

# OUR HISTORY

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## TIME & MOTION STRIKE MANCHESTER 1934-7



*the wiredrawers' struggle against the  
Bedaux system at Richard Johnson's*  
**by MICK JENKINS**

**OUR HISTORY** is published by the History Group of the Communist Party, 16 King Street, London WC2E 8HY. The Group exists to forward the study of history from a Marxist standpoint and to put its members in touch with others in the same fields. Membership is open to all members of the Communist Party. Non-Members may subscribe to Our History at the above address.

In the next issue Gillian Cronje will be examining middle class reactions to the 1889 London dock strike.

### **THIS ISSUE**

The strike at Richard Johnsons was typical of the fierce resistance which met the new Bedaux system of 'scientific' speed-up, in the 1930s. Mick Jenkins' account provides the first detailed case-study, and in particular brings out the degree of collusion between the firm, the police and the Ministry of Labour officials. The front cover shows the strikers marching past the Johnson works. The back cover reproduces the picket rota list.

## TIME AND MOTION STRIKE-MANCHESTER 1934-7

### The Wiredrawers' Struggle against the Bedaux System at Richard Johnsons

Mick Jenkins

#### PREFACE

Whilst preparing materials for a short biography of George Brown, a comrade and friend of mine who was killed in Spain in 1937, I came across the fact that he had helped the Wiredrawers in their strike in the mid-1930s. This struck a cord. I remembered the strike. I too had given some little assistance to the strikers.

My interest aroused, I decided to make a more diligent search for materials. I was very fortunate in being able to examine a number of documents of the strike and to interview a number of participants, and have constructed what I believe is a reasonably accurate account. The picture that emerges is that of a bitterly fought battle, with the odds weighty against the workers, with heavy losses for the workers, but no gains for the employers.

Nineteen thirty four had not yet shaken off the effects of Nineteen Twenty Nine-like a man who has survived a serious illness but only just Around 3,000,000 men and women were out of work. Towards the end of 1933 the figures began to fall, but not until July 1935 did they fall below 2,000,000 and as the clouds of war gathered they fell to 1,500,000 by the summer of 1937.

For the working-class, 1934 was nearly as black as 1929. The Means Test, bad housing, poor food and clothing; that was the lot of the unemployed man and his family, and for many in employment For those in work, it was wage cut after wage cut, it was rationalisation and speed-up, and every concession the workers made led to demands for more concessions. So in our ever-expanding system of production people starved and went without

For the capitalists the economy was moving away from 1929. For them the making of profits was the driving force—the only reason for being in production. They just had to get out of the depression if they were to meet the mad cut-throat competition of the home and world market, if they were to keep in business and if they were to continue to make profits.

The classical capitalist way of overcoming a depression was to intensify the exploitation of the workers and as a result to cheapen commodities and make possible increasing sales and so slowly climb out of the crisis or depression.

A microcosm of this process can be found in the situation of the firm of Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., Wiredrawers, of Forge Lane, Bradford, Manchester, and the nine month long strike of their workers, which stretched over the years 1934 and 1935, and was not officially ended for another two years.

# **STRIKE** **AT R. J. & N.**

**WORKERS!**

**"BEDAUX"**

**IS YOUR ENEMY,**

**OUR FIGHT**

**IS YOUR FIGHT.**

**your sympathy consoles us,**

**but ACTION would**

**HELP**

**YOUR FRIENDS ON**

**STRIKE**

Mark Buckley, Printer, 289, Ashton New Road, M/c., 11.

*'Leaflet issued by Strike Committee'*

## 1. RICHARD JOHNSON AND THE BEDAUX SYSTEM

Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., was established in 1864 from a firm founded nearly 50 years earlier by a forbear, a John Johnson, who in turn took the factory over from an original home wiredrawer who established it in 1773. With ups and downs the business continually expanded, continuously building new workshops-in the late 1870s a new factory was built at Ambergate in rural Derbyshire-adding new machinery, adopting the very latest methods and exporting its products to America, Australia and many other parts of the world. By the 1920s they could claim, when installing a new process of galvanising wire, that it 'made our product second to none in the world' and 'We were not slow to take advantage of the position'.<sup>1</sup>

From the end of the First World War until the introduction of the Bedaux engineers in 1933 into the works, the firm of Richard Johnson and Nephew Ltd., had increasingly made efforts to increase the efficiency of its workers, to produce more in the same time, or with less workers or less hours worked, and now and again, probably to vary the process, to ask for and receive a reduction in rates of pay.

On June 2, 1932 Richard Johnson and Nephew Ltd., wrote to Chas. E. Bedaux Ltd. stating they were particularly anxious to reduce costs in a certain shop, and would the system they advocated be applicable? Would they be willing to visit the shop, give a gratuitous report and some idea of the cost in achieving economies? An exchange of correspondence took place and eventually Bedaux Engineers visited the factory on Friday, 1 July.

In their report there were some preliminaries. First the aim was outlined. It was to improve labour utilisation and effect total economies by a reduction of unit overhead cost. Other improvements were likely to be disclosed in the process.

'The principal objective of Bedaux is the elimination of all ineffective effort and losses at present hidden'.<sup>2</sup> Then 'the underlying principle of Bedaux work measurement ... all human effort can be measured in terms of a common unit made up of effort and relaxation, in proportions governed by laws controlling strain'.

The unit employed is termed 'b' and may be defined as: 'A fraction of a minute of work, plus a fraction of a minute of rest, the two always aggregating unity, but varying in proportions according to the nature of the strain'.

The results of the Pilot survey in the Stranding Shop showed:

1. A net reduction in labour cost of 16%.
2. An average increase in operators' earnings of 17.5%.
3. An average increase in operator productivity of 45%.
4. An average increase in machine 'running time' of 25%.
5. The maintenance of quality at least at its present level.<sup>2</sup>

These were its main findings. There followed:

### Basis for Financial Computations

Without repeating here the calculations they made the results showed that for the 6 months (27 weeks) ended 3 October, 1931 there would have been a saving in the Stranding Shop if Bedaux had operated as follows:

- (a) On labour £756
  - (b) On fixed overheads £527
- £1283

Just with improved machine utilisation, this tonnage could be produced in 21.6 weeks instead of 27 weeks. Hence the total net available saving per annum (50 working weeks say) would be £2.970'.<sup>3</sup>

The firm 'decided to give the Bedaux system a trial in our Stranding Shop'.<sup>4</sup> On 3 November, 1932, Field Engineer, P.R. Wace was appointed to operate the Bedaux System in the Stranding Shop of Messrs. Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd.

## 2. BESET AND WATCHED

Exactly three months later, on 4 February, 1933, Mr T. Seed, full-time official of the Amalgamated Society of Wire Drawers and Kindred Workers, wrote to the firm:

'We beg to inform you that there is general discontent and unrest among the workpeople in your employ as a result of being beset and watched for the purpose of procuring their trade secrets and methods of working, which normally, and we think, legally belong to themselves. We therefore respectfully ask that the practice be discontinued

Again on 20 February, 1933, Mr Seed wrote regarding the question of unemployment arising from the operation of the Bedaux System and all it would mean, and stating that a well attended meeting the previous Friday had expressed its resentment at 'being beset, watched and timed ... and we will be glad if the Directors will respect the views of their workpeople in this matter'.

Again Mr Seed wrote a week later to say a well-attended meeting of employees heard a report of the 'negotiations ... together with the suggestion put forward by Mr Sawtell (Works General Manager).... There was an unmistakable demonstration of loyalty to the firm, the Directors and Management, but marked hostility ... towards strangers who seek ... cutting down the existing rates of pay and generally worsening the conditions of employment'.<sup>5</sup>

There followed six months of negotiations between the firm and the Union, and during this period the Bedaux system was not operated.

Simultaneously with the exchange of letters, the meetings and negotiations between the Union and the Management, the firm must have maintained a correspondence with the Bedaux people on how to handle the Union and its arguments. On 3 March 1933 a long letter arrived at Forge Lane addressed to H.D. Sawtell, Works Manager. It started off: 'We have gone through the correspondence which has passed between your Company and Mr Seed'. It listed the main points brought forward by the Union and said 'We would like to recommend that the proposed meeting with Mr Seed, the Local Union representative and two or three workers from each department, be made as informal as possible, the management, however, keeping the discussion within definite limits and directed towards their own employees, rather than to Mr Seed and the other outside union representatives'.

They suggested the lines along which the management should address the meeting-Trade conditions, General World depression, need for efficiency, fairness of the scheme, no one will 'go out', timing operatives in nearly all industries etc., etc. The letter writer waxed eloquent and ran away with himself and started making the speech himself. 'Through your Union representatives, we have already assured you that'....<sup>6</sup> A grateful management replied 'The notes you send us are excellent and we are framing our remarks on much the same lines. Enclosed herewith is a copy of the letter which we sent to Mr Seed on Friday last'. The letter proposed a series of meetings of the work-people to explain the reorganisation scheme.<sup>7</sup>

Four days later on 11 March 1933, the management sent the Union a letter headed 'Works Reorganjsation' - enclosing:

1. General statement of the aims and objects... of a general reorganisation of the works.
2. A more detailed description of how such reorganisation could be carried out

With the letter were 18 foolscap pages of typing, facts and figures. The workers would find some of it very readable such as '... looking back over the last 10 or 12 years... great advances have been made in the management of the works, dies and other methods have been introduced, new machines have been bought and new trades such as the alumin-ium trade, have been started; and, in many cases, considerable sacrifices have been made by the men'. Point 9 under the heading 'Reorganisation of the Works' dealt with guarantees:

- (a) No one would be dismissed.
- (b) The available work would be shared out amongst those who usually did it
- (c) Every worker would be able to earn in 40 hours not less than he earned in 47.

One of the problems worrying the men and the Union was the amount of unemploy-ment Bedaux would create. In the correspondence, the Union Officials returned to this question again and again. The Union Officials were concerned about unemployment among their members; they were concerned about the burden on the State Unemploy-ment Fund, they were concerned about their own funds ... The firm was forced to say something. It issued a statement on 14 February 1933 which said:

'RICHARD JOHNSON & NEPHEW LTD., MANCHESTER

Assume

1. 25% increase in the rate of earning
2. No alteration in total output required.

In every three weeks, two weeks would be worked and unemployment insurance drawn for one week.

The Union replied with reason, with dignity and with feeling. On 16 March 1933, Mr Seed, on behalf of the Union, wrote: 'We feel sure the Directors will appreciate that their workpeople have interests quite as personal, far-reaching and vital as shareholders have in these works and possibly greater inasmuch as the whole of their capital, namely their talents and ability to manipulate the various processes are sunk in the business. While on the one hand, a shareholder expects a reasonable return for his outlay of money, the workman, rightly expects an equally reasonable return for his labour and skill.

During the past ten or twelve years in response to appeals by the management, wage earners in every department have suffered substantial reductions in their reward for labour and skill, so as to enable the Company to meet competition. We cordially agree with Mr Sawtell that further advances on similar lines are not easy. In addition to these reductions, the scouring of the world to get the best machines and the adoption of new methods has resulted in a large volume of unemployment which has cost State Insurance an average of 20/- per displaced man per week. Concurrently, this Society has had to contribute a substantial part of its normal income towards the maintenance of those displaced men.' The management must have sensed the underlying indignation of the Union at the attempt of the firm to get the National Unemployment Insurance and the Union funds to subsidise the putting over and operation of the Bedaux System.

Further concessions were offered by the firm. The management agreed to make payments to men laid off one week in three 'as an act of grace and not as a contract'. They amounted to—from 2/6d to 10/- per week. They were prepared to contribute to Union funds to meet the Society's Unemployment Benefit for men in their employ who drew Union Unemployment Benefit and to inaugurate a Provident Pension Fund to be run by the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society Ltd., the men to pay a small weekly contribution.<sup>8</sup>

This period of meetings between representatives of the firm and the Union must have made clear to the management that the Union representatives were unshakable in their refusal to entertain Bedaux. A tactical line towards these Union Officials had already been indicated by the Bedaux people and so the management made a number of efforts to get meetings of the men—preferably in the departments and to start in working time and for the men to be paid up to normal finishing time—so that the management could explain the reorganisation scheme direct to the men. Five such meetings were arranged for 20 June 1933. A notice informing each man of the meeting was distributed, the final paragraph read: 'The importance of the decision which each one of you will have to take before long is so great that we are sure you will welcome this opportunity of getting first-hand information of our intention'<sup>9</sup> (Their real intentions were to be unexpectedly and dramatically revealed some fourteen days later.).

The letter was signed by the General Works Manager, and the Works Manager. The meetings were fixed, the Union Officials had agreed to these being held and would themselves attend. On the day of the meetings, the Union Officials received a telegram from the firm to say that the men refused to attend the meetings. The exasperation the management felt was kept under control. They expressed their regrets at the breakdown in arrangements for the sectional meetings, asked that a general meeting of union members fixed for the following Saturday, and which was to hear the Chairman of the Board of Directors, be postponed, and proposed that it would be helpful if their differences were referred to the Conciliation Officer of the Ministry of Labour.

With some reservation, the Union Officials agreed to the proposal. It was at this meeting on Monday, 3 July, that the Conciliation Officer revealed a decision of the Board of Directors taken on 2 March 1933 that is four months earlier, and brought forth a protest from the Unions representatives, which forced the management to make public the minute of the Board. It read:-

EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF DIRECTORS' MEETING HELD 2 MARCH 1933 (505 Time Studies)

The Board unanimously decided that particularly in view of the export trade, a new system of wage payment and shop control, based on a specialised time system, should be put into operation. That the Works General Manager is authorised to negotiate with the employees for the introduction of the system. Failing the negotiations being brought to a satisfactory solution, the necessary steps should be taken to enforce the adoption of the system, even if this course involves a stoppage of work.

### 3. END OF THE LINE

The mass meeting of the men which was to be addressed by the Chairman of the firm took place on Saturday, 22 July 1933, at 12 noon in the Fairlie Hall, Ashton New Road, Bradford. The Chairman of Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., General Sir Walter Campbell, was heard in stony silence by over 400 men.

After the Chairman of the firm had withdrawn, the meeting continued in private, listened to a report by Mr T. Seed, at the time the Society's Organiser, and then unanimously passed a resolution which stated:

1. 'We ... reaffirm our previous declaration of loyalty to the Company. Moreover, we intend this loyalty to continue so long as we retain the confidence of the firm under present contract service.'
2. 'In the event of the Company carrying out their declared intention of terminating present contracts of service with a view to bringing in the Bedaux expert to watch and beset us, such new terms of employment shall be refused on the ground that the conditions of re-engagement are contrary to the best interests of the state and and in conflict with the law governing the rights and liberties of British subjects resident in this country.'
3. 'That our representatives be and are hereby authorised to continue negotiations with the firm and to ask for facilities to explain the men's point of view to the Directors and Shareholders of the company instead of resuming discussions with the Conciliation Officer of the Ministry of Labour.'<sup>10</sup>

The Executive of the Union which had convened a special meeting that day at the United Hotel, Ashton New Road, a few minutes away from the wireworks and a few yards away from the Fairlie Hall, and had been in session prior to the mass meeting, resumed its deliberations on the 'position of affairs at Messrs. Richard Johnson & Nephew'. The Executive Council promised 'to find the moral and financial support to enable the men to refuse to entertain the idea...' 'That all Districts shall be instructed to forward to the General Office each week, its proportionate share of the cost of the Dispute'. The meeting placed on record its appreciation of Mr Seed and other officials, and adjourned until 12 August 1933.<sup>11</sup> This was the response of the Union to the revelation that the firm had decided on operating the Bedaux System and had taken steps to prepare for a stoppage.

At the resumed meeting in August, the Executive resolved ... 'That the strike weapon shall not be resorted to until all other methods have failed, and that Mr Seed be requested to communicate with the Solicitors with a view to Counsel's opinion being obtained as to the legality of the Bedaux System'.

They also agreed to send Mr Seed and Mr S. Chapman, the President, to the Trades Union Congress. As a result the General Council of the TUC indicated that if the Union failed in its court case, they would consider what action they would take, under standing order of Congress, which provided certain facilities for cases to be tested in the House of Lords in the interests of Trade Unionism. During the course of the strike, discussions took place with the TUC and correspondence passed as to what assistance could be rendered.

#### 4. UNANIMOUS AGAINST BEDAUX

This was the end of the line for the management. However much they had felt that the Union leaders were influencing the men against the reorganisation, the reception and resolution of these 400 men even after the threats contained in the Board's decisions of which the Chairman had informed the meeting, convinced them that they had to 'enforce\* the adoption of the system.

On 28 July 1933, the firm issued two statements; a general one stating 'We are compelled to continue the reorganisation', and the other an individual notice with name and works number which read:

Memo 74.  
RICHARD JOHNSON & NEPHEW LTD.,  
NOTICE  
WORKS' REORGANISATION

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Works No. \_\_\_\_\_

1. We hereby give you notice that as from Monday, August 14, 1933, the taking of time studies will be continued with a view to the gradual reorganisation of the works. '
2. All existing agreements will remain in force.
3. Should we decide in future to terminate any of the existing agreements due and reasonable notice will be given.

RICHARD JOHNSON & NEPHEW LTD.  
28 July 1933.

H.D. Sawtell  
E.A. Medley

This notice did not produce the desired results, if anything, it worsened the relations between the management and the men. Two weeks later Memo No. 86 appeared. It read:

At 3.15 p.m. on Thursday, 10 August 1933, the sentences given below were spoken to all the Cleaning House men, except the crane driver by EAM.

For several days now, you have been deliberately working below your usual rate.

As Works Manager here, I cannot allow this to continue, but as you are all old servants of the firm, I think it fair to warn you of the consequences.

Unless during the next few days your hourly output goes up again to approximately what it used to be, you will be guilty of serious misconduct and will be liable to instant dismissal for refusing to obey lawful and reasonable orders.

The last paragraph was given twice.

(Seeing that it was in this department some eleven months later that the strike started because they were not giving the required output, perhaps it would help to get a more accurate picture if a quotation was given from a management survey of the situation in the works by the same EAM just one month after he had read out the above statement to the Cleaning Shop workers. The survey is headed: EAM/T.<sup>12</sup>

WORKS SITUATION ON THE MORNING OF MONDAY 11.9.33.

When the machines have been improved in the ways that have been worked out, I believe it will be perfectly possible to speed them up considerably, or alternatively, to get one man to work three machines instead of the present two.

I should much prefer the speeding-up solution if that proves to be the right one, because there would be a tremendous difficulty at the present time if I asked one man to work three machines, whereas speeding-up, though doubtless it would be disliked, would certainly not have the same irritating effect)

The reply of the Union Officials was in line with their conduct over the whole period, one of tolerance, negotiation and above all else, the avoidance of strike action. They advised their members 'to continue at work until such time as we can seek the protection of the Courts.' They sincerely believed that the firm was interfering with the personal liberty of its employees and that a High Court of British Justice would uphold their point of view, and Britain's Greatness.

The determination of the management to go ahead with the reorganisation expressed itself not only in a plethora of memos and verbal threats, but also in action against their workers to force them to accept Bedaux, to submit to being timed and watched and above all to work and produce according to the dictates of the Bedaux expert. In November 1933, probably in an attempt to test how solid the men were, but in any case to attempt to break the resistance of the men, a number of workers in the Barb Wire Shop were sacked for not coming up to the Bedaux standard of production.

The Union pursuing its general policy of trying to avoid a stoppage, got the agreement of the rest of the men to make weekly contributions to keep the barb men out without taking any retaliatory action and without the men suffering financially. Within a few weeks the men were back at work.

And so for two years prior to April 1934, there had been meetings, discussions, statements and consultations within the Amalgamated Society of Wire Drawers and Kindred Workers. The Executive and local and national leaders of the Union were completely united and completely confident that the stand of opposition to Bedaux not only represented the best interests of the men, but that the men to a man were one hundred per cent behind them.

## 5. TUC INQUIRY

At this time the whole Trade Union movement was worried about the Bedaux System. Five TUC Congresses from 1932 to 1936 discussed or passed resolutions on Bedaux; on Systems of Labour Measurement; on Micro Motion Studies and on the Wire Drawers Strike.

The Newcastle TUC in 1932 instructed the General Council of the TUC to institute an inquiry into the Bedaux System of Labour Measurement. One hundred and four Unions were approached, ninety one had no experience of Bedaux in their industries, the remaining unions furnished details of the method of operation where the system had been introduced.

The first general conclusion drawn by the inquiry was:

'It will be seen from the foregoing summary that in almost every case, the Unions that replied to the questionnaire have opposed the introduction of the Bedaux System'.<sup>13</sup>

It continued: 'In the first place, such methods have the effect, and in some cases, the intention of speeding-up the individual worker to the greatest possible extent, regardless of his health, comfort and individuality. The object of such systems is to produce the maximum output per worker and carried to extremes, this has very undesirable results both physiologically and psychologically. Overstrain and fatigue may follow and may, over a long period, cause serious injury to the health of the worker. Moreover, the worker under such systems is made to feel that he is a cog in an inhuman machine for increasing output. The tendency is to obliterate individuality and craftsmanship and to make the worker merely a machine'.<sup>14</sup> Again, 'It may be pointed out here that so far as is known the Bedaux Company does not employ skilled industrial psychologists or medical experts, when the system is installed'.<sup>15</sup> 'It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the standards fixed are really based on the experience, prejudice and personal peculiarities of the Bedaux engineer himself'<sup>16</sup> and lastly, 'A final criticism is that the Bedaux System by increasing output per head, results in the displacement of labour'.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. THE STRIKE BEGINS-JUNE 1934

The immediate cause of the strike was the position in the Cleaning Shop. This was a key department, it was the first process in the manufacture of wire. The work was of a highly skilled character, in spite of its designation, the Cleaning Shop. Here the rust and scale were removed from the steel rods. They were passed through acid tanks, then through water, then dipped in lime and then through a process called 'blueing' that is passed through ovens to be dried out. Some of the processes had to be timed to a second, and not with the aid of a stop watch, otherwise dirt remaining on the rods would cause them to crack, or a couple of seconds too long in the ovens would make them brittle.

The department contained 16 men plus the crane driver. Of the 16 men 14 were Irish workers. All 16 were not only good at their jobs but were 'old servants' of the firm as Mr Medley acknowledged in the warning he had read out.

For some two years prior to April 1934, the period of continuous effort to persuade the men to accept Bedaux, the firm had tried to get this department to agree to work a double shift with 'reorganisation'. In April 1934, after nearly two years of increasing lack of harmony, an agreement was arrived at, giving the men 52/6d. per 47 hours with the 'B' bonus system.<sup>18</sup> This meant a loss of 7/6d. and 10/d. per man per week. Resentment at the loss of wages, increased sickness, management complaints that production was not high enough increased the tension and led to the men refusing to allow the Bedaux engineer to time them.

The moment the Bedaux Engineer entered through the door, the men stopped work. They shut the vats down. At this stage the men, like the men of the whole works, were prepared to co-operate and try anything to help the firm but under no circumstances were they prepared to be 'watched and beset'. As one heated atmosphere was cooled down and things got back to normal, the temperature rose steeply again as Mr Wace, stop watch in hand, put his face round the door. Work immediately stopped.

According to the management of Richard Johnson and Nephew the men had consistently refused to give the required output based on the agreement. So at the end of June 1934, after warnings and conferences, the management felt they had no alternative but to give the men notice of dismissal. On the surface, the impression could be got that these sixteen men were isolated and without support. In fact, whilst the sixteen were sacked with due notice of dismissal, five hundred of the rest of the workers struck work, without notice, and against the advice of the Union, in sympathy with the sixteen.

There is no doubt that the general conclusions arrived at by the TUC Inquiry of 1932, fully reflected the actual situation in the individual factories where Bedaux was being applied. It was certainly true of Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., in 1934.

The action of the men was not ill-considered, hasty or irresponsible, nor was it sixteen men who 'have refused consistently to give the output required' because of any cussedness on their part. On the contrary, the men had suffered twelve months of Bedaux.

The men had seven shillings and sixpence to ten shillings taken from them. Cleaners who had earned their wages and tried to save £75 worth of acid a week had been sacked.<sup>19</sup> What is more, the evidence shows conclusively that the overwhelming majority of the workers were united in opposition to Bedaux.

The attitude of the Union seems to have been that their members were fully justified in taking the stand they did and that whilst they were prepared to enter into discussion or negotiation with Messrs. Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., they made it perfectly clear that they had no concessions to make on Bedaux as far as the men were concerned. They were prepared to discuss the applications of Bedaux to machinery or re-organisation, but not to their members. But the firm was determined to introduce Bedaux. After one hundred years of existence, playing not an unimportant role in the industrialisation of the British economy, moving forward at each stage of technological development, and meeting all industrial challenges, and creating a fortune in the process, they certainly were not going to be diverted from this path by a bunch of workers led by officials elected from their own ranks.

It was a case of heels well dug in with no concessions on their part. They were determined to have Bedaux whatever the workers said or did. This went on for nearly four months, with five hundred men on strike. Then the bosses made a most well-prepared well-organised and dramatic move, which was the culmination of a carefully laid plan, that was to end the strike in defeat for the men but not a victory for the firm.

On 13 July 1934, the firm sent a letter to the Union in which they said: 'Our works are still open for the men who left without notice, to return to their former positions without any change in the pre-existing conditions, which latter include a continuance of the reorganisation of the works'.<sup>20</sup>

On 4th September 1934, a further offer to re-engage the men at the same average earnings as before was made through the Lord Mayor of Manchester. Both these offers were turned down by the Union on behalf of the men. On September 28, 1934, the firm sent the Union a letter which ended: 'This action on the part of your Society further compels us to give you due notice hereby to terminate all agreements applicable to our Manchester Works existing on 30 June, 1934, between your Society and your members and ourselves'.<sup>21</sup>

And that was a slamming of the door firmly intended not to be reopened, and all the sweet reasonableness on the part of the firm in subsequent discussion with the Lord Mayor, the representatives of the Trade Unions who had members in the works and representatives of the Trades Council could not hide the single mindedness of Sir Walter Campbell and his colleagues in obtaining, peaceably and with the agreement of the Union, if possible, forceably and with organised strike breaking, if necessary, the imposition of the Bedaux System on the workers at Messrs. Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd.

## 7. STRIKE BREAKING

The firm announced in the 15th week of the strike that the works would restart on Wednesday, 10 October 1934, with labour imported from outside. On Wednesday morning, long before the normal starting time, Forge Lane contained a seething mass of men and women strikers, their families, workers from nearby factories and places of employment, sympathisers and others. All seven entrances were mass picketed. Soon a large force of police arrived and proceeded to move the strikers and everyone else out of Forge Lane; Trade Union officials, leaders of the strikers and individual strikers protested without effect.

The firm obviously in collaboration with the police, prepared their tactics to the last detail. Led by police motor cycle patrols, two motor coaches, moving swiftly, drove the scabs right into the works.

Some fifty men from outside were now in the works scabbing on the 500 outside. On the firm's own admission, these men were semi-skilled. But the firm suffered immediate retaliation. One hundred and fifty men in the copper department joined the strike. There were now six hundred and fifty men on strike.

Perhaps it would not be out of place here to say a word or two about the type of worker employed by this firm. Some indication has been given of the character of the firm. A family concern of long-standing, this found its reflection among the workers. Nearly all were local people who were born and lived all their lives in the Bradford, Beswick, Gorton and Openshaw areas of East Manchester. Again, in the main, these workers were long-serving employees of the firm, usually a sign of satisfaction with the firm and the conditions of employment. And yet there were now six hundred and fifty men on strike, united in their determination to defeat the employer's attempt to impose the Bedaux System on them.

Let us have another look at these workers. On that fateful Wednesday, the dominating thought among the strikers was how to stop the black legging. After the scabs were conveyed into the factory, a strong force of police was left to patrol Forge Lane and around the factory. The strikers nevertheless drifted into the area around the factory, small groups gathered, talked, discussed and argued.

COPY.

RICHARD JOHNSON & NEPHEW LTD.  
Bradford Ironworks,  
Forge Lane,  
MANCHESTER, 11.  
19th October, 1934.  
The Manager,  
The Employment Exchange,  
Mill Street,  
OPENSHAW.  
Dear Sir,  
We confirm having telephoned you to-day that  
the under-mentioned men have gone out on strike:-  
No. 2236 ... A. Barber. Should have returned to  
work on 8.10.34.  
No. 2243 ... W. Downing. Should have returned to  
work on 15.10.34.  
Yours faithfully,  
For RICHARD JOHNSON & NEPHEW LTD.  
Geo. POYSER.  
P.S. We would inform you that these works are open, and that,  
for the time being, we are prepared to re-engage at  
their former rates of pay the above men who have left  
our employ without notice, when we have work available  
for them.  
\* Phone message from firm on  
20.10.34.  
(Intld.) C.H.L.

*'Letter from Jonsons to the Employment Exchange'*

As the day wore on and the afternoon was drawing towards five o'clock so hundreds of men, and women again picketed the gates. Soon after five o'clock the police again in large numbers, cleared Forge Lane. The scabs were loaded into their two buses and with motor-cycle police escorts drove at a very fast pace past booing crowds and within a minute or two, were gone.

On Thursday morning, and for days after, there was mass picketing, police intervention, attempts to stop the buses and the inevitable happened. The windows of the buses were smashed, bricks and stones were hurled at the scabs and police. There was obstruction of the police and 'considerable disorder'. In that first week of scabbing, there were eight arrests. All had been on strike for fifteen weeks. Of the men charged there was 'Mr Archer of Cross Street, Bradford, who had twenty one years' service with the firm and had been complimented on his efficient labour',<sup>22</sup> said Mr Rawson who appeared on behalf of the Union and the men. There was Mr Booth of Kendal Street, Bradford, who had fourteen years with the firm, and others who had long service and were regarded as reliable workmen.

Mr Rawson proceeded to explain the cause of the trouble-It was the new system of Labour, the Bedaux System. 'They are all timed to a fraction of a second...'

The Stipendiary: 'Well, I have nothing to do with that matter'. He said: 'What was done was the negation of law and order. It was no good talking about liberty and freedom and then taking part in something which might amount to terrorism of people who had a right to their own opinion. Law and order must be preserved'.<sup>23</sup> The unity of the strikers the solidarity of the factory workers of this huge industrial belt of East Manchester with the strikers and the decided sympathy of the whole of the working-class population of the area, no doubt had its influence on this Magistrates' Court that particular morning. The Defendants were bound over and ordered to pay £4.10.0d. to repair damage caused to the buses!

Other court cases followed. One man was charged with disobeying police requests. He was the leader of a picket line, and his Solicitor stated 'Kelly had a feeling that he had a right to move about where he chose'. And there he was wrong ! Another case was for bad language. At the end of January 1935, there was a further Court case for intimidation. (In the course of the trial it was revealed that a police officer had visited a man who had been persuaded not to go back to work.) The defendants, two of them Trade Union Officials, were fined. In addition to the introduction of blackleg labour, there was the use of police on a massive scale, and the arrest, trial and fining of strikers. The firm took active steps to ensure that no man who had worked at Richard Johnson and Nephew Ltd., and had come out in connection with the strike, received unemployment benefit They engaged in conduct that seemed to be entirely uncalled for. On the 19 October 1934, Mr George Poyser, Chief of the Cost Office of Richard Johnson and Nephew Ltd., wrote to the Manager of the Employment Exchange, Mill Street, Openshaw, Manchester. 'Dear Sir, We confirm having telephoned you today that the under-mentioned men have gone out on strike:' Then followed the numbers, names of the men and the dates on which they should have returned to work. There is a P.S. 'We would inform you that these works are open, and that, for the time being, we are prepared to re-engage at their former rates of pay the above men who have left our employ without notice, when we have work available for them' (The first man named had actually finished work on October 6, because of a shortage of work and he claimed unemployment benefit from two days later, from October 8, 1934 to October 17, when he joined the union and joined the strike.

On the official Ministry of Labour form U.I. 624.T.D. the Insurance Officer's decision that the man was disqualified from receiving benefit was endorsed by the Court of Appeal. The Insurance Officer's observation on the claimant's statement was 'The employers have stated that claimant withdrew his labour from 8.10.34 and that work was available on that date. As from 17.10.34 claimant was also a member of a participating and financing union. He is not, therefore, entitled to relief under..... as from the date of his claim'. Leave to appeal to Umpire was refused.)

## 8. THE UNION AND THE CHANCERY COURT-NOVEMBER 1934

At the time of the strike the Union had been in existence for just short of one hundred years, being established in 1840 (A Friendly Society of Wireworkers existed in Manchester with forty-two members in 1827). At first the Union catered only for the skilled men in the trade. As with most craftsmen of this period the skilled wiredrawers were proud of their craft, their apprenticeship and their skills. They tended to be contemptuous towards the ancillary workers. In some factories there was a marked hostility towards the unskilled workers. The introduction of dies and continuous machines undermined the craft status of the apprenticed trained wiredrawers, who were reluctant to operate continuous machines, these being manned by workers with no training, and in many cases where this happened, the skilled wiredrawers would not even speak to the machine wiredrawer and so the majority of the unskilled were unorganised.

As this situation changed, so the need and understanding for trade union organisation and unity of all workers in the industry grew, with the result that some time shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, the unskilled were admitted into the Union. The name of the Union was the Amalgamated Wiredrawers' Society of Great Britain. In 1924, it became the Amalgamated Society of Wiredrawers and Kindred Workers, organising workers in all sections of the Wire and Wire Rope industries. The main object of the Society was to regulate the relations between employers and employed by regulating wages and conditions of employment in all sections of the Wire and Wire Rope Industries, and in general it had amicable relations with the employers in the industry. The Society hoped to defeat Bedaux through the law courts rather than by strike action.

Faith in the justice of their case, the impartiality of British Justice and the British Public's attitude of 'Fair Play' expressed in the early stages of the dispute remained with the Union and the men for a long time. When at the September 4 meeting at the Manchester Town Hall, Alderman Binns asked: 'Why should the men go to law?' Mr Seed replied: 'As an alternative to a stoppage', and added that Acts of Parliament over the past hundred years provided work people with the same liberty and protection as that enjoyed by other members of the state. And so following the August 1933 Executive decision, an approach to Solicitors and Counsel as to the legality of the Bedaux System was made and proceedings instituted.

The case was heard towards the end of November 1934. It was heard by Mr Justice Luxmore in the Chancery Court. The action was brought by five workmen: Mr Samuel Davies, Mr Joseph Cordt, Mr Levi Wood, Mr Robert Best and Mr James Bennett (in the employment of the firm from eight to forty one years) all of Manchester, against Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., Wire Manufacturers, of Bradford Ironworks, Manchester, and Charles H. Bedaux, American Efficiency experts of Bush House, Aldwych, London, W.C., Mr D.N. Pritt, K.C. represented the five men and Mr Gavin Simmonds, K.C., the firm.

The men's case was that the firm had broken its contract with the Union and the men by interfering in normal working. To have a man with a stop watch in his hand standing over them, made it impossible for the men to work efficiently or normally; that there was proof that this conduct had produced a state of nerves in some men, had mentally and physically upset them, and that men had fainted under the mental strain created by the stop watch technique. The employers' side had introduced a sidetracking issue of wages lost but Mr Pritt made it clear that that was not the issue. The case lasted three days and was dismissed by Mr Justice Luxmore with costs. The Judge remarked: 'I am satisfied that what was done by way of observation was well within the legal rights of Richard Johnson'.<sup>24</sup> (It should be noted that at the joint meeting at the Manchester Town Hall on 4 September 1934, that is before the Court Hearing, Lt. General Sir Walter Campbell had said in reply to complaints about the effects of stop watch timing that he was prepared to give instructions that no man should be timed more than half-an-hour in one stretch, and not more than two hours in any one day. Further, he was prepared to issue instructions that the posting of each man's individual production day-by-day in the works should cease).

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## 9. THE LORD MAYOR'S CONFERENCES- SEPTEMBER AND NOVEMBER 1934

The Lord Mayor of Manchester in 1934 was Alderman Joe Binns, leading member of the Manchester Labour Party. Alderman Binns was a Bradford man, born and bred, and had worked for Richard Johnson & Nephew as a lad. Like Lord Mayors before him, and after him, he was anxious to help settle a dispute which as he viewed it, was harmful to the City, to the workers and to the employers. Alderman Binns succeeded in getting the firm and the Union to agree to meet under his chairmanship and with the attendance of a representative from the Ministry of Labour. (The same who had revealed the Board's decision at an earlier meeting to operate Bedaux even if it meant a stoppage.) The conference was held on the 4 September. Divergence of views was deep and a postponement for one week was agreed to. The press and the public evidently did not know of these two conferences—at least not until the *Daily Worker* some six weeks later, on 18 October 1934, told the story of these two meetings. Why had the story not been released? The *Daily Worker* report expressed the opinion that the Lord Mayor was in favour of Bedaux, that he had hopes that with some modifications in the position of the firm—such as altering the methods of timing or a partial operation of Bedaux— (The Lord Mayor: 'Bedaux may be made very elastic—Now is the time to negotiate')<sup>25</sup> that the men would respond in a favourable manner. In such a delicate situation, publicity could be disastrous. How the pledge of secrecy from both sides was obtained is not known, nor how the *Daily Worker* got the story.

In addition to Alderman Joe Binns and Mr T. K. Liddell, the conference was attended by Lt, General Sir Walter Campbell, Mr H.M. Johnson and Mr A.T. Johnson for the firm, and Mr T. Seed, Mr A.E. Bywater and Mr W. Dunn for the Union. In the course of the exchanges that took place, one or two very illuminating things were said, and one or two very forthright statements made.

Mr Seed said:

'My Lord Mayor, are you aware that men have fainted under the Bedaux System?

The Lord Mayor:

'They fainted fifty years ago in Bradford works under conditions very much worse than those which obtain today.'<sup>26</sup>

It seems that Mr Liddell was trying to help, but Mr Seed at one point stated: 'Whenever the Conciliation Officer interrupted, it was always in support of the firm.'<sup>27</sup> Mr Liddell protested against what he described as 'Mr Seed's insulting remarks'. Inevitably, they came back to the heart of the matter, perhaps summed up in the following exchange between Mr Seed, who was at the time National Organiser of the Amalgamated Society of Wire-drawers and Kindred Workers and Lt. Gen. Sir Walter Campbell, who was Chairman of the Company. (Incidentally, Lt. Gen. Sir W. Campbell during the 1914-18 war was closely associated with Lawrence of Arabia and later was Quarter Master General to His Majesty's Forces.)

Lt. Gen. Sir W. Campbell:

'Reorganisation was necessary to meet competition from abroad'.

Mr Seed

'Let the firm apply Bedaux to their plant, and machinery and materials but leave the men alone.'

Lt. Gen. Sir W. Campbell:

'Reorganisation must be complete, each aspect was dependent on the other.'

Mr Seed

'I am allowing the firm to apply Bedaux to machinery and their own property, but not to the men.'

**Lt. Gen. Sir W. Campbell:**

'Mr Seed had no rights in the matter of the firm's reorganisation of machinery'.

Mr Seed:

'Could the men have an adviser to inspect the firm's books and ascertain particulars of salaries, selling prices, profits, etc'

Lt. Gen. Sir W. Campbell:

'Certainly not!'

Mr Seed:

'The firm was ready to take but not to give'.<sup>28</sup>

The firm's offer to allow employees to check the Bedaux engineers studies Mr Seed described as 'just to watch the robbery'.

Some two months after the first Lord Mayor's Conference, the Manchester and Salford Trades Council organised a deputation, including Mr Seed, to the Lord Mayor. A few days later, a Conference of representatives of the firm and trade union representatives, including the wireworkers was held. The meeting went on through the afternoon and lasted until 8. p.m., it then adjourned until November 16. The meeting on the 16 took place, without the Wiredrawers representatives, lasted four hours and at the end, it was announced that 'a little progress had been made'. Arising from the meeting, it was expected that the wireworkers would make a move. The differences were indeed deep. The Wiredrawers had the Chancery Court case in a few days' time and were involved in preparing for it. Whilst this was true, it was also true that the Wiredrawers' leaders felt these conferences were loaded against them; that they were not really for negotiation-a searching for a give and take possible solution, but rather how to inveigle them into a settlement based on the acceptance of Bedaux.

The Union had asked for a postponement, but the Lord Mayor, in consultation with the firm and the other trade union representatives, sent a telegram to Mr Seed saying they agreed that the 'meeting should stand. If you cannot attend, kindly appoint substitute'.<sup>29</sup>

So the meeting took place without the Wiredrawers. The transcript of the meeting makes it quite clear that by reorganisation the firm included the Bedaux system.

Councillor Moss: (Manchester District AEU) 'If reorganisation means the Bedaux system of labour measurements, then I am afraid there is very little hope whatever'.

Mr Purcell (Secretary, Manchester and Salford Trades Council) 'Yes, I think that applies Mr Chairman',

Councillor Moss: '... if reorganisation means an attempt to impose the Bedaux system of labour measurement, then we cannot accept the term reorganisation as applied in that fashion'.

Sir Walter Campbell: 'I do not quite know what is meant by the Bedaux system of labour measurement'.<sup>30</sup>

This conference further confirmed the determination of the firm to operate the Bedaux system.

The offer of returning to the status quo had been withdrawn on 28 September. There was no going back to that. The temporary concession not to engage further labour in view of this conference taking place, was to end with the ending of the conference. The firm was absolutely adamant that the one hundred and thirty blacklegs in the works were there to stay, come what may. 'The honour of my firm is pledged, pledged not in words, but pledged in writing, to each individual man; that as long as he wishes to remain with us, and gives us satisfactory service like anyone else, he will not be discharged', said Sir Walter Campbell.<sup>31</sup>

It seemed that that was the end of the Lord Mayor's conferences. The firm proceeded to staff the works with scab labour, with semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Meantime, the strike remained solid. Strike pay was 30/- per week for the skilled wire drawers and 1 2/- per week for the ancillary workers. (The contributions were 1/6d. per week for the skilled workers and 6d. per week for the unskilled workers.) Part of the cost of the strike was met by District Committees of the skilled section levying their members 6d. in the £. up to £3 of earnings to 1/- in the £ over £3 per week. Nevertheless, the strike represented a big drain on the resources of this small trade union (in 1935 it had a total of 4,952 members and 5,644 in 1937) and it had to seek financial help and assistance from trade unionists and others outside its own ranks. In addition, strike pay for the majority very soon proved inadequate to provide the most immediate necessities of life and much suffering was experienced, and so supplementary forms of relief had to be found.

## 10. MANCHESTER AND SALFORD TRADES COUNCIL

Delegates to the Manchester and Salford Trades Council took up the cudgels on behalf of the wireworkers. When one bears in mind the very limited powers of Trades Councils, at best co-ordinating bodies on the most general of issues, it will be seen that the Manchester and Salford Trades Council played its part to the fullest extent possible. The Annual Report of the Council for 1934-35 in the section giving month-by-month activities and decisions, for October stated 'The Council had its attention drawn to the Wireworkers' dispute at Bradford and resolved to give the fullest possible support. An effort was made to bring about a joint meeting, for the purpose of securing a satisfactory settlement, this, however, proved futile and it was afterwards decided to get the maximum of financial support'

Two months later, for December, there appeared the following:

'The Wireworkers' Appeal for Financial Assistance, issued by the Council has resulted to this date in £220 having been subscribed'.

In March 1935, the Council issued a list of moneys it had received up to March 20th. The total up to that date was £608.18.6d. Some 330 organisations and individual donations and collections are entered. 76 contributions came from organisations associated with the printing Trades Unions. It is not without significance that the largest donation of £58.0.0d. came from the Hyde Road Car Works and was third on the list and later a second subscription from the Hyde Road Tram and Bus Workers Works Committee of £8.10.0d. was recorded. Manchester Corporation buses were conveying the scabs. When a third bus was put on, a further twenty men from the Copper Department came out on strike. The busmen were incensed and wanted to strike. They held mass meetings. These coincided with efforts being made by the Trades Council to bring together fifteen unions with members in Richard Johnson's, and so the busmen were persuaded to postpone action.

Most of the rank-and-file trade union organisations contributed to that Fund, whilst Trades Councils from all the larger and some smaller towns of Lancashire organised collections. It is not possible to give the final total of the fund, as the records of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council were destroyed in the Nazi Blitz on the two cities at Christmas, 1940. In addition to this local fund raising effort, the General Council of the TUC issued a circular letter on 21 February 1935, addressed to all affiliated Societies urging support of the fund opened by the Wireworkers Society. At the 1935 Congress of the TUC Mr T. Seed thanked the Manchester and Salford Trades Council, the Trades Councils in the neighbourhood and the General Council for subscribing £1,900.

## 11. 'BOILING FROTH'

One thousand, nine hundred pounds between six hundred and fifty men, over a period of many months, did not go very far, but it helped. Families which had denuded themselves of non-essential goods in their homes, were able to obtain from the Board of Guardians, vouchers to the value of three shillings and sixpence (17.5p) to be spent on groceries at local shops that would accept them. Cigarettes etc., were barred. The Union itself issued vouchers valued at two shillings and sixpence to be spent at the local Co-operative Society. The Union also issued Christmas hampers for two years running. The depth of feelings, 'boiling froth', as one middle-aged woman whose grandfather, father and brothers worked at the Wireworks, and later, during the war, worked there herself, described the state of feeling among the strikers and people of the area. How deep this feeling was, can be gauged by the sacrifices and suffering endured by the strikers and their families. The local pawnshops were full on a Monday morning with women and elder children and the occasional man, pawning some family heirloom, some piece of clothing or property and when very little more could be found, women pawned engagement and wedding rings (replaced with Woolworth's wedding rings bought for 6d. (2.5p). In very many cases, as the time limit for redeeming the goods drew near, so the pawn ticket would be sold, at less than the value, to someone in regular employment with a few shillings or a pound or two to spare.

The story is told of the woman who every Monday morning took down the front room chenille curtains and the front room table cloth and sent them to the pawn shop, to be reclaimed and restored to windows and table on Friday afternoon. One day the husband coming into the house said to his wife: 'What! You're not washing the bloody curtains again'. He never knew what actually happened.

My middle-aged informant - herself a girl of twelve years of age at the time, and living in the street that ran to one of the entrances of the works, vividly remembers the poverty and suffering during the strike. Her mother used to make dresses for the children of the strikers. Their mothers would bring old dresses and the old clothes and her mother would unpick them, iron them and then cut out and make frocks for the little girls of the street.

That the strikers enjoyed the sympathy of the people of this area, there can be no doubt. Many of the local shopkeepers nearly bankrupted themselves with the amount of 'tick' they gave the strikers' families. The tradesmen made concessions to the strikers, clubs and organisations organised whist drives, and other functions the proceeds of which were donated to the strike fund. An anonymous donation, reputed to be a well-known Manchester businessman, presented pickets with four hundred pairs of boots. There was a tall, lean fish and fruit salesman who came round the streets once a week with a donkey and cart, and he very seldom received back by the end of the day all he had laid out at the wholesale fish and fruit market that morning. That day, he too was on strike.

As the strike wore on, so the strain on the strikers and particularly their womenfolk began to tell. Some women foolishly fell into the clutches of the moneylenders. When a mother can see her child suffering from lack of nourishment, when people begin to talk about malnutrition, then who can blame her for trying anything to alleviate the suffering of her child. With some, it took many years, right into the war, before they were able to wrench these petty leeches off their backs. With others, the accumulation of hardship, suffering and mental strain had a serious effect, heart failure, premature death and more than one woman was fished out of the canal that ran at the back of the wireworks, who had 'accidentally' fallen in.

The suffering of the wireworkers did not end with the termination of the strike. For large numbers, the suffering intensified and lasted for years. The father of my middle-aged friend, who was 38 years of age at the time, for months lived in the hope that he would get his job back in the wireworks. It was fully fifteen months from the commencement of the strike when he was definitely and firmly told that he would never again work at Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd. He entered the kitchen of his house, sat down, and with great difficulty told his wife of his conversation at the works but he could not complete his story. He broke down with head in hands and just cried bitterly. He did not work for six years. Two weeks before war broke out, he got a job at Clayton Aniline. During those years of enforced unemployment, there were occasions when standing at his front door about the morning starting time, he would quite automatically respond to the works whistle and join one of the groups of workers walking down the street talking with them until they reached the factory entrance. They went through the gates, he sauntered back to his kitchen firegrate.

Such was the untold suffering imposed on men, women and innocent children all in the cause of 'progress', 'technical advancement'.

## 12. THE STRIKE LEADERSHIP

Nine departmental shop stewards, the men agreed, should form the Strike Committee. Two more were co-opted and one of the stewards, George Baghurst was elected chairman of the committee. They met every morning. A key job was to arrange the picket rota. This had priority over everything else. The most successful picket line was the 5.30 a.m. to 7 a.m. A tremendous amount of work was undertaken in organising the strike activities. Some of the committee visited factories and trade union branches, to explain the case for the men and to appeal for moral and financial support. Some visited other towns and tours of Yorkshire and other counties were undertaken.

At particular moments efforts such as the preparation and sending out of ten thousand circular letters, or dealing with a large number of cases or parcels of clothes for distribution to the strikers and their families would result in the Strike Committee members and helpers working sixteen and eighteen hours at a stretch and in the case of the ten thousand appeal circulars they worked through the night. The committee as a whole, worked very hard, very firmly convinced of the justice of their stand and enjoyed the full backing of the men. The Saturday morning picket line was manned by the Committee itself.

The minutes of the Strike Committee, the minutes of the Manchester Branch Committee of the Wire Drawers and the occasional minutes of the meetings of the 'Captains' or leaders of the picket lines, show how the strike was a genuine rank-and-file movement. If, to those are added the minutes of the Warrington District Committee of the Union—which had jurisdiction over the Manchester membership—not to mention the General members meetings held in Manchester and Warrington, one not only gets an insight into trade union democracy but one can appreciate and understand the confidence with which the Executive Council of the Union conducted this gigantic struggle.

The minutes of the Manchester Branch Committee for a period of three years—from January 1933 to December 1935—were dominated by the struggle at Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd. In January 1933, the minutes recorded that 'a new system of checking and timing ... had caused a great amount of unrest... events were being watched very carefully'. In February 1933 the minutes recorded a full meeting of Kindred Workers on Friday, 17 February, a Shop Meeting of Day Shift of No. 8 Section members on Monday, 20th February, and again a meeting of the night shift the same evening. The skilled men (No. 1 Section members) passed a resolution: 'That this meeting agrees entirely with the action taken by the Committee and to stand by the Kindred Workers (ancillary workers) in their efforts to resist the new method'.<sup>32</sup> Many meetings and resolutions in this period are recorded in the minutes. The minutes are a record of events in the strike as seen or organised by the Union. In March 1933, No. 1 Section members, frustrated an attempt by the firm to hold meetings of their employees. (As already noted, it was tried again on June 20 with similar results.) April, May, June, July—month after month, the minutes mirrored the men's activities, their anger, their opinions, their solidarity and their joint meetings, their mass meetings, their votes of confidence. 'Chair asked for show of hands, against—none' that was August 13, 1933. Confidence in the Committee was expressed by the General members meeting on January 7, 1934, refusing to carry through the normal procedure of the annual election of the Branch Committee, re-electing the existing committee en bloc. Confidence in and respect for the leaders was shown by appreciation of 'The lucid and clear report of Mr Seed', 26 July 1933. As the months dragged by so the minutes dealt with the wider problems of the strike. Bowling handicaps; pressure from Hire Purchase Companies on the strikers; the arrangement with the Beswick Co-operation Society for the half-crown vouchers; the ETU and AEU members who were working; the Manchester and Salford Trades Council help and mediation; Christmas hampers; children's parties; production of leaflets, arrests and fines; appeals for funds (The Secretary and Chairman of the Committee were arrested, charged with intimidation, fined and had to pay costs); the Law Court case, the Lord Mayor's Conferences. The items discussed were endless.

In reading through these minutes, one cannot help feeling for these men. Uncorrupted, heroic, self-sacrificing, suffering real want and privation, and yet, absolutely solid in their simple straightforward belief in the dignity of man—a dignity that Bedaux threatened to destroy. When the firm declared all vacancies filled, and the men could register as unemployed at the local Labour Exchange, not a man applied for a job at Richard Johnson & Nephew. When the firm tried to induce men to come back, no one responded—the men were solid. Later in 1935 when the men ran out of benefit at the Labour Exchange, many were forced on to public assistance, but no one went to Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., for a job. It has been said that only four men who came out on strike actually attempted to go back to work during the strike and that six went after the strike.

It should be added here that in addition to the support the strikers received from the organised workers in the trade unions, they also received valuable support from the organised unemployed workers. The National Unemployed Workers Movement was well-organised in the Greater Manchester Area and had a reputation for being 'Blackleg Proof', Its biggest and most active branch was the Openshaw branch.

It was the propaganda it conducted at the Labour Exchanges in the area that won the unemployed against blacklegging. On occasions of special mass picketing, the unemployed rallied in hundreds to the factory gates and demonstrated their solidarity with the strikers.

### 13. THE STRIKE LEADERS

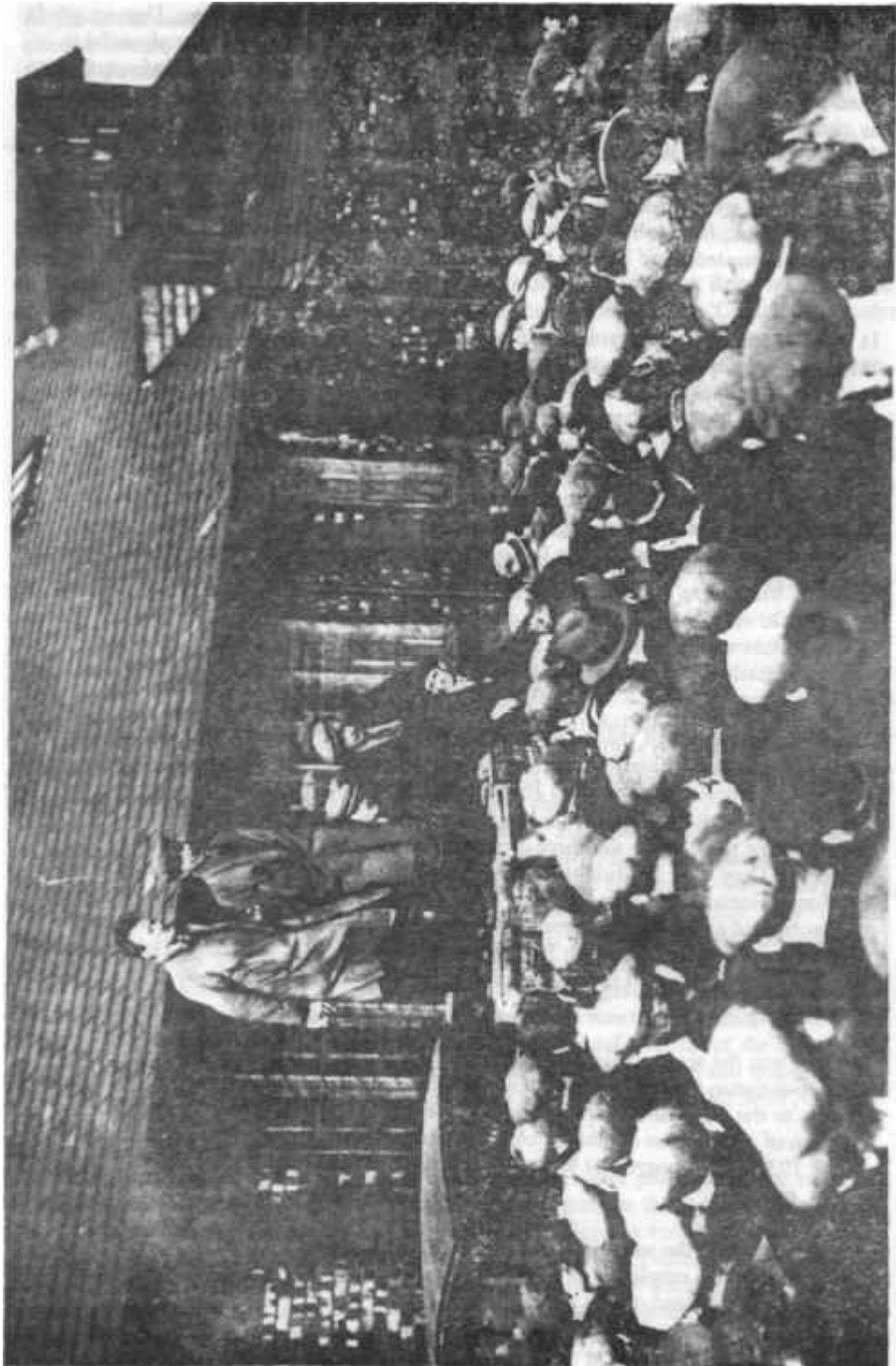
The principal leaders of the strike were Mr Tom Seed, Mr Alf Bywater and Mr Bill Dunn, Mr Seed was the full-time official, whilst Mr Bywater was the Manchester Branch Secretary and an employee of Richard Johnson and Nephew Ltd., and Mr Dunn was the secretary of the branch catering for the ancillary workers, also employed in the factory. In the course of the dispute the three men showed qualities of leadership and depth of character. They were forthright in their defence of the men, displayed personal courage and forcefulness which won them the confidence and support of the men throughout the protracted struggle. The three men formed the Union negotiating team with the employers and the Lord Mayor. Mr Bywater and Mr Dunn were the Union Delegates to the Manchester and Salford Trades Council and kept the Council informed of the dispute at all stages.

Mr Seed was the senior official employed by the Union full-time and as such, was the main spokesman for the Union in the course of the dispute. It was he who made the reports to the Executive Council. From his reports and statements, one gets the impression of a man who combined clear sightedness with natural simplicity. Describing to the 1935 TUC Congress at Margate what the Bedaux system of labour measurement meant, he said;

'In practice the scientific report (The Bedaux expert's report) means that 66 of the workers employed in the factory can be made to do the amount of production normally turned off by one hundred.'

He added:

'Neither Government nor Local Authorities expect to receive 25 cwts for each ton of material contracted for.'



*'Alf Bywater and Bill Dunn (with cap) addressing the strikers'*

He asked Congress not to accept an inhuman system designed ... 'to measure them (men and women in employment) as ruthlessly as greyhounds are measured for racing on a dog track' and warned 'This is the latest method of collective bargaining, not between employers and workpeople, but between employers and labour measurement concerns'.

He accused the Conciliation Officer of supporting the firm. He accused the firm of bringing in a third party (Bedaux) into the traditional relations of negotiations between the men and the firm.

When the offer was made to put a workman to watch the Bedaux expert working, he retorted: 'Just to watch the robbery'. Again 'Bedaux means dictatorship not negotiation'.

A Warrington man, some six feet tall, it has been said that listening to him in a conversation, you could be pardoned for thinking him a country yokel. In fact, he was a forceful man, and if he said a thing, he meant it. He worked tirelessly for the strike. He was on the Committee that compiled the rules and constitution of Section 3 of the Amalgamated Wire Drawers Society of Great Britain (This was between 1907 and 1912). He was a member of the Rules Revision Committee in 1924. He attended Executive Council meetings in 1918, was National Organiser in 1924, and became General Secretary of the Union in 1934.

Mr Alf Bywater, was a local man who was born and lived most of his life within the shadow of the factory. Mr Fred Bywater, Alf's father, was a skilled wiredrawer and had worked in the wire industry all his life. Wire was in his blood. The factory was as much his as the Johnsons. And as his two sons left school, so they had to enter the Forge Lane works. Alf Bywater served his apprenticeship from March 1, 1913 till February 1, 1918. On March 1, 1914, he became a member of the 'Club'. He became a highly skilled wiredrawer in the tradition of the family.

At the time of the strike, Alf was already a leader of men, enjoying the confidence of his fellow workers. He was a big good-looking man with grey eyes and broad shoulders. On a platform, he was a commanding figure. He developed an ability to address meetings and his sincerity, his devotion to the men and his strong character helped to sway many a meeting. He was always frank and straightforward with people, always talked reasonably, whether to fellow-workers or employers, never attempted to bully anyone. In spite of his friendly and pacific character, he was arrested in January 1935 and fined £3 plus costs for 'intimidation'.

The men recognised in him a good negotiator on their behalf and he was generally acclaimed as a 'genuine type of fellow'. He was concerned to improve his abilities and so attended WEA classes. It was there that he met his future wife. His deep hostility to the Bedaux system was based on his own experience of it. In the Wiredrawers Society report of the second meeting with the employers and the Lord Mayor of Manchester, appears this paragraph:- 'Mr Bywater said that the principle of timing interfered with the liberty of free Englishmen. He, himself, had been timed and he was quite overcome after even five minutes of it'. When it was obvious that further resistance was useless, Mr Bywater, under the direction of the Union, devoted himself entirely to helping to find jobs for the hundreds of men who had so gallantly stood their ground. Mr Bywater became the National Organiser of the Wiredrawers Society.

Mr Bill Dunn, like Mr Bywater, lived near the factory. 'All the workers lived a couple of stones' throw from the factory', he said. He worked in the Galvanising Department. The ancillary workers were not as well-organised as the skilled workers and Mr Dunn played a most important part in winning one hundred per cent trade union organisation among the ancillary workers.

He and Mr Bywater, were mainly responsible for the practical work in organising and administering the strike activities. Both visited factories in the area explaining the importance of the strike and winning support for it. Mr Dunn was one of the principal organisers of the sports and bowling competitions in Phillips Park which the Manchester Corporation put at the disposal of the strikers. Other jobs fell to the lot of Mr Dunn. One was to visit shopkeepers, especially furniture stores which traded on the hire purchase principle, appealing to them to be generous with strikers who could not pay their instalments.

During periods of slackness, Mr Dunn was forced to find work elsewhere in order to maintain his family. He was the father of four children.

Inevitably it was at Bradford Colliery that he obtained work during the spells away from Forge Lane. After the strike, Mr Dunn managed to get a job on the Salford Docks, joined the Transport and General Workers Union and was eventually elected to the Regional Committee of the Union. He represented the men on the Dock Labour Board and held these positions until his premature retirement due to health reasons.

#### 14. DID THE STRIKE FAIL ?

On the 30 March, 1935, the firm issued a statement to the effect that the works were now fully staffed and that more men could not be taken on. The Ministry of Labour agreed to pay unemployment benefit to strikers who were then off the firm's list.

For the men who had worked all their lives for the firm, who had given a life time's service to the firm and for the older men it was a very black outlook indeed.

Was the strike ended ? Were the Union and men defeated ? Three months after the employers had declared the works fully staffed and the Labour Exchange authorities treated the strikers as being unemployed and entitled to unemployment benefit, the Chairman of the Wiredrawers Society said: 'I feel sure you will agree with me that our members implicated have fought, and are still fighting.'<sup>33</sup>

Some fifteen months after the 'ending' of the strike a resolution proposed at the Executive Council advocated that a letter be sent to Messrs. Johnsons offering 'to go back where we left off. It received no support in the Executive Council. In 1935, the "year the strike ended", the Union paid out £9,600,15.8d in dispute pay and two years later, in 1937, £2,874. 15.3d. was paid out.'<sup>34</sup>

Virtually every Executive meeting until June 1937, that is more than two years after the 'ending\*' of the strike, discussed the strike.

Only on 11 July, 1936, did the Union agree 'that members in dispute be encouraged to accept employment, where such is available, at other firms instead of waiting indefinitely for reinstatement at Messrs. Johnsons'. The same meeting noted '... the present chaos in the works and the tremendous stocks of wire for which there appeared to be no market'. Another item in the minutes of this meeting read: 'Two letters from shareholders intimating that they were in disagreement with the policy of Messrs. Johnsons regarding 'Bedaux' were also read'.

The ending of the strike from the men's point of view can best be described by quoting from the official minutes of the Union. The minutes of the Annual meeting, held on 11 June 1937, states:

#### 'JOHNSON'S DISPUTE

A report was given of affairs at Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., Manchester, from which it would appear that all our members who came out in dispute and who were available for employment had been placed at other firms; that the residue were of advanced age and, therefore, could not be expected to leave the district; that the Management personnel now in the firm's service had likewise changed almost completely since the dispute began; that the Bedaux Company's experts had been withdrawn from the works; that attempts were being made to run the works under the old system but with imported labour and improved labour saving devices; that the dispute was automatically resolved as a result of these developments and the provision was being made to cover the Society's liability for aged members affected by the dispute after June 30, 1937, out of the General Trade Fund.'

## 15. EPIC STRUGGLE

This account of the Wire drawers Strike opened by saying that 1934 was linked to 1929. The massive unemployment, workers out of work for months, some for years, in a state of semi-starvation were all factors of some importance.

The overwhelming police intervention, a feature of all big struggles of that day, also made its contribution to the defeat of the wire drawers.

The link, in fact, goes a little further back, to 1926-the year of the defeat of the General Strike and the miners. 1926 had been followed by the Mond-Turner Cooperation in industry. Co-operation which, in fact, meant collaboration with the employers in putting over rationalisation schemes and speed-up in industry. It was a period of heroic and epic struggles.

The unwillingness of national trade union leaders to fight the rationalisation schemes of the employers was one of the principal causes for the defeat of the wire drawers. Vivid proof exists of the accuracy of this statement, in the minute books of the Strike Committee, the Manchester Branch Committee, and the Warrington District Committee of the Union. Here are two extracts from those minutes. They speak for themselves:

## MANCHESTER BRANCH

### MINUTES OF MANCHESTER BRANCH COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON SUNDAY, 10 MARCH, 1935

Secretary (Mr Alf Bywater) gave a report of the meeting of Mr S. Chapman (National President of the Society), Mr T.S. (Mr Tom Seed, National Organiser), Mr W. Dunn (who represented the Ancillary Workers) and himself, with the General Purposes Committee of the TUC.

His impression was that the whole of the members of the General Council were disinclined to do anything which might appear aggressive. Certainly they were not big enough to make an open declaration against Bedaux as a system. They did say that the cause of the men was just and that the spirit which had kept them solid for 35 weeks ought to be recorded in the Annals of the TUC and they would hold a conference to see what could be done for us. But it all fizzled out to them sending out a fresh appeal for money. At my suggestion that all transport should be stopped, both coming in and going out of the works, it was said that there was another committee to deal with and, of course, left on the table.

Secretary's report was accepted..

### MINUTES OF MANCHESTER BRANCH COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON SUNDAY, 2 JUNE, 1935

Secretary gave report of affairs at R. Johnson & Nephew. Several letters had passed between the TUC and General Office. The outstanding impression one got from the correspondence is that the TUC were trying hard to wriggle out of their responsibility. That the situation was one which they could not cope with and that they were trying to pitchfork the job on to anyone who would shoulder the burden. This arose out of the fact that Mr Citrine was continually detailing Mr Tewson for the work which he should have done himself.

Another question relating to the defeat of the strike was that of the skilled workers. The lack of unity and possibly inter-union rivalries allowed the employers to use the maintenance men to keep the factory going. A threat by the maintenance men that they would strike if scabs were brought in might have altered the course of the strike. Similarly if it had been made clear that any attempt to introduce blacklegs would be answered with a shut-down of the whole of the Johnson combine-especially the Ambergate works, this too might have altered the whole course of the strike.

(The question of Ambergate being brought out on strike was raised and the advice given was for the Ambergate men not to come out as they were engaged in high strain stuff only. They were making wire for spring mattresses, for bicycle wheels, wire for tyres, rope wire and the like and this was not made at Manchester, and of course, Ambergate never made any Barb or Strand wire such as the Manchester works made.)

Support from other factories in the Johnson combine would have strengthened the fight for a complete shut down of the Forge Lane works and made it more difficult for the leaders of the other trade unions to justify their refusal to call their men out

The history of **trade** unionism is not a history of strike victories only. And yet had these strikes not taken place, the standards and conditions of working people would have declined, or would not have been improved to the extent they have been. Trade unionism has organised the worker, has taught him to fight for his rights and his well-being. Strikes, whether won or lost, do not fail. On the contrary, this particular strike proved to the powers that be that working men are not chattels. They have standards which they will defend and not permit to be lowered; they have dignity and demand respect. In the face of over-powering strength and brute force they showed fine qualities of determination, solidarity and self-sacrifice and remained true to their Trade Union and their principles.

The nine months' long strike of the wireworkers was, in its own way, an epic struggle, in line with the long history of militant class battles fought by the Manchester and Lancashire working-class which will make its contribution to the victory, one day, that will abolish such exploitation of man by man for ever.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. **The Part We Played.** Michael Johnson p.20.
2. **Report on Bedaux Survey of Messrs. Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., Strand Shop, Manchester,** signed J. Leslie Orr, Chief Consulting Engineer, Chas. E. Bedaux Ltd., 6 July 1932.
3. Ditto
4. General Works Manager, Richard Johnson & Nephew Ltd., to Chas. E. Bedaux, 2 August 1932.
5. Letter from Mr T. Seed, Organiser ASWDKW, 28 February 1933.
6. Letter from Arnold Meuhleek, Chas. E. Bedaux, Bush House, Aldwych, London, 3 March 1933a
7. Letter to Chas. E. Bedaux Ltd., from Works Manager, 7 March 1933.
8. Memo 48. June 1933. Draft Notes on Works' Provident & Pension Schemes.
9. Letter to men at Bradford Mills only, 20 June 1933, signed H.D. Sawtell, E.A. Medley.
10. Minutes of Special Executive Meeting of ASWDKW, 22 June 1933.
11. Ditto

12. **EAM-Major E.A. Medley, Works Manager, R. Johnson & Nephew Ltd.**
13. **The TUC Examines the Bedaux System of Payment by Results, p.9.**
14. Ditto **pp 9 and 10.**
15. Ditto p. 10.
16. Ditto p. 12
17. Ditto p. 14
18. Memoranda of **Two Meetings 4** September 1934, issued by ASWDKW, **p.4.**
19. **Memoranda of Two Meetings 4** September 1934, issued by ASWDKW, p.p. 5-a
20. Transcript from shorthand notes of Frederick William Baker, p.3.  
(of the 16 November 1934 Conference, The Town Hall, Manchester).
21. Ditto, **p.3.**
22. **Gorton Reporter**, 20 October 1934.
23. Ditto.
24. **Labour Research** January 1935, p.20.
25. **Memoranda of Two Meetings 4** September 1934, issued by ASWDKW, p. 2.
26. Richard Johnson & Nephew Limited, Manchester 8.  
**Memoranda of Two Meetings**, First Meeting 4 September 1934, p.4.
27. **Second Meeting. Memorandum of Meeting held 11 September 1934, p.7.**
28. **Daily Worker.** 18 October 1934.
29. Transcript from shorthand notes of Frederick William Baker, p.3.
30. Ditto, p.p. 10 and 11.
31. Ditto, p.7.
32. Minutes of the Manchester Branch Committee, ASWDKW, 12 February 1933.
33. Minutes of the Annual Meeting ASWDKW, 4 July 1935.
34. Reports of Statement of Accounts 1935, 1937, ASWDKW.

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