

Hunger marches

When the unemployed fought back

Matt Dobson
Jarrow marcher

"Why all this unrest? It seems in the rebound from the anxieties from the war, we are all trying to get something for nothing. We must not ask for the impossible" - Mayoress of Southport in a speech of welcome to the TUC Congress at Southport 1922

This statement of arrogant contempt could have come from today's 'we are all in this together' Tory politicians and right wing press. The 1922 congress was organised in the aftermath of revolutions sweeping across Europe and mass strikes of miners, shipyard workers and engineers in Britain.

Delegates also heard from Wal Hannington, a Communist Party member and leader of what was to become the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) who appealed for support for the first national hunger march.

The NUWM was to be the main organisation that led the mass struggles of the unemployed throughout the inter-war years. Of these struggles the hunger marches and particularly the Jarrow Crusade are the most famous. The hunger marches, marginalised from official history, involved mass organisation of the unemployed and working class communities in support of strikes and against brutal attacks on the poor.

Without these struggles the pressure would not have existed to force the 1945 Labour government to implement welfare reforms in the form of the NHS and the social security system which is under attack once again today.

History distorted

Even the history of the hunger marches themselves has been distorted. The Jarrow Crusade of 1936 has been highlighted over other hunger marches. It has left a worthwhile legacy and should be commemorated. But out of all the hunger marches its aims were the most diluted and it made the most modest gains - which is the main reason why it was the most warmly received then by the Tories and now by their rewriters of history.

The NUWM organised national hunger marches from all corners of Britain to London in 1922, 27, 30, 32, 34 and alongside the Jarrow Crusade in 1936. Armies of the unemployed would assemble in different towns and converge in contingents on London. Often the marches would last over a month with thousands marching in bitter winter conditions.

In 1922, over one million people were unemployed and those out of work were confronted with a 19th century poor relief system. It was in these conditions that the first hunger march took place.

The coalfields of Wales and Scotland, the ship building areas of the North East and the textile towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire became 'distressed areas.' Wal Hannington's study on distressed areas in 1936 reveals epidemics of rickets and TB from malnutrition in what Tory ministers themselves were calling the 'famine areas.' Populations in these areas declined by an average of 10% and the politicians devised schemes to force people to emigrate which the NUWM were to the fore in opposing.



A crowd of 100,000 greeted the first hunger march in Hyde Park, London

The hunger marches drew the public's attention to the plight of areas that the politicians and capitalists wished to ignore. Successive Tory, Labour and National Government prime ministers refused to meet deputations of the hunger marchers.

The second hunger march from the South Wales coalfield to London concluded a nine month strike following the 1926 General Strike. The march was supported by miners' leader A.J Cook and by the South Wales Miners Federation but denounced by right wing trade union leaders.

They were joined by the press which claimed that marchers would be left to starve on the road by the NUWM. Women who went door to door in the Rhondda valley to collect for the march were arrested by the police. Marchers won temporary concessions on the rate of relief.

The Great Depression

In the midst of the early 1930s Great Depression, unemployment rose to three million with hundreds of thousands even in the 'prosperous, non-distressed' south east and midlands joining the dole queues.

The 1930 hunger march was organised as unemployment was rapidly increasing in the aftermath of the 1929 economic crisis. The bosses made 'rationalisation' agreements with the union leaders that were leading to speed ups in production and many skilled workers being thrown onto the dole queues. The minority Labour government increased attacks on the unemployed.

Again the march struggled to receive support from the official trade union movement. This was partly due to the right wing in the unions but also was a result of the Communist Party and NUWM leaders' ultra-left policy of denouncing the Labour Party as 'social fascist'. The 1,000 marchers were subjected to being treated as vagrants by the workhouses en route under orders from the Labour government.

Brutal repression

Of all the hunger marches, the 1932 march, which carried a one million strong petition against the means test (to qualify for the dole), was the



NUWM on the march



The YFJ Jarrow marchers are on their way to London photo Oliver Fournier

most brutally treated, with constant police harassment. Mass uprisings against the means test in Birkenhead and Belfast resulted in confrontations with the police and won concessions from local authorities on poor relief.

The betrayal of Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald in joining a national government with the Tories added fuel to the fire. The hunger marchers were met with a police riot in London and the NUWM leadership was jailed. But the march won concessions as benefits were raised.

In 1934 a hunger march against the means test succeeded in forcing the government to give aid to the distressed areas and to suspend the brutal assessment of benefit claimants by the Unemployed Assistance Board. A women's contingent was organised and demands for maternity benefit were raised.

By 1936 the Communist Party leadership of the NUWM had abandoned the 'social fascism' attitude to the Labour Party and were working with left Labour MPs. Ellen

Wilkinson, Labour MP for Jarrow, approached the NUWM for assistance in organising of a march from Jarrow to London to highlight the decimation of the town's shipping industry.

Originally the Jarrow Crusade was to be a contingent on the NUWM national hunger march but right wing councillors objected saying it should be about Jarrow only.

The Jarrow Crusade reached London before the NUWM national march. Despite more sympathetic coverage for the Jarrow Crusade in the media, the NUWM march was received by a larger demonstration in London which was the key factor in winning a delay in the attacks on benefits.

Inspiration for today

Today the austerity measures planned by the capitalist class mean the unemployed, benefit claimants, young people and the working class as a whole face a return to the conditions of the 1920s and 30s.

The ideological mission of Iain

Duncan Smith's 'welfare reform' is a return to a poor relief system where only the 'deserving poor' receive assistance at the discretion of those in power who have never had to struggle against poverty.

We should take inspiration and lessons from the heroic unemployed struggles and hunger marches. Before setting off every hunger marcher on an NUWM hunger march swore an oath to support the struggles of workers and trade unions and never to be used as scab labour.

The oath stated that unemployment was caused by the failures of capitalism as a system and that the marchers would fight so future generations would never know the misery of joblessness.

Youth Fight for Jobs is taking up these traditions with the march from Jarrow to London this October that will be a key event in the building of a mass movement against the austerity cuts.

See page 5 for more on the modern Jarrow march and its progress.