

Technological Innovation and Industrial Relations

THE current bout of labour trouble in Britain, which among other things indirectly delayed the distribution of last week's *Nature* in North and South America and the Far East, is possibly the most serious since the Second World War. Most of the argument has come to centre on the question of whether the government has been wise in relying as much as it has done on the Industrial Relations Act as a means of persuading British workers and trade unions to follow explicit and novel rules in their dealings with employers. The act is by no means as horrendous as the unions say but there is an element of unreality in the government's belief that workers will instinctively comply with the requirements of an act they do not like and which is demonstrably unworkable in many of its parts—the recent strike which put the newspapers out of action, intended by the printing unions as a demonstration of support for the dockers and as a protest against the act itself, was frankly illegal under the new act, but it is exceedingly improbable that the unions concerned will be hauled before the Industrial Relations Court. In retrospect, no doubt even the government is wishing that it had sugared its pill by introducing the parts of the act which give workers a right to appeal against what they think are unfair dismissals, for example, before asking that trades unions should abandon their traditional if misguided ways. The row about the Industrial Relations Act, likely to continue for several weeks, may, however, obscure an even more interesting and important issue—the origin of the discontents of the past few weeks—the extent to which dock workers traditionally responsible for loading cargo into the holds of ships should acquiesce in the change in the pattern of dock labour brought about by the introduction of containers stuffed with cargo not at the docks but sometimes well inland.

In the past few years, British docks have been a recurring source of trouble. By the early 1960s, it had been recognized that handling equipment was out of date and that there were serious anomalies in the way in which a host of small companies made use of dock facilities at British ports for making profits from the loading and unloading of cargo vessels. Over the years, the fragmentation of the employers and the widespread practice of relying on casual labour had led to a needlessly meticulous and rigid definition of the kinds of jobs which dockers might perform and to a labour force which was at once too large and too insecure. In the past decade, successive British governments have fostered several schemes for the improvement of this unhealthy situation. The Dock Labour Scheme has the merit of giving most dock workers a measure of security—they are paid from a fund to which all port employers contribute even when there is no work for them, and there are also reasonably generous payments for redundancy. It would no doubt have been still better if the reorganization of the ports could have encouraged a still quicker amalgamation of the companies now operating at British ports, but what seemed until a few years to be a framework within which continuing

rationalization might be possible has been undermined by the widespread and rapid introduction of containers as a means of shipping cargo.

What is to be done? The first thing to be said is that it would be intolerable if anxiety among dockers about the spread of container transport should artificially restrict the uses which might be made of this invaluable and potentially economic means of transport. The truth is that the old-fashioned way of loading cargo into the holds of ships is entirely out of tune with modern thinking on production engineering. For is it not absurd that cargo intended for sea transport should be handled not merely at its origin and destination but twice at each of two intermediate ports as well? British dockers are at present asking that members of their union should have a right to employment at the centres at which containers are stuffed with goods but this is merely a side issue—and in the long run, a pointless issue. What everybody must recognize is that the decline of the dock labour force in the past five years should, on economic grounds, continue. Nobody will be surprised if there are merely 20,000 dockers working in Britain by the 1980s.

Situations like these are not unprecedented. A few years ago, in Britain, the coal industry was in a plight similar to that of the docks at present. In the end, successive governments decided to edge off the economic pressures on the coal miners and the communities of which they formed a predominant part by agreeing that the economic pressures on coal as a fuel should be artificially softened. The construction industry might have been in the same case if, by magic, factory-made buildings had not proved to be not merely feasible but economically attractive as well. What has happened to the British ports industry is that the pace of technological change has turned out to be faster than the speed with which the workers and the others who depend on the docks for a livelihood have been able to transform their way of life. It is unthinkable that nobody should accept responsibility for the consequences of such rapid change. The question, short of its trimmings, is who should pay. In countries such as Britain, there seems to be no doubt that ultimate responsibility must rest with the government, which is why it is sensible that the government should have agreed, last week, that it should pay for still more compelling inducements to persuade dockers to leave the industry. It remains an important question how best an attempt should be made to provide the workers for whom there will in future be no work with opportunities for changing their ways. Cash compensation is not enough. Should there not be a much more vigorous programme for the retraining of men like these in other crafts? The present government, like the past, for all its protestations about the value of and the need for retraining, has done less than it might to put flesh on the bones of an abstract concept. But the docks are the place to start, and urgently, for the need for imaginative retraining and redeployment will and should increase.