained new members. In December, 1851, the Association extended its activities to London. It was so successful that the Central Association of Employers of Operative Engineers was formed, which included firms in London and Lancashire.<sup>1</sup> On December 25, 1851, *The Times* published a declaration issued by the Association. This pledged a lock-out by its member firms if workers in either London or Lancashire tried to implement their demands. The dismissal of "illegal men" was included among these demands, as well as the abolition of piece-work and systematic overtime. On January 1, 1852, ASE members went to work but refused overtime.<sup>2</sup> The result was that by January 10 many member firms of the Employers' Association had closed their gates. The men had been locked out.

## V

When the ASE instructed its members to ban piece-work and systematic overtime on January 1, 1852, it limited the ban to firms in London and Lancashire. The Central Association of Employers of Operative Engineers was a body of London and Lancashire firms. Thus the lock-out by the employers of workers who tried to implement their demands was restricted to London and Lancashire. Not all engineering workers in the two areas were ASE members, and not all firms were members of the Central Association. Hence the lock-out was only partial, even in London and Lancashire.

The lock-out initially involved between 2,500 and 3,500 ASE members, in a total membership of more than 11,000.<sup>3</sup> There were also 1,500 skilled men affected who were not ASE members, besides 10,000 unapprenticed workers who were thrown out of employment.<sup>4</sup> The ASE immediately raised a subscription of one day's wages per week from each member still in employment to help the locked-out men.<sup>5</sup> A public subscription was also raised from private persons and other trade societies.

From the very beginning, the ASE found itself in a weak position. The "illegal men" issue, in particular, received a great deal of publicity. *The Times*, for example, was convinced that the dismissal of "illegal men" from the machines was an official ASE demand, and this view

<sup>1</sup> Jefferys, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Offices of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, London: *Monthly Reports* [...] A.S.E., January 1852, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

was widely held by public opinion.<sup>1</sup> The Employers' Association also had a very articulate spokesman in Sidney Smith who declared that the workers intended to take over the firms and dictate to the employers what they could or could not do with their own property. The Employers' Association put its case as follows:

“Ours is the responsibility of the details, ours the risk of loss, ours the capital, its perils and its engagements. We claim, and are resolved to assert the right of every British subject, to do what we will with our own...”<sup>2</sup>

This argument carried great weight with prevailing opinion.<sup>3</sup>

Financial support from outside its ranks was essential to the ASE. It could only meet the employers' challenge if as many workers as possible were persuaded not to return to work unless its demands were met. This meant in effect that the ASE had to support the non-society men who had been locked out, as well as its own members. This it could do on its own only for a very limited period. External financial support was essential but not enough was forthcoming.

In the half-year ending June 30, 1852, the total expenditure of the ASE was over 63,000 pounds, most of which was used to support the locked-out workers.<sup>4</sup> Total income during this period was about 44,000 pounds and most of this came from ASE funds.<sup>5</sup> About 4,000 pounds was raised by public subscription and almost 5,000 pounds was received from other trade societies.<sup>6</sup> Yet in order to win the struggle the ASE had to support the non-society men who had been locked out, especially the 10,000 unapprenticed workers, as well as its own members.

This was an impossible task. The diffusion of machine tools had created a much larger labour pool for the engineering industry, and at the beginning of 1852 the economy had not fully recovered from the previous depression.<sup>7</sup> Employers had at their disposal a reserve army of labour in most grades of skill. This was difficult to organize. In fact, the apprenticeship qualifications of trade societies like the ASE meant that unskilled labour was excluded from trade unionism. Yet it was essential that the ASE support the unapprenticed workers who had been locked out if the skilled men hoped to be victorious. “Illegal men”

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 27 December, 1851, p. 79; 17 January, 1852, see the letter from Lord Cranworth.

<sup>2</sup> Neale, *op. cit.*, cited on pp. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> See above, pp. 655-56.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 24, Appendix I.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> See my previous paper.

now constituted such a large part of the trade. But this was beyond the resources of the ASE. It was a small body which represented a labour aristocracy.

The financial burden contributed to the final defeat of the ASE. The employers, moreover, were successful in substituting unapprenticed men for the ASE members who had been locked out. James Nasmyth, for example, adopted the following course of action during the lock-out:

“We added, so far as we could, to the number of intelligent labourers, advanced them to the places which the Unionist workmen had left [...] and thus kept our men on full wages until the strike was over [...]. One of the results was that I largely increased the number of self-acting machines, and gave a still greater amount of employment to my unbound apprentices. I placed myself in an almost impregnable position...”<sup>1</sup>

It was this which broke the spirit of the ASE and made a return to work on the employers' terms inevitable.

By February the employers sensed that they were winning the struggle. On February 9, 1852, the Employers' Association published a declaration to be presented to workers for signature as the condition for a return to work:

“I do hereby honestly declare that I am neither now, nor will I, during the continuance of my engagement with my present employers, become a member of or support any society, which, directly, or indirectly, by its rules, meetings or funds, professes to control, or interferes with the arrangements or regulations of this, or any other establishment, the hours or terms of labour, the agreements of employers or employed, or the qualifications or period of service. I do also further declare, that I will not, while in my present employment, call in question the right of any man to follow any honest calling in which he may desire to engage, or of any employer to make any arrangements, and engage what workmen he pleases, upon, whatever terms they chose mutually to agree.”<sup>2</sup>

If the workers signed this declaration as the condition for a return to work, it would mean the total capitulation by the ASE to the employers.

By April the ASE was finding it impossible to support all the men affected by the lock-out. Slowly they began to return to work on the

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Smiles (ed.), *James Nasmyth, Engineer: an Autobiography* (1889), p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> *The Operative*, 21 February, 1852, No 60, quoted on p. 274.



conditions laid down in the declaration.<sup>1</sup> On April 10, 1852, *The Times* noted that “the contest is substantially at an end”.<sup>2</sup> This was officially acknowledged by the ASE Executive on April 29.<sup>3</sup> On May 1 *The Operative* declared that all men who signed the declaration should not consider themselves excluded from the ASE.<sup>4</sup> The 1852 lock-out had ended. The skilled men returned to work with none of their demands met. Technological change had undermined in a fundamental way the privileged position of engineering workers who found themselves isolated and divided.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 March, 1852, No 62, p. 291.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 10 April, 1852, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 29 April, 1852, pp. 164-65.

<sup>4</sup> *The Operative*, 1 May, 1852, No 70, p. 393.