Dare to Be A Daniel

A History of One of Britain's Earliest Syndicalist Unions

Wilf McCartney

1992

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The publishing history of “Dare to be a Daniel!” (published in 1992, written in 1942, published as “The French Cooks’ Syndicate” 1945)

Wilf McCartney in his late sixties was a regular speaker at anarchist meetings and a member of the Syndicalist Propaganda League but did not join the Anarchist Federation (as reconstructed in 1940). He took the view, held by many, that what was needed was workers as a whole to organise, not the anarchists as such.

The AFB set up a publishing division, taking the name of the old Freedom Press (1886–1935). It was infiltrated by many bourgeois literary careerists who gradually, hived off FP as their own, leading to a split.

When Tom Brown suggested to McCartney he should write his history in 1942, it was assumed FP belonged to the anarchist movement, but by the time it was written (1944) this was already dubious. The clique later calling itself “Freedom Press Group” insisted the book was impossible to publish, giving as an excuse the admittedly scarcely legible script. It was typed by a friend of McCartney and lay on the table in the flat of two of the group while they thought of fresh excuses why it could not be published.

However, they were friends of George Orwell, who happened to call and, seeing it, was interested enough to ask if he could take it home to read. Next week he came in and said enthusiastically, “If you’re going to publish it, I’d like to write a foreword.” Though Orwell was not as famous then as now, he was a Noted Intellectual and this of course altered the situation! They “agreed” it should be published, but George Woodcock, as a literary “expert” still wanted it re-written in his brand of Standard Boring English. Brown objected vigorously. However, by the time the booklet was ready for printing, the FPG had seized control of the press. Woodcock made several deletions, and changed the title to “The French Cooks’ Syndicate”, with an introduction by Woodcock and a preface by Orwell.[1] The original title, here used, is not the best in the world, but it was his own.

McCartney, who did not expect nor receive a penny for the work nor even a free copy, was not consulted. When he saw it printed, he objected strongly to the patronising introduction by Woodcock and he also resented Orwell writing that his experience agreed with those of the author, who regarded him as a “upper class twit playing at workers, who said that the working class stinks”.

[1] The published text of 1945 does not contain a preface by George Orwell. But Orwell did review the pamphlet in *Freedom – through Anarchism* (8 September 1945). This review is reprinted in *The complete works of George Orwell* volume 17 page 284–5. [KSL 2012]

When Wilf's daughter, before she died some fifteen years ago, asked an anarchist publisher for the pamphlet to be re-printed, the directors of Freedom Press wrote that it was "their" pamphlet and they were about to do it themselves and jealously preserved the right to Orwell's few words.

In rescuing the book from oblivion, it was hoped to produce it as originally written. But the manuscript was never returned. It so happens they typesetter of this edition was the typist of the old edition, and an endeavour has been made to get back to the original. Sadly, the missing paragraphs cannot be recuperated. It can be noted however, that before the last section ("Comparisons") there were two sections on the unemployed workers struggle in Southwark and Bermondsey, (The words "but that is another story" were inserted instead in that edition). The missing sections contained references to early anti-fascist activity during the General Strike, when the Imperial Fascisti organised a strike-breaking force, which despite Regular Army protection was routed in the Old Kent Road by dockers with their hammers and catering workers with their carving knives. The heroic scabs took one look, broke ranks and ran, to the hilarity of the squaddies. The earliest section, an amusing paragraph on Victorian schools with some sarcastic comments on professional writers, is also missing. These deletions were no doubt in the interests of space.

Albert Meltzer

London

1992

DARE TO BE A DANIEL

Dare to be a Daniel
Dare to stand alone,
Dare to have a purpose firm
And dare to make it known

LIFE AS AN APPRENTICE COOK

I was born in 1877, watched Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887, left school at twelve years of age, got a job at a hotel in Westminster Bridge Road, working from 10 a.m. to 2 a.m., sixteen hours a day for five shillings (25p) a week and 'board and lodging'. I became an apprentice cook and an apprentice to all this strife and poverty around me, i.e. the class struggle.

As a boy I had asked my father what 'purpose firm' meant. He said it meant a resolve, making up your mind to stick to it till you have accomplished what you make up your mind to do.

I started my apprenticeship in a well-known West End restaurant fifty years ago, already with a 'purpose firm', I wanted to know why we were poor, why men and women were under-fed, ill-clothed. I soon got some bitter experiences in this West End kitchen.

First let me draw a picture of the scene. One entered the great glass and polished doors, flung open by a smartly uniformed doorkeeper, and passed on to a beautifully carpeted floor, splendidly polished tables, mirrors, hat-racks, umbrella stands, ashtrays, with spotlessly dressed waiters. This was the dining floor, seating over a hundred persons. There was a beautiful basement, same size, same luxury. On the first floor was the smoking and domino-playing floor, not quite so large as the kitchen which was at the back of this floor. A plain wooden narrow door opened in on the kitchen, the basis of all the activities of the restaurant, the foundation on which the concerned existed.

What a sight met the eye! It was just a room about five yards by five with one small window, sawdust on the floor, gas, hot-and-cold water pipes all along the walls, alive with rats at night, mice and beetles on the floor. That was the general scene of all kitchens in the City of West End. Some were on the top floor, some in the basement, some a little larger. That is all that might be slightly different.

About the people who slaved many hours a day in this so-called kitchen. First there was the chef, the second cook, fish-and-pastry cook, veg. Cook; then the kitchen porter, boilerman and liftman, two women to clean vegetables and dish-up – that is seven in all, not counting myself. We had to be in the kitchen for work on the stroke of eight. That meant the cooks had to get to their 'dressing-room' or rather cubicle, at 7,45 to change from ordinary dress into whites. This cubicle had sweating pipes running along the walls, so our clothes were not always dry. We started preparing the lunch menu, which was in French. As you entered the kitchen on the right was the service lift and speaking tube, up which the orders came. In the middle was the hot plate, on the left a sink for vegetables and fish cleaning, at the back were two gas stoves. Everything had to be cooked in or on these two stoves. Just imagine the veg peelings everywhere, steam boiler and coal corner making the room stink with various smells, the plate washer bending over a steaming tank washing plates for twelve or fourteen hours a day, each cook racing against the lock to have his part of the menu ready sharp by twelve o'clock, the bumping into each other, racing for the stove or oven before the other fellow.

By twelve o'clock everyone in the kitchen as dressed drenched in sweat, with the stoves, the boiler, racing against time. But at twelve we were only just starting. The liftman got to the lift,

the whistle of the speaking-tube shrieked out, then order came thick and fast, each cook, each serving-hand having to have a memory like Datas.

Excitement, swearing, bullying, going on all the time. Orders, more orders. This hell went on till 3 p.m., then the porters got a 'staff dinner', sometimes a week old, never the same as the day's menu. Cooks can generally help themselves to what they like. That was my first lesson in the dividing of the workers.

At this time the cooks were glad to get into the glorious fresh air for two hours, then back again till nine. If lucky, nine was your early night. Your late night before this was twelve, and this slavery went on in every hotel or restaurant. Some might be slightly better than others, but generally this was the picture.

What about the wages? Before the second world war, good cooks were glad to get jobs at thirty shillings (£1.50 current style) a week, porters anything from fourteen shillings (60p) a week, not forgetting the food. As a boy, I was horror-struck to think I was to spend seven long years at this awful life, but I had a "purpose firm – I dared to make it known."

MY EARLY IMPRESSIONS

The struggle in Ireland first gave me a deeper urge than ever to answer my boyhood questions. But what other impressions did I have after two or more years as apprentice? I saw the office, the 'superior' staff, treating all other staff with the greatest contempt, except the Manager, whom they fawned on with the utmost servility. The waiters, feeling this, wished to get even with the remaining staff, so the kitchen staff, in the eyes of these 'superior persons', were dirt. But one could watch the cringing of the waiters to the manager and customers. No doubt their method of slavery made them so servile. The kitchen workers, not coming into with the customers, had a spirit of comradeship amongst them.

Although they would swear and fight with one another, an injury to a kitchen worker, porter or cook, was an injury to the kitchen staff as a whole. They also had a fine spirit of independence, in spite of the mass of cooks and porters amongst the unemployed waiting to get their jobs. During those seven years the members of the kitchen staff were constantly changing. When my time was up at 21, not one member of the kitchen staff was there who was there when I began, yet there were the same spirit of independence, the same slavery conditions, the same servile waiters, the same mimic aristocratic office staff. I have seen many interesting and amusing fights in the kitchen. I have seen waiters bodily thrown out of the kitchen. A manager who came in the kitchen with his 'tarpot' on his head had a spud thrown right through it. He knew he had no right in the kitchen, so could do nothing about it.

I was mystified by this kitchen solidarity, and these appalling conditions of slavery. In the Trade Union world outside long and bitter strikes of workers were taking place. But nothing was done in the catering trade – the same old conditions existed. Yes, there were a few 'clubs' for the catering worker, and many hotel staff agencies. These sharks, who sometimes started only with a backroom, as an office with a telephone, prospered on the simple worker looking for a job, to come and be swindled. The West End was full of them, these get-rich-quick merchants on the poverty of the out-of-work catering workers. Kitchen, waiter, 'superior' staff, all the same to them. Many of these agencies charged you half-a-crown (twelve-and-a-half pence) 'booking fee' and then sent you after a job, and if not successful, "Well, call tomorrow". You went. "Nothing today". So you went on for a month, when your booking free was exhausted. If you still wanted a job from the same agent, another half-crown had to be paid. If you got a job, the charge was usually the first week's wages.

Sometimes this used to be an agreement between the agent and his manager, who would go 50–50 with the applicant's fee for the job. You started work, perhaps a week on trial. The manager would not say anything at the end of the first week, because the worker could claim another job without further payment. So after a few weeks, either you or another worker was sacked, and the game was repeated. Many of these agents were exposed and prosecuted, but others just started the same old game.

Another little trick these gentry used to play. They would put advertisements in Continental papers, telling of the 'glories of England'. How boys – French, German, etc. – could come to

England, learn the English language, make a fortune, then return to their own country and spend an easy comfortable life. These rosy lies brought thousands of poor foreign youngsters to this country. But it did not take some of them very long to realise how they had been swindled by these sharks and left to the tender mercies of anyone in this bitter fight for existence. One important thing it did for some managers. They took on one or two or more of these boys, at no wages, or very little, and sacked more who were getting more wages. Of course, the agent for a nice picking from these boys, and so he gave up the backroom and took a larger premises with an assistant or two. But many of these boys drifted into an already big unemployed army or into the so-called 'criminal class', got into trouble and were deported to their own country as 'undesirables'. But who was the cause – if not the agent with his advertisement?

There were several so-called catering unions, but they only functioned as clubs, social centres and employment agencies for their members. These unions were mainly on the nationality line. The City Restaurant or Ye Olde Chophouse carried on in the English traditional style, its staff mainly British, its menus in English, orders given in French. The West End hotel and restaurant were nearly all on the Continental style, their cooks mostly French, their waiters mostly German, all other staff consisting of every other nationality, not excepting Indians, Africans, Chinese.

THE TRONC SYSTEM

On several hotels and restaurants in the West End waiters used to have to pay to go to work – that is, they had to pay to serve customers at so many tables. The management got the customers served without cost, and even pocketed no small trifle from the waiters. The waiters solely depended on tips from customers. In other catering firms there was what was and still is what is called the Tronc system, which worked in this way. Every waiter and all those depending on tips, after receiving a tip from the customer, had to fold it inside a paper with his or her name or number on it with the amount of the tip. It meant the sack for anyone seen to put his own tip in his pocket. At the West End, after all tips went into the box or tronc, it was opened by the head waiter or manager who shared it as he liked. Naturally, he got the lion's share. Many might have paid into the tronc during the week two, three or four pounds, but got as their share anything from ten to twenty-five shillings (50p to £1.25), according to the grade of the worker. The head waiter or manager put nothing in, yet took the largest share. The tronc system is an evil, but tipping in any form is a curse. It makes a man or woman a servile animal. All human dignity and self-respect are gone. Only the humble, servile, cringing, bowing-and-scraping serving machine remains. That is what makes a waiter so different from the kitchen worker who does not depend on the generosity of customers but has a stated wage, however big or small, and is free to accept or reject this wage. He has no respect, he feels no terror about any important customers: he knows his job, does it, gets his wages and that's that. No servility or cringing for him. Black or white, French or British, male or female – they are all the same, comrades in slavery, because they must submit exist somehow. Yet they will not bear more than they are compelled. That was the waiter and the kitchen worker of yesteryear.

THE STAFF AND ITS FOOD

Many large restaurants and hotels had a servants' hall, mostly used for 'meals'. Generally, they served vile stuff at the very best, and sometimes even rotten. You either had to have that or go without, and so the waiters never went into the staff hall. They used to take tasty bits left on customers' plates, hide them and wait for a chance to eat them, or during their two or three hours rest time from three to six, they would go to a nearby cafe and have a real good meal. But for this meal they would have been physically unable to carry on, so that is where a great portion of their tips went.

The same applied to the chambermaids and pageboys and so on. All kinds of kitchen porters have served to them the staff 'food'. They also have to take it or leave it but pinching is much easier in the kitchen, especially where the cooks are real men. As an apprentice I wore whites, I sat with the cooks and we had just what we fancied from the menu. But many just played with the food. We were full with the steam, the heat, the sweat, the fat, and had no appetite. When I got home at ten o'clock I gladly ate my mother's bread-and-butter and cheese and a cup of cocoa and enjoyed it – the environment was different. I had left a hell and was now in my home where someone who cared for me studied every desire or whim: there was no profit-making hell here.

A DESIRE FOR ACTION

At eighteen years of age I was entitled to join a Club. We met in our rest hours between three and five and met a few cooks who had a desire for action. We talked about many things: Continental and British working class history in particular, and agreed it was second to none. We then tried to find the reason why the working class struggles in Britain were no longer direct action by the rank-and-file but agreements lasting months or years by trade union leaders or politicians with the bosses or industry. When we could, we went to meetings of all kinds, Liberal, Liberal-Labour and then Labour Party, which even in those days seemed to us to have one main desire: to build up its party from the workers in or out of the trade unions solely for the leaders to get political jobs. This Labour Party did not appeal to us. We listened to Harry Quelch, H. M. Hyndman, Ben Tillett, John Burns and many others, but we were not convinced that any of them struck the note we were longing for. Then we heard Tom Mann with his cry of "Solidarity of all workers". We came into contact with Paul Vogel. Together we spread the agitation for a union of action for catering workers. A mass meeting was held in Trafalgar Square, but the propaganda was too revolutionary at that time, so the union failed for a few years. But we carried on the agitation in and out of work, everywhere where catering gathered, and spread the gospel of direct action.

We talked of 'Bloody Sunday', we studied the Chartist movement and gradually we increased our numbers. About this time, I was a full-blown cook at 21 years of age, when a strike of waitresses at a West End restaurant occurred. All of us went to their aid but in spite of a splendid fight the strike failed, because the girls came out. The stay-in strike was our policy. A few of these girls opened a cafe in the West End without help, calling it Ken's Cabin. Others got good jobs under other names, but all became members of our union.

About 1900 Guy Bowman gave lectures on syndicalism in a hall in Little Newport Street and Tom Mann came in as well. These meetings were attended mainly by catering workers of all nationalities. Slowly but surely everyone at those meetings began to get knowledge of the class struggle. We watched the trade union movement in all other trades discontented by contracts with the boss, to give one, two or three months notice before striking, and then they just walked out of the works. Blacklegs from the unemployed army filled the job, the strikes were batoned by the police but not the 'leaders'. When things got too hot they made another 'agreement' with the bosses and ordered the men back to work. Perhaps the men gained a little, perhaps not. The main thing that mattered was that the trade union leaders still had their well-paid jobs and the funds of the union were safe, what was left of them. About this time Keir Hardie formed the Independent Labour Party, which was just another political party and did not appeal to any of our members. Then came the Socialist Party of Great Britain. I and others joined this party to learn socialism, but later, along with H. Maslin and others, we left because of a letter in the Socialist Standard signed "Upton Park." The questioner wanted to know what would be the action of a member of the SPGB elected to Parliament, and the answer was that the Socialist member, backed by the revolutionary votes outside, would consider capitalist measures on their merits! This was quite

enough for us. Never having much faith in any politicians we finally broke with that so-called revolutionary party.

The Industrial Workers of the World in the USA drew our attention, as a gang of strikebreakers stopped at nothing to smash the IWW. Several of the most prominent members fled from the USA. George Swassey was one of these. He came to our hall in Little Newport Street and told us of the story of the IWW, the bitter hatred of the 'respectable' trade unions, the persecutions, prosecutions and the brutality of gunmen. From George Swassey's talks, from our own experience of trade union officials in this country, from Tom Mann, Guy Bowman, and above all from our knowledge obtained of the class struggle, we realised there is no other basis but direct action at the point of production for the catering trade workers.

CONSTITUTION OF THE FRENCH COOKS SYNDICATE

Although the union we formed was called the French Cooks Syndicate, it was absolutely International. Every worker in the catering trade, whatever his or her nationality, could, if they understood the basis and principles, join as members. Many long and wearying hours were spent at meetings, mainly starting after nine at night till twelve or one a.m. thrashing out the constitution. No final decisions were taken until every member present agreed to the matter in discussion, so no voting was necessary. First we had to get a committee. This consisted of workers' delegates from every branch of the catering trade; not even the page-boys were forgotten or ignored. This committee chose its secretary, treasurer and chairman, but it was not an executive. Both the committee and the officials were servants of the whole syndicate, took their orders from members' meetings and had to give financial and other reports to the members. There was no boss to betray the syndicate. Having watched for years the trade union movement of all other trades, we ignored the politician. There was no room for the trade union official careerist in the syndicate. The members paid for and controlled the whole syndicate. The workers in any hotel or restaurant could, if unanimous, tell the committee to arrange a strike. The committee had to do what it was told to do by the members, because any workers in a certain catering firm themselves alone knew the conditions in which they slaved. The stay-in strike was agreed by all. There was no agreement with bosses before striking and no notice of strikes was given. Every member was expected to be a loyal comrade to the syndicate and keep to his or her self all activities and discussions of the syndicate. Comrade Rinault, a French cook, was made secretary by the committee, for one year, and Comrade Beck, a German, was made chairman for one year. The committee held the funds themselves, so no treasurer was wanted. In the main that was the constitution of the revolutionary catering union in 1905.

Apart from a few strikes by the Waiters' Union, conditions of slavery were worse than ever in that year. The plans and preparations had to be complete before the battle. This Waiters' Union I have referred to had an office in the same building as the syndicate with our hall in the basement. It was based on the old respectable trade union lines, and thanks to unemployed girls or men blacklegs and scabbing societies, other unions poaching for members, the few walk-out strikes it arranged generally failed. Its membership was decreasing, and its secretary, Bob Young, was beginning to despair.

There was also another 'respectable' trade union in the building, a branch of the Bakers' Union. Needless to say, they ignored us completely. Now the syndicate realised that it would be better for us if we could get the waiters and other staff on our side, so we asked the Waiters' Union for a conference with our members, and pointed out that the old way was dead. The waiters had got to realise the class struggle. So as to prove we did not want to smash their union or poach on their preserves, all our members outside the kitchen were prepared to join the Waiters' Union, if their union would have a working arrangement during activities. Bob Young and his members saw

failure staring at them, so he knew he had to accept and act just as the syndicate acted. What the Waiters' Union did not know was that the staffs outside the kitchen in the syndicate still remained members of the syndicate in case the Waiters' Union funked the coming battle.

Here let me put it on record that neither in the Waiters' Union nor in our syndicate during our four years of strike actions was there one coward or traitor. Not one out of those thousands could be bought or bribed. Every one was loyal to themselves and to their revolutionary union. Press reporters, managers of catering firms, police, all tried to find out what we were doing next. As an example, a Daily Telegraph reporter said if we could give him some copy, he would see that hotel and restaurant unemployed had a separate column all to themselves. Well, he was given some copy, useless copy, but he kept his word and the column was an accomplished fact, from then to the outbreak of the war.

Having got our constitution for direct action we had a great deal of work to do in building up the membership. There were at this time some thirty to forty thousand catering workers in London alone. We had to secure the greatest portion of this number if possible, but we were not prepared to water down our agreed line of action in order to secure members. Most of us were class conscious and we were determined to fight on class lines, so hard work, indoor and outdoor meetings, committee meetings and members' general meetings, and dozens of large and small matters which were vital to the syndicate's success must be undertaken to ensure that success.

As the reader will no doubt realise, it was no easy job to build up a great syndicalist movement in London, and it was several years before we were ready for action. At this time, 1910, from one end of Britain to the other, strikes, lock-outs, unemployment, were absolutely chronic. Semi- and full starvation, death and disease, were stalking through the land. Men struck without their leaders' consent, unemployed became desperate, it only needed a spark to set alight their fury against the bosses. That spark came and then the unequal fight took place in the West End. Shops were raided, windows smashed, the well-fed aristocrat got the wind-up and fled from these infuriated half-starved men. But though they were beaten cruelly by the police, they accomplished by their bloody actions more than the respectable trade union movement had accomplished in years. The Lord Mayor of London opened a Mansion House Fund for the unemployed. In a few days £40,000 passed into that Fund and a few years later came the dole. Meanwhile schemes for providing work were set on foot. Charity societies, clergy and the like, saw a profit for themselves, so they suddenly had an active sympathy for these men. The Press, seeing that public sympathy was aroused, opened their columns hoping by doing so to increase their circulation. So even the unemployed were exploited.

DIRECT ACTION

Such were the economic and industrial conditions in London and Britain in general.

The syndicate stepped in to add to the difficulties of the Government and its ruling class. I shall never forget the scene in our basement hall where the committee, with the kitchen staff and some waiters, had sat in conference from 12 p.m. till 3 a.m., planning action. No other member of the Syndicate or the Waiters' Union knew anything about this secret meeting of the staff of one of London's West End hotels. Everyone had serious, even white faces, but with looks of determination. All present were practically bound by their oath to be loyal to the syndicate and to themselves.

Not one word must be uttered about our plans. At this memorable meeting members left in ones and twos as they had come. The next day at 7 p.m. would decide failure or success for the syndicate. The staff went to work in the morning, lunch was prepared, lunch was served, the usual row, the usual bad language, jokes, but not a word, not a sign, not one traitor. The manager still walked about with the air of a God Almighty, looking for someone to bully or sack. Lunch was over, 3 o'clock had come, and we were free for two hours. We passed over out of the hotel by the staff entrance. Still no word, no sign, no traitor. At five o'clock the kitchen staff prepared the table d'hotes, 6 o'clock the waiters returned to prepare the tables, everything was as usual. The manager still looked vicious, still looked for trouble. He got it – at 7 p.m.

Five minutes before 6,30 the dinner gong sounded, calling all the well-fed parasitical guests to 'dine'. They took their seats, ushered by smiling, bowing waiters, who were treated with contempt by the guests. 6,30 p.m. Hors d'oeuvres were served, then soup, then fish. The entree arrived and that was the lot. 7 p.m. A stranger walked into the dining room, he wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief – the signal agreed upon at the secret meeting. Waiters stood like statues, except one or two. The kitchen got the 'wire' and everyone stopped work at once. Some sat down, out came pipes and cigarettes, a terrible offence in all kitchens. Kitchen porters, women and boys, looked at the guests' lovely sweets – the cooks said, "Help yourselves", and soon all the pastry had vanished. Meanwhile, what a scene in the dining room! The waiters, who were just dirt beneath the notice of these important guests, suddenly realised it was the cooks and the waiters who were now important. The head waiter and manager were dumbfounded – and could not believe their own eyes. These docile, servile slaves dared to do this thing! Send for the chef, send for the police, the hotel will be disgraced, ruined! No – stop – he cannot send for the police, his guests will have to be served with the rest of their dinner! The guests are calling for the head waiter, for God, the devil, anyone who will serve them!

Never before had the sacred dining room seen such a sight in all its long history. Guests forgot, being only half-fed, that they were gentlemen, and even began swearing. They began to leave the hotel, but had to find their own hats and coats, call their own cabs or carriages. This reminded me of other hungry, angry men on London's streets a short time previously, but these were batoned. They had not these 'gentlemen's' sympathy or help. Perhaps these important guests understood a little now of what hunger really meant!

The noise and confusion died down, except for a cook playing a mouth-organ in the kitchen, the staff meanwhile dancing. All was now seemingly quiet. The manager had been told to see our union representative. "Union," he shouted. "I'll have no union in this hotel!" But he did. "I'll throw the lot of you out now." But he did not. He signed the first agreement ever made between catering slaves and their masters. And there was no time limit to these changes. All must be permanent. Or – well, he knew. What were the changes signed for? Now the reader must remember both the Syndicate and the Waiters' Union were built up on class principles. We must hit the boss, the director, the shareholder, where he would feel it most. The changes demanded were in our opinion only a beginning of the end of profit-making catering firms. Our ultimate objective was the owning and controlling of all catering firms for the benefit of the workers and not for the benefit of a few idle parasites. Meanwhile we had to prove to our members, to the rest of the catering workers not in the union, and to the workers of all other trades that we could and would hit the master-class where he would feel it, and cry out the most about his rent, interest and profit.

Our demands and their aims were:

1. Abolition of all slave-drivers. This would stop head waiters, managers, chefs etc. from tyranny

1.

Abolition of tronc system and all forms of tipping. This would hit the owner etc. in their pockets. Theywould now have to pay wages.

1.

Abolition of staff meals. This would compel good wholesome food for all staff.

1.

TU rates of wages for all grades of workers. This would affect profits, strengthen the syndicate and make the staff more class conscious.

1.

Abolition of petty fines for breakages, lateness to work etc. This also decreased profits, as every week large sums were stopped from wages and added to income.

1.

First aid help and a medical man if possible to be on or near the hotel in case of need. Accidents were frequent but nothing was ever done (except by the staff). Now it would mean the employer's expense.

1.

As all staff were human beings, all were workers, no one must think or treat the other as dirt beneath them. This was aimed at the management, office staff, head waiters, head porters, head chambermaid etc.

1.

A clean, airy and dry dressing-room, both for male and female staff. This was aimed at the cooks' cubicle with sweating pipes. Other staff had no dressing rooms before this action.

1.

Clean dining room and rest-rooms for kitchen and waiters, other rooms for female staff. This stopped porters having to sit on baskets with their meals on their laps.

1.

All staff required to be obtained from the Syndicate and the Waiters' Union. This hit the sharks of the hotel agencies, and stopped chefs' and managers' surplus incomes.

1.

No member of staff to be discharged before proof of the charge was given to the Syndicate. This stopped favouritism, persecution, petty dislike and jealousy.

1.

An eight-hour day, one day off duty a week, one week's holiday a year, all holidays paid for. This was the last demand, a very important one.

All these demands after a lot of excited and dramatic opposition, in just over one hour. There was no more work that day. The whole staff, after singing, eating, drinking, laughing, formed up outside the staff entrance and marched to the syndicate's hall. In the hall a small band was playing workers' songs, then came speeches. This was kept up till past 12 midnight. So ended, as one speaker said, the first round of our war on capitalism and its profits.

Next day the papers were full of the lightning strike. The scene outside and inside our office was beyond description. Members, the public, the police, absolutely filled Little Newport Street, and traffic had to be diverted for hours. Then later, managers wrote to the Press demanding that this outrageous gang be at once suppressed. TU leaders shrieked out their hatred. It should be illegal to act in this cowardly way, they said. They utterly disowned us and all our works. Much of this kind of thing came from these 'respectable' TU leaders because they were afraid their members might copy our methods of direct action and accomplish in one hour what they paid TU officials to do for years, and ultimately come out on strike. Some already were asking, "What was the good of their well-paid officials?" So they talked among themselves, but the leaders still kept them in order. There were a few unofficial strikes as a result of direct action, but the leaders soon got them back to work, as no strike pay was forthcoming, so the TU officials breathed again, but they still went on attacking the syndicate. We took no notice. Then they demanded legislation by Parliament to outlaw the syndicate. Still we ignored all these attacks, concerning ourselves only with our own activities.

What a transformation in the hotel where action was taken! Everyone was getting good food, tyranny had ceased, every demand as being carried out to the full, the staff began to look a bit healthy, were more comradely than ever, quarrels stopped. The workers know THEY, not Governments or TU officials, must end tyranny.

We – that is, mainly members of the syndicate – studied the works of Kropotkin, Bakunin, William Morris, we had meetings among the Southwark unemployed. George Swassey told of the direct action of the US workers in the IWW, and slowly and surely a great mass organisation of direct actionists was spreading over London. Adolph Beck, the German chairman of the syndicate and many others were speaking all over London to the workers, employed and unemployed. So now, as the reader will have learned, I found the answers to all my childhood questions.

It was just about this time that various Anarchist groups were formed in many parts of London with their paper Freedom, edited by Tom Keel. Many times I went to The Grove, Hammersmith, and Willesden, to speak and to learn. I knew governments exist by force in the interest of the ruling class. Freedom is the only thing worth fighting for, all else is illusion.

MORE LIGHTNING STRIKES

After this strike we remained quiet for a time; meanwhile the managements of other catering firms were altering their attitude to their staffs. They were less tyrannical, more smiling, more human, giving them more time off, a little better food etc. Of course, their object was plain to our members. They tried to draw, to pump syndicate secrets from the staff. Some members were plainly asked if they belonged to the union. Various tricks were tried to get some one to betray themselves and the syndicate. The manager of one of the big hotels got so energetic in these methods that the staff told the committee to arrange a meeting for action before it was too late. A week passed, plans were complete. There was not a traitor on the staff. Yet this manager had hidden in the hotel a force of police and a gang of loyal British waiters.

However, this evening the hotel had besides the usual table d'hote dinner, several Masonic diners, company directors' dinners, etc. The manager looked worried. Various dinners started at various times, so the syndicate could wait its chance. And this is how it happened. Table d'hote at 6,30, another commenced at 6,45, another at 7 p.m., and so on. At 7,15 all dinners were being served with something, when suddenly a waiter clapped his hands and every member of the staff stopped work. The waiter looked for the manager. The poor man was nearly mad – he rushed up and down, but the waiter handed him our demands, exactly as on the last occasion. He refused, he hesitated, he read, he signed. The hidden police were told it was all over. "What the hell have we been kept here for?" they asked. The loyal blacklegs were hooted off the premises. And so another victory for direct action was won.

What a sensation this caused! All the press of the catering employers were louder than ever in demanding that Parliament step in and stop this un-British thing at once. Now we had to move fast, in case they did try to stop us. The managers did not know when or where the next strike would take place. Some managements gradually sacked some waiters, and employed loyal British waiters, but as they could not speak Continental tongues, they were not much use, so they sacked some kitchen staff, but still not syndicate members. The managers, however, being ignorant of this, were blissfully happy, when suddenly, in various parts of the West End, three, four and five strikes were called simultaneously. Not all of these were so quickly successful. Many interesting incidents could be related, but just a few of these have we space for, such as: A 'loyal' slave (loyal to his slavemaster only) as seriously taking a great carving-table followed by another waiter with a similar dish. When the covers were taken off, there in all its natural beauty lay a lovely large joint of raw beef. The second dish contained a pile of raw, dirty vegetables, so no dinner that night. Another incident. The cooks and all the kitchen staff were having the longest rest ever known in the kitchen, so they became hungry. "Well, what are we waiting for?" Everyone in the kitchen, the chef included, with all the pomp and ceremony of the great, seriously began. Hors d'oeuvres, soup, fish, entrees, joint and veg, sweet, coffee, liqueurs, cigarettes, all this was taken slowly, about one hour, then they were told by the manager to serve the dinner. Too late. There was no dinner to serve, the strike was on, and it was now past 9 p.m., time to go home.

Another amusing incident was carried out by the kitchen clerk, who writes out and orders all supplies. He placed the butcher's order in the greengrocer's envelope, and so on, so by the time the strike was called the telephone was busy with tradesmen asking what they wanted. It was only then that the manager found out there was nothing in the kitchen. Poor man! He spluttered, swore, threatened to strike the chef, stamped and raved. After this he signed.

There are just a few incidents that took place during these lightning strikes in the catering trade which numbered thirty-eight in all in the West End of London, and all successful. But it took a long time to fight all these battles, bringing us to 1914. During these years the organised workers of all other trades had been following our activities, our methods, our success, with envy and admiration. They admitted that it took courage to act as we did. But to the TU leaders we were everything vile. They slandered us because they were afraid they would lose their easy positions. It was natural they should hate the Syndicate. Its principle was an understanding and operation of the Class Struggle, while the TU leaders were bribed by the boss to keep the worker in slavery. Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, and with that ended the greatest revolutionary class-conscious union Britain had ever known. Germans and Austrians were interned, French and Italians of military age were sent to their own countries, British of course were conscripted later. With that ended the greatest class conscious union Britain had ever known.

But for the world war of 1914–18, the workers of all trades would surely have spurred on by the spirit, courage and class-conscious direct action of the syndicate, and realised that all leaders lead to destruction. They had to free themselves. No other class or body would do it for them, but only betray them. The syndicate would have carried out the light of truth. Soon the whole working class would have seen it burning strong and clear. Then after a stern, bitter struggle, with workers knowing their own strength, would have come the end of all slavery.

WAR AND THE PEOPLE

It is not for me to stress the war hysteria, jingo patriotism that was generated, encouraged and gradually grew into a frenzy. All industries except war industries were depleted of workers, prices rose, wages rose slowly, the unemployed army had gone into the fighting army. The hotels were glad to take anyone into slavery, so in the catering trade entered men and women refugees, too old for the army, as cooks, chambermaids etc. Some had never seen the inside of a kitchen before, but the wages were good and everybody was happy.

Realising that this war had given the workers better conditions for a short while (and saved capitalism) the workers would not tolerate anybody opposing the war or asking for peace. Harmless German shopkeepers had their shops wrecked, their goods thrown into the street, their homes ruined, and endured personal injury, all in the cause of smashing Prussian militarism. For the first time in my life I was ashamed of my class. But I was to witness a scene later that made me equally sick to look on. We had marched from Old Ford with Sylvia Plankhurst and about three or four hundred women to Trafalgar Square to hold a peace meeting. The meeting had barely started when some colonials got on the plinth, tore the handbags from the women and emptied them among the crowd below, who cheered and laughed. The women's hats and other personal property went the same way. When protests were made to the police standing behind the crowd, they laughed and said they had no orders to interfere. I was helpless with a few others to stop this disgraceful scene.

For the first year or two of the world war the revolutionary spirit was kept alive in several parts of London by a small band of Anarchists and Socialists. My old Anarchist comrade Fotner and I were having a meeting in Deptford Broadway. Fotner only asked the crowd what they would gain by this bloodbath. The was all. They charged the platform, knocked Fotner down, smashed the platform, and he and I lay n the road helpless, covered in blood. The trade union movement in Britain had passed resolutions never to support capitalist wars. They conveniently forgot all that. The so-called Second (Socialist) International had said that there was only one war, the class war, which they would support, but fell at once like a house on sand by supporting the various capitalist rulers in the war.

The powers-that-be tried all they knew to get us. In Southwark I was even framed on a charge of signalling to the enemy! That having failed, I was brought in under the age limit of the Conscription Act. After the jubilation of 'peace' came the aftermath of war. Ex-servicemen injured in it were given miserable pensions. Those fit for work who could not get it were given 29/- (£1.45) per man unemployment benefit. Slowly this came down, wages came down, workers were discharged in thousands. Soon the army of victory had returned once again to its old conditions, an unemployed army, but this army was now amounting to such enormous figures as had never been seen in Britain before.

What of the catering trade? No longer was there a shortage of skilled staff. All the old wartime staff with their large wages had vanished. There was now no class-conscious movement of catering workers in existence. Managers were now quite happy with plenty of thousands of

unemployed beating each other down, so wages came down with a run, hours increased, conditions went from bad to worse. The hotel agent did a roaring trade plundering unemployed, and there was no opposition. The white-slave conditions of prior to 1911–12 were returning worse than ever. All the work of the Syndicate was dead. There was altogether a different personnel in the catering trade now, and it would take years of hard spade-work, plenty of persecutions and victimisation, to rebuild. We tried to get into touch with several unemployed cooks, waiters, etc. At last we made contact with a Tom Cann. I was working at this time in a Government luncheon club. A meeting was arranged, and Tom and his friends, being in the majority, decided to call their new union the British and Allied Catering Union.

A great powerful teashop firm had sprung up in a few years all over London. Tom Cann as the secretary decided along with the executive committee to call a mass meeting of the teashop waitresses. One must admit that these girls were simply slaves, completely under the domination of managers and directors. The conditions were so like the old slave days that it was no wonder that Tom Cann decided to attack this firm when strong enough. Having built up a great membership, a members' meeting was called at a hall in the London Road, S.E., where a new committee was elected. All branches of catering staff had their representatives on this committee. I was to represent the kitchen. The committee consisted of twelve.

THE UNITED CATERING TRADE UNION

We managed to get the name of the union changed to the United Catering Trade Union, but Tom Cann had the majority of the executive committee supporting him in everything, and as there were only two of us we could do nothing but support the remained after decisions were taken. We tried to do all we could to give advice and reason but it was useless. Nevertheless, we stuck loyally to the members.

There was a vast difference between the revolutionary Syndicate which stood for attacking and abolishing the cause of slavery, capitalism, and the United Catering Trade Union. The union was run on the old TU methods. Just simply increasing wages and other reforms. This made Tom Cann content. He did not trouble about the class struggle. He was the secretary. He and his supporters were the bosses. There was no constitution. Cann gave the orders, the members who paid him just obeyed. Though realising all this, as there was no other catering organisation, we stuck it. Every time a members' meeting was called, I taught the girls to sing the "Red Flag" and whenever Cann, who was always chairman announced my name to speak, hundreds of girls seated in the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, would start singing the "Red Flag". I also preached the class struggle, which Cann did not realise.

During this time, every member of the luncheon club in which I worked, joined the union and made me the shop-steward. We elected our shop committee, and had meetings of members which had forty in the kitchen, and soon got some drastic improvements in conditions. But it was easy to see that was all that they wanted. They did not mind being slaves so long as they could, as they said themselves, "pay their way". When May Day came and I walked out of the kitchen for Hyde Park, not one left their work, although I had told them what May Day meant to the working-class movement. Now the management of the kitchen luncheon club saw that I, and I only, was a danger, to their easy domination of the kitchen staff. So they made an excuse of not doing the same trade as before and the staff would have to be reduced. I retorted, "That's all right, keep the sheep and sack the man." Every one of the forty kitchen staff held a trade union card. Not one protested or even said one word when I, their shop steward, walked out of the job. Picture my reactions.

TEASHOP WAITRESSES' STRIKE

A Committee meeting was called to make plans for a strike of the teashop waitresses. My friend called on the committee and I fought hard and earnestly against the foolish conduct of the strike by the Committee. We pointed out that the food was cooked at the Head Depot and before you called the girls out you had either to get the cooks at this head depot in the union, or make an arrangement with them, in case they should blackleg. The same applied to the bakers and the carmen who brought the food to the teashops – if you did not have an agreement with these unions you would fail. It was no use.

Next evening at the Memorial Hall, Tom Cann said something like this. "The time has come for action. I am not telling you now, but when I give the signal, not one girl must go to work." Well, those girls obeyed orders, and as I pointed out, that is why they would fail. The Syndicate members controlled their own union, their own actions and took no orders from officials. They did not come out of their jobs. They stayed it and won.

These simple girls, inexperienced in the trickery of TU officials, came out and marched up and down the Strand and Regent Street, singing that the firm "had got the wind up, but they can't put the wind up us." What was the scene at the teashops, though? Carmen with trade union cards in their pockets delivered all the food as usual on the morning of the strike. Telephones rang and every agency in London was soon sending girls. Head Depot and other places of the firm drew girls to fill the strikers' jobs. Next morning every London paper had big advertisements for girls as waitresses, no experience necessary, and the firm paid them nearly double the wages the strikers had got.

Now Tom Cann had his union affiliated to the London Trades Council. As we were theonly two who could speak, he asked me to come with him to complain to the Council about the workers' unions blacklegging the strike. We both spoke, but I could see that it was nothing new for unions to blackleg unions, and we got no satisfaction. The strikers got no help from the TU movement or the public. They, the public, just wanted to be served, and did not care who served them. Gradually the strikers got disheartened – they left in twos or threes till finally only Cann with a few cronies remained. The strike was broken.

I was already sacked when I attended the meeting prior to the strike being called. So now I was both out of work and with no revolutionary union. After thirty years of learning and struggle I found myself, except for knowledge and experiences, back where I was at ten years of age. Thanks to the employers' organisation I never got another job after I was sacked from the luncheon club.

For months I walked the City and West End streets, but not even a fried fish shop or a coffee shop would let me put my nose in. I had a fish-and-chip barrow built and went round the streets at Southwark where the people knew me. I carried on for ten years like this, when my wife died from cancer in 1930. During those ten years I was active in the unemployed movement. It was while working on my own that I met my only friend and comrade of the late union committee. He said I could help him to put the only position. He would propose me as a member of the new union if I agreed. So once again I was in the fight for the catering worker. All went smoothly

until speakers were chosen for the May Day demonstration in Hyde Park. My friend nominated me, and I was third speaker on No. 2 platform. What I said on that platform does not matter here, but I was expelled from the General Workers Union. So ended by catering trade activities.

COMPARISONS

Craft unions are and must always remain powerless. The boss, the State, the trade union official, have the power. Tom Cann's union was national, not international. He ignored thousands of foreign catering workers. He had one walk-out strike and failed. The Transport & General Workers' Union, Catering Section, has not even had that. It just draws the subs of its few members, and does nothing. As with these few unions, so with the whole British trade union movement.

Now the contrast: The Cooks' Syndicate was international. The Cooks' Syndicate had no huge funds, The Cook's Syndicate had no funds in Government bonds. The Cooks' Syndicate had no leaders or bosses. The Cooks' Syndicate members controlled it themselves. The Cooks' Syndicate did not need strike pay. The Cooks' Syndicate understood the class struggle. Their aim was to end capitalism. They had thirty-eight strikes: all were won. Not one man was injured, arrested or victimised.

Since 1939 the unemployed army has gone back into the other army. Once again prices rise, rages rise, and falling industries not concerned with war are depleted of workers. Once again, anyone, even at 60 or 70, can get a job. Hotel and restaurant managers are nowadays more polite than ever. Part-time workers are now the order. Some workers can even choose their own time to work.

It is extraordinary how some so-called Socialist Parties can perform acrobatic feats of complete change. They used to say Socialism was the only hope of the world's workers, now (1944) when the government talks about a new world, such as the Beveridge Bubble, Town Planning, improved education, green belt and the Catering Act, these self-styled socialists call it social advance. I want to know what the advance leads to. If it is true that the interests of the capitalist class are absolutely opposed to the interests of the working class, then all reforms of a capitalist state must be in the interests of the state, which is the controlling force of the capitalist system, and can never be in the interests of the working class. Of course, a few sections of workers in various industries may for a period gain a slight improvement in their wage-slave conditions, but they remain wage-slaves.

We will try to prove our position by looking at the (1944) Catering Act. First I ask, why does the Government suddenly take an interest in the catering worker? Has the Cabinet suddenly taken sympathy for these slaves? No. The Cabinet know the trade union rate of wages of all organised workers in town and country, from the unions concerned, but in the catering trade since the days of the syndicate there has been no trade union rate of wages. What does that prove? This – in dealing with the trade union movement, the Government found it a different matter with catering workers. The kitchen staff got a stated wage, varying according to class of the catering firm and the position of the kitchen worker. The waiter, waitress, housemaid, porter, liftman, luggage porter, page-boy, chambermaid, may all get a small wage, or may not, their main source of wages coming in tips. Now the Cabinet says fair wages for all. Having obtained the scale of wages for chefs and cooks, the Government knows whom to tax and how much. How they obtain the tip percentage is their affair, but those who depend on the tips must, beyond a

certain percentage, pay tax. That is the object of the Act. Of course, many may benefit. A sprat for mackerel. The Government benefit by thousands of pounds, the worker by a few shillings. Governments govern in the interests of themselves.

Wilf McCartney
Dare to Be A Daniel
A History of One of Britain's Earliest Syndicalist Unions
1992

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