

IMPORT CONTROLS: FORWARDS OR BACKWARDS WITH THE TORIES?

The urgency with which a number of trade unions, and the TUC, are pressing for import controls is rapidly transforming this basic element of the alternative economic strategy into a contemporary political possibility. Allied to the pressure from trade unions, the growing calls from businessmen in hard-hit industries and the conversion of some Tory backbench MPs to the need for action on imports could lead the present government to introduce some form of import controls. The potential paradox of import controls being introduced by the apostles of the free market currently occupying Downing Street must be responded to by the Left.

The past twelve months have seen a shift in emphasis in the call for import controls, as the deteriorating economic and industrial situation has bitten hard into certain industries. Previously the argument for import controls had tended to rest more heavily on the general economic case—most clearly put forward by Godley, Cripps *et al* in the Cambridge Economic Policy Review — that general import controls are needed to ensure that inflation of the economy benefits domestic producers, and does not backfire by sucking in a flood of imports which generate a balance of payments crisis. Increasingly the perilous competitive position of many of our key industries in the face of rapidly growing levels of imports has led to specific demands

for import controls to protect output and jobs in those industries.

The threat to pits posed by imports of coking coal, particularly in South Wales but elsewhere as well, has generated forceful demands for controls on coking coal imports from the NUM and the Welsh trade union movement led by the Wales TUC. The impact of low cost US imports of synthetic fibres — which benefit from a cheap energy policy — on the carpet industry, where a quarter of the workforce has been lost in two years, has led to a vigorous campaign by unions in the industry. More generally, the failure of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (which governs imports of textile and clothing products from developing countries to the EEC by setting quota limits over a four year period) to anticipate the recession in demand for textile and clothing products in the EEC has led unions to demand a strengthened agreement when the MFA is re-negotiated in 1982. This would ensure that the growth of imports does not run ahead of the size of the market. In cutlery, where imports which purport to be 'made in Sheffield' but which are actually manufactured in South Korea and Taiwan have had a devastating effect on UK producers, the unions have made strong representations for improvements in the 'Country of Origin' requirements.

In the motor industry the pincer on UK output between falling sales and a high imported share of the market has intensified pressure for controls, as all four manufacturers seek redundancies and BL have laid off many thousands of workers. Last year's TUC called for a minimum domestic content

requirement for all cars sold on the UK market. Both the AUEW and the TGWU are stepping up pressure for action to control car imports.

The strengths of this shift in the demand for import controls are the possibilities it opens up for alternative strategies to be fought for on the shopfloor. The TGWU have instructed all their negotiators to raise import issues with companies, including companies' own purchasing policies. The action by South Wales dockers earlier this year in blacking shiploads of coking coal at the request of miners, is a shining example. At Ford's Dagenham the stewards, backed by the membership, have campaigned to ensure that the company purchases equipment manufactured in the UK — presses and fork lift trucks are two examples to date. The increased consciousness that this has generated at Dagenham was illustrated when over 300 turned up for a meeting on import controls organised by 2 branches of the TGWU recently.

However, taken out of the context of being part of a programme for transforming the economy, or particular industries, the demand for import controls can have dangers. The recession that the economy has now entered is so severe that many companies face large-scale loss of production, if not bankruptcy. In such circumstances protection of markets through import controls becomes a very attractive option for business. The past few months have seen an increasing demand for import controls by companies particularly affected by the depression — but on very different terms from those of trade unions and the Left. BL's 'Buy British'

campaign was only one step removed from a call for import controls. The chairman of Ford Europe recently called for controls on the volume of Japanese cars entering European markets. In a number of industries — textiles, clothing, tyres, electronics and cutlery — trade unions have made joint approaches with employers to the Government calling for import controls. It is essential that unions call the tune in these approaches, linking the need for import controls to issues of industry structure, investment, product development and training — otherwise alternative strategies for particular industries will disappear beneath the cry for protection. The experience of protection in the 1930s is instructive in this context.

Demands for import controls can also generate chauvinistic reactions amongst workers. This is most clearly demonstrated in the anti-Third World attitudes of some textile workers, and the anti-Japanese flavour of calls for controls on mechanical, electrical and electronic products — even where, as with cars, the major threat comes from the EEC.

What flows from this is that at the broader economic level the overall objectives of the alternative economic strategy must be projected. Otherwise it is not impossible for import controls to become a part of ruling class strategy for maintaining the status quo: imposed when the going is rough, eased off when prospects improve. It is vital that the Left maintains the initiative in the demand for import controls — as has been the case so far — through an increasing campaign at the base of the trade union movement for a comprehensive economic and industrial policy to transform the economy of which import controls are only a part. If the Left succeeds in this, then any move by the Government to introduce import controls will be seen as a renunciation of their free market principles, and a major concession by the ruling class. The Left's case is put succinctly by Ken Gill, general secretary of AUEW-TASS, in a recent pamphlet by the union, *Import Controls Now!*:

'... to be effective import controls must form part of the kind of alternative economic strategy which TASS has long been demanding. This should include deflationary policies designed to create full employment, an extension of public ownership, the control and expansion of industrial investment and the large scale redistribution of income and wealth.'

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