

ALAN MCKINLAY

## FROM INDUSTRIAL SERF TO WAGE- LABOURER: THE 1937 APPRENTICE REVOLT IN BRITAIN\*

Since the publication of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in 1974, an increasing number of social historians have turned their attention towards the workplace as a major site of class struggle.<sup>1</sup> In particular, social historians have focussed on the unequal struggle between employers and craft-workers to determine patterns of work organisation and the balance of power in the labour market. However, despite the growth of interest in the historical relationship between the division of labour, trade unionism and business strategy, no academic work has yet considered the development of apprenticeship in the post-1914 period.<sup>2</sup> This is surprising, given that the "right to trade" was a fundamental of the political economy and moral vision of craft-workers in the nineteenth century, and remained crucial throughout the inter-war period. Equally, the engineering employers' refusal to permit union regulation of the skilled-labour supply through the operation of a fixed apprentice-to-journeyman ratio was an integral element of the managerial prerogatives they defended in the lock-outs of 1852, 1897 and 1922.<sup>3</sup> This paper intends to go some way towards filling that lacuna by considering the development of apprenticeship in the Clydeside engineering industry. The aim is to show, firstly, that engineering apprentices occupied an increasingly important position within the industry's occupational structure and, secondly, that this process was paralleled

\* My appreciation and thanks for the advice and criticism of J. Melling, W. Knox, R. Martin and the editors of this journal. All dates cited refer to the year 1937, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>1</sup> H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974); see inter alia R. Price, *Masters, Unions and Men: Work Control in Building and the Rise of Labour 1830-1914* (Cambridge, 1980); D. Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (Cambridge, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> For apprenticeship in the pre-1914 period see Ch. More, *Skill and the English Working Class, 1870-1914* (London, 1980); W. Knox, "British Apprenticeship 1800-1914" (Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> See K. Burgess, *The Challenge of Labour: Shaping British Society 1850-1930* (London, 1980).

Important shifts in the social and legal status of apprentices also took place in the period 1890-1914. Specifically, the gradual disappearance of traditional indentured apprenticeships, written agreements binding boy, guardian and employer in a series of reciprocal legal and moral responsibilities concerning the continuity of employment, the adequacy of trade training, and the boy's abstinence from trade unionism for all except friendly-society purposes.<sup>11</sup> The cumulative effect of mechanisation, skill fragmentation and increased managerial interest in work organisation was to divest the relationship between "master" and apprentice of much of its former moral obligations, so that it corresponded more closely to the instrumentalism of an employer-employee relationship. Most notably, it became accepted for employers to discharge apprentices during slack periods and for boys to move between factories in search of higher wages. One significant indicator of what was, in effect, the partial proletarianisation of apprenticeship was the emergence of strike action as part of the workplace behaviour of apprentices. Most apprentice strikes in the twenty years before the Great War were short-lived and small-scale, but in 1912, in protest against reductions in earnings associated with contributions to the new national insurance scheme, apprentice strikes broke out in all the major engineering and shipbuilding concerns in Scotland, the North-East coast of England and Manchester.<sup>12</sup> The 1912 apprentice strikes demonstrated the universality of the processes we have characterised as the gradual proletarianisation of apprenticeship.

While we have stressed the increased instrumentalism of the relationship between apprentice and employer, apprenticeship retained an immense symbolic value for skilled workers. That is, apprenticeship was itself a process consisting of a series of rites of passage marking in turn the ascension of a boy from the ranks of the unskilled, his gradual assimilation into the craft community and, finally, on "serving his time", manhood. Each stage was marked symbolically: initiation by the pranks of older apprentices, assimilation by the journeymen's use of apprentices as look-outs for foremen and, finally, by the rituals associated with completion of five years' "probationary servitude".<sup>13</sup> This pattern of socialisation into the ethics of the craft community was not seriously disrupted by the partial proletarianisation of apprenticeship, not least because skilled workers remained almost completely responsible for teaching apprentices "the

<sup>11</sup> Knox, "Apprenticeship and Deskillling in Nineteenth Century Britain", *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> W. Knox, "'Down with Lloyd George': The apprentices strike of 1912", in: *Journal of the Scottish Labour History Society*, No 19 (1984), p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> J. Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London, 1973), pp. 95-98; W. Greenwood, *Love on the Dole* (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp. 48-53, 70-75.

mysteries of their trade” throughout this period.<sup>14</sup> Definitions of craft privileges and exclusiveness, particularly the right to a technical education, were to become fused with more narrowly economic demands during the 1937 apprentice strikes.

The position of apprentices deteriorated still further in the harsh industrial climate of the 1920's. The dominant conception of apprentices which developed in the 1920's was that they constituted nothing more than a low-cost, mobile labour-force. Symptomatic of this was the continued decline in traditional forms of indentured apprenticeship. On Clydeside, fewer than one in four metalworking apprentices were indentured in the mid 1920's.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, those employers who did retain indentures adopted a form of private contract which gave the employer all the disciplinary benefits of the traditional indenture, but did not include any reciprocal obligations towards the apprentice. The Clyde employers' hostility to any restrictions on their power to shed labour at will was paralleled by the apprentices' insistence on their freedom of movement; one shipyard manager observed that the relationship

which exists now between the apprentice and the employer is in no sense a contract; as a matter of fact it is an understanding which is adhered to by the apprentice as long as it suits him, and possibly also by some employers, while the only restraining motive is that “lines” may be refused.<sup>16</sup>

The importance of apprentice labour in the occupational structures of heavy-engineering districts such as Clydeside was reflected in the relative stability of apprentice numbers in the inter-war period. As the table on p. 5 demonstrates, as the inter-war depression deepened, particularly in the years 1929-32, apprentices constituted an increasing proportion of the engineering workforce.

In effect, the employers were substituting apprentices for time-served workers. Clearly the cheapness of apprentice labour more than compensated for any deficiencies in its productivity. In 1934, on the eve of rearmament expansion, the *Engineering Mirror* – a broadsheet issued by the Clydeside Amalgamated Engineering Union – reviewed the engineers' experience of the *de facto* substitution of youth for adult labour.

During periods of industrial expansion the tendency is to build up the labour force from below, to engage the maximum amount of juvenile labour, where

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Labour, Report of an Enquiry into Apprenticeship and Training for the Skilled Occupations in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, VI (1928), pp. 7, 30, 39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 13, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Position of Apprentices: Statement of Association Members, February 1921, Clyde Shipbuilders' Association Papers, Strathclyde Regional Archives, Glasgow, TD 241/13/20.

*Numbers of journeymen, engineers and apprentices employed by federated firms on Clydeside, 1921-38*

	Fitters	Apprentices	Ratio apprentices/ journeymen (%)	Turners	Apprentices	Ratio apprentices/ journeymen (%)
1921	1,934	1,197	61.9	1,584	1,223	77.2
1926	4,142	2,176	52.5	1,981	725	36.6
1927	4,234	2,347	55.4	2,122	849	40.0
1928	4,964	2,724	54.8	2,037	905	44.4
1929	4,799	2,823	58.8	2,053	928	45.2
1930	4,624	2,760	59.7	1,782	835	46.9
1931	2,307	1,845	80.0	1,212	565	46.6
1932	1,783	1,240	69.5	877	492	56.1
1933	2,299	1,299	56.5	1,283	543	42.3
1934	4,176	948	22.7	1,996	671	33.6
1935	4,624	1,774	38.4	2,036	683	33.5
1936	5,328	2,438	45.7	2,404	882	36.7
1937	6,353	3,219	50.7	2,853	1,092	38.2
1938	7,196	3,741	52.0	3,132	1,403	44.8

Source: North West Engineering Trades Employers' Association, Case Papers, folio entitled "Statistical Returns".

the loss of efficiency is generally more than balanced by a low wage rate. In times of depression the general practice is to contract at the top and lay off higher paid operatives and retain the services of juveniles and lower paid.<sup>17</sup>

While overall apprentice-recruitment patterns were haphazard throughout the inter-war period, there is evidence that employers went to considerable lengths to retain apprentices even when shedding virtually their entire adult workforce. The employers' efforts to retain trainees cannot be attributed to a paternalistic concern with their welfare. That is not to say that paternalism was entirely absent: major employers such as Stephens of Linthouse waged considerable moral crusades against "gambling, swearing and other vices" amongst their young workers. However, even for such self-consciously progressive employers the benefits of welfare initiatives – "while impossible to measure in [. . .] pounds, shillings and pence" – were justified as "sound" investments because they "considerably reduced" juvenile-labour turnover.<sup>18</sup> The most important mechanism for maintaining apprentice numbers during particularly slack periods was an informal system of labour transfers between neighbouring factories and shipyards. In 1926, for example, apprentice engineers, plumbers, electricians and boilermakers were moved between Fairfields, Barclay Curle and Stephens to prevent their suspension.<sup>19</sup>

During the 1920's the links between apprentices and trade unions became increasingly feeble. The 1922 York Memorandum, imposed by the employers after a bitter thirteen-week lock-out, reaffirmed the "purely domestic" relationship between employer and apprentice, excluding any right of representation for trainees. The percentage of Clydeside engineering apprentices who were members of the AEU dropped from 20% in 1920 – a figure indicative of the low priority ascribed to apprentice organisation by the union even in relatively buoyant times – to 4.5% in 1929 and 2.8% in 1935.<sup>20</sup> In the decade after the crushing defeat of 1922 the scarce financial

<sup>17</sup> Amalgamated Engineering Union, Glasgow District Committee, "Engineering Mirror", Spring 1934, p. 1, Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, Glasgow.

<sup>18</sup> F. J. Stephen to R. Hyde, Industrial Welfare Society, 16 February 1925, Personal Letter Book, University of Glasgow Deposit 4/3/13. Notwithstanding Stephen's express commitment to welfare they did not formalise their paternalism through the use of traditional indentured apprenticeships: "It has been our practice here for some considerable time to leave our apprentices free to take their departure from our employment if and when they desire to do so, and we ourselves are equally free to dismiss them for bad conduct or other good reasons." Stephens to Captain Allen, 5 February 1929, Company Letter Book, *ibid.*, 4/1/75.

<sup>19</sup> Stephens to Fairfields, 1 April 1926, Company Letter Book, 4/1/72.

<sup>20</sup> E. Kibblewhite, "The Impact of Unemployment on the Development of Trade Unions in Scotland 1918-39: Some Aspects" (Ph.D. thesis, Aberdeen University, 1979), p. 171; McLaine, *New Views on Apprenticeship*, *op. cit.*, p. 56, for the changing entrance

and organisational resources of the AEU were channeled towards maintaining its existing adult membership rather than expanding its recruitment base. Local attempts to win the allegiance of apprentices, such as the formation of the AEU Youth Guild in 1928, found little support among union activists, and its meagre success was quickly dissipated by transfers to adult sections of the union. The Youth Guild was allowed to die a quiet death little more than a year after its inception.<sup>21</sup> Even after the AEU accelerated its recruitment programme in 1934 in response to the slow economic recovery from the profound depression of 1929-33, organisational resources were still considered insufficient to revive the union's youth section.<sup>22</sup> The AEU's perennial conference claim for the right to negotiate on behalf of apprentices was paralleled, therefore, by an enforced neglect of youth organisation.

The immediate cause of the 1937 strike was that of wages. The wage cuts imposed on adult engineers in the winter of 1921-22 were accompanied by reductions of up to 50% of apprentice wages.<sup>23</sup> On Clydeside the employers formulated a scale of *maximum* wage rates which ranged from 11/9d in a boy's first year to 25/6d in his fifth and final year.<sup>24</sup> The employers' appreciation of the productive and psychological value of apprentice labour during industrial disputes underlay their decision to delay the introduction of this maximum-wage scale until their confrontation with the AEU was concluded. As the Tyne Shipbuilders' Association put it, if any other strategy was adopted,

the employer might risk losing the great asset of apprentice labour on which he can now rely in an emergency. [ . . . ] it is not desirable to unsettle apprentices in any way, especially those in their third, fourth and fifth years, whose services are usually very remunerative.<sup>25</sup>

requirements of the engineering union for apprentices.

<sup>21</sup> AEU, *Glasgow District Committee*, 7 December 1929.

<sup>22</sup> AEU Glasgow, *Report of Organising Sub-Committee*, November 1934; similarly Boilermakers' Society, *Monthly Report*, September 1935, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> AEU, Executive Council, *Report of Sub-Committee considering Industrial Section*, 29 May 1926, Modern Records Centre, Warwick University, Coventry; J. Gollan, *Youth in British Industry: A survey of labour conditions to-day* (London, 1937), pp. 67-68.

<sup>24</sup> The maximum rates for apprentices were:

Engineers, Year 1: 11/9d	Other trades, Year 1: 15/2d
Engineers, Year 2: 13/8d	Other trades, Year 2: 17/7d
Engineers, Year 3: 17/7d	Other trades, Year 3: 20/-
Engineers, Year 4: 21/6d	Other trades, Year 4: 24/11d
Engineers, Year 5: 25/5d	Other trades, Year 5: 29/10d

*Report of Special Sub-Committee Considering Position of Apprentices*, March 1921, Clyde Shipbuilders' Association Papers, TD 241/12/144. The report stressed that firms were free to set lower rates if local labour markets were favourable.

<sup>25</sup> Tyne Shipbuilders' Association to Clyde Shipbuilders' Association, April 1921, *ibid.*

The 1922 maximum-wage scale remained unaltered for the following fifteen years, with the result that apprentice engineers became the poorest-paid young craft-workers on Clydeside. Indeed, in 1936 a survey conducted by the North West Engineering Trades Employers' Association (NWETEAs) discovered that the overwhelming majority of local factories paid "well under the limits recommended".<sup>26</sup> By retaining the maximum-wage scale, the employers effectively generalised the Victorian wages, which provided fertile ground for the general demands which emerged during the 1937 strike.

In addition to the customary five-year apprenticeship was the universal one-year "improvership", during which the young engineer's wage increased by 2/6d per quarter until he was eligible for the full-skilled rate.<sup>27</sup> Experienced apprentices and "improvers" therefore worked for less than half the wage of a time-served artisan. Nor were apprentices necessarily juveniles; the prevalence of short-time working during the depression meant that it was not unusual for a five-year apprenticeship to stretch to seven years.<sup>28</sup> In 1937 the striking apprentices reflected on the disparities between their wages and their importance within the occupational structure of the metal-working industries and, often, their age and continued status as apprentices.

Can it be wondered at that boys of twenty-three years object to being paid a pound a week for doing the finest skilled job? [ . . . ] In some cases fares have eaten up two-thirds of the week's wages and when all other insurance and Society expenses are paid, fourpence, or a "double Woodbine", as one apprentice put it, was left after a hard week's toil.<sup>29</sup>

In September 1936 engineering workers won a wage rise of 3/- per week. On Clydeside, the exclusion of apprentices from this award prompted a "widespread movement" of boys approaching individual employers for an advance of 2/- per week.<sup>30</sup> The "most insistent" juveniles were the engineering apprentices of the Govan shipyards, whose wages were 10/-

<sup>26</sup> NWETEAs Minutes, 25 August 1936, Scottish Engineering Employers' Federation, Glasgow.

<sup>27</sup> More, Skill and the English Working Class, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-74.

<sup>28</sup> Report of an Enquiry into Apprenticeship and Training, *op. cit.*, VI, p. 20: in 1925 an engineering apprenticeship typically lasted 5.7 years. It is certain that depression considerably lengthened the average apprenticeship. In June 1937 a Glasgow AEU branch received an application for apprentice membership from a man aged twenty-five years and one month, AEU Executive Council, 15 June.

<sup>29</sup> Clyde Apprentices' Committee, "Strike! Clydeside Apprentices' Committee, full story" (Glasgow, 1937), p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Chief Conciliation Officer Glasgow, Weekly Report, 3 September 1936, Ministry of Labour Papers 10/76, Public Record Office, London (hereafter CCO Report).

lower than those of any other trade.<sup>31</sup> However, the apprentices' lack of organisational strength or procedural standing enabled the employers to ignore such protests with impunity.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, this experience generated a burst of unionisation amongst apprentices, especially in the Govan area, where 110 new AEU apprentice members were enrolled in the autumn of 1936.<sup>33</sup> The importance of this influx should not be overstated, since the percentage of unionised apprentices on Clydeside as a whole remained below 5%. Nor were there any moves to establish a youth pressure group within the AEU at this stage. The energies of the young engineers who later formed the leadership of the 1937 strike were devoted to the campaign to defend Republican Spain. It is to this seminal experience and its influence on the apprentices' strike that we shall now direct our attention.

As John Saville has argued, the cause of Republican Spain aroused "more positive commitment among the politically progressive in Britain than any other external set of events in the twentieth century".<sup>34</sup> On Clydeside, the Spanish Republic became the focus of a political crusade which percolated throughout every factory and community. For young activists, involvement in the campaign was all-consuming: a constant round of neighbourhood collections, sorting donations and loading lorries.<sup>35</sup> This time-consuming activity, even more than the widespread public sympathy for the Republican cause, was crucial in maintaining the morale of those involved. Moreover, the campaign was one in which the Young Communist League and the Labour Party's youth section – the Labour League of Youth – co-operated so wholeheartedly that their activities were virtually fused.<sup>36</sup> Such political activity established personal contacts between the apprentices who were later to form the core of the strike's leadership. Importantly, while participation in the Spanish-aid programme was a seminal experience for many of the leaders of the 1937 strike, it remained entirely divorced from the industrial concerns of those involved.

<sup>31</sup> NWETA, Shipyard Apprentice Wages, June: a fifth-year Fairfields engineering apprentice received 21/6d, compared to 29/10d earned by joiners, blacksmiths and boilermakers.

<sup>32</sup> CCO Report, 3 September 1936.

<sup>33</sup> AEU, Glasgow District Committee, 27 January.

<sup>34</sup> J. Saville, "May Day 1937", in: *Essays in Labour History*, ed. by A. Briggs and J. Saville (London, 1977), p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> Oral-history transcripts of Clydeside Apprentices' Strike (Interviews 1984) "Watson", "Maitland", "Maley", in the possession of the present author; H. Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1984), for a vivid description of the forms of support the British working class extended to Republican Spain.

<sup>36</sup> J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain 1931-41* (London, 1982), pp. 77-78, 100-02, for the "popular front" and radical youth organisations.

Well, I had met Stuart Watson [later chairman of the apprentices' strike executive] and a couple of others through the YCL and the Spanish campaign before we came out on strike. [. . .] Of course, we were more interested in Spain than we were in talking about our own factories. [. . .] There was a lot of muttering among us boys at our work, but nothing else.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the continuation of such “muttering” throughout the winter of 1936-37, there were no moves towards even the most rudimentary organisation among Clydeside apprentices.<sup>38</sup> Common political purpose, even where focussed by membership of the YCL, produced no industrial initiatives. The YCL, without a local industrial organiser until 1938, concentrated exclusively upon Spain, ignoring the parochial industrial problems of apprentices.<sup>39</sup>

The spark which ignited the apprentices' strike was a strike by boys employed by Lobnitz, a relatively small Paisley engineering firm, who won a rise of 2/- per week within a day of striking on 18 March 1937.<sup>40</sup> The Lobnitz strike was emulated by apprentices in two neighbouring factories with the same result. For the NWETEA, the “foolishness” of these firms was the catalyst which transformed inchoate dissatisfaction into a widespread strike.<sup>41</sup> As the employers' association feared, the following week witnessed a rash of spontaneous strikes. Typical of innumerable frantic telephone calls received by the NWETEA was that of William Simon and Co., whose manager reported that at

about half past three the boys suddenly stopped work and assembled in the yard. They were sent back to work and told that if they came back in a proper manner the position would be considered. This morning, 31 March, however, they refused to start work and made a demand for rates of pay [ranging from 12/- to 23/-].<sup>42</sup>

The spontaneity of these strikes was signified by the diversity of the strikers' wage demands and their willingness to accept factory-level settlements. However, as the employers recognised, concessions by individual firms would not arrest the dispute, “but merely spread the contagion to

<sup>37</sup> “Watson”, oral-history transcripts.

<sup>38</sup> CCO Report, 24 March.

<sup>39</sup> Oral-history transcripts of National Minority Movement, “Cowe”; Mr Cowe was the Communist Party's Industrial Organiser in West Scotland, 1937-38.

<sup>40</sup> Clyde Apprentices' Committee, “Strike!”, op. cit., p. 4; CCO Report, 24 March.

<sup>41</sup> NWETEA, telephone message to EEF, 5 April, EEF Microfilm Accession (1937)A(7)138, Modern Records Centre. This accession is currently being re-catalogued; all subsequent messages etc. to EEF bear the same reference.

<sup>42</sup> Wm. Simon and Co., telephone message to NWETEA, 31 March.

neighbouring works".<sup>43</sup> For this reason, the employers were convinced that studied indifference would rapidly lead to disillusionment and a return to work. The strike, they noted, was completely unorganised and, in their opinion, certain to collapse given union assurances that "none of these boys will receive trade union support".<sup>44</sup>

On 31 March five hundred apprentices from Fairfields shipyard, Govan, came out on strike.<sup>45</sup> The involvement of the Fairfields boys proved to be a watershed in the development of the strike. The Fairfields boys established a mass picket to bring out all the apprentices of the closely-packed shipyards and factories in the Govan area. On 1 April the manager of the neighbouring Stephens shipyard reported to the NWE TEA that "his boys" has been "quiet" until the Fairfields apprentices "persuaded" them to strike until a common wage scale was established for all apprentices in the Govan area.<sup>46</sup> This marked an important turning point in the dispute in two respects. Firstly, the participation of the Govan apprentices provided the manpower necessary for the systematic escalation of the dispute: on 2 April approximately 4,300 apprentices were on strike. Secondly, it was the first step towards the articulation of common demands for apprentices irrespective of factory or occupation. Nevertheless, the continuing diversity of wage demands made by boys outside the orbit of the Govan apprentices underlines the limits to this development and reinforced the employers' conception of the unrest as nothing more than an unorganised juvenile adventure.

By the end of the first week in April the Govan boys had commandeered an abandoned shop for headquarters and convened a delegate meeting of all striking apprentices. Factory delegates were either boys who acted as spokesmen in the winter of 1936-37 or, more typically, apprentices whose debates with tradesmen – "tea-break politicians" – made them natural leaders of their fellows.<sup>47</sup> The nucleus of the strike committee elected at this first boisterous meeting was composed of young men whose political experience was dominated by involvement in the campaign to support Republican Spain. Above all, the boys' leadership was aware that inactivity would, as the employers anticipated, quickly sap morale and endanger the strike's solidarity. The first task confronting the newly formed leadership

<sup>43</sup> NWE TEA, Apprentice Strike, March 1937, for examples.

<sup>44</sup> NWE TEA Minutes, 5 April.

<sup>45</sup> NWE TEA, telephone message to EEF, 6 April.

<sup>46</sup> CCO Report, 7 April.

<sup>47</sup> "Johnston", oral-history transcripts; W. Maitland described these first delegate meetings as "like a section football crowd crammed into a small room. You couldn't put your hands in your pocket".

was discovering precisely what factories were involved, and establishing links between strike headquarters and outlying areas. The unco-ordinated travelling picket rapidly gave way to systematic “patrols” assigned to specific geographical areas and instructed to enlist all apprentices still at work.<sup>48</sup> By 8 April the strike was 8,000 strong, and the boys had developed an extremely efficient form of centralised leadership and decentralised administration based on “a cycle corps of no less than 500 members”.<sup>49</sup> The immense communication system not only performed essential administrative functions, but also kept hundreds of boys involved in maintaining the solidarity of their strike. Similarly, the boys organised a series of athletic meetings – “the Apprentice Olympics” – and a daily football league with forty-eight factory teams to maintain enthusiasm for the strike.<sup>50</sup>

The rapid escalation of the strike forced the AEU Executive Council to decide how to react to the “revolt of apprentices on Clydeside”.<sup>51</sup> Two factors decided the Executive’s position. Firstly, support for the apprentices would constitute a major breach of industrial-relations procedure and risk provoking a national conflict with the employers. Such a move would conflict with the Executive’s conservative bargaining strategy, and jeopardise the union’s efforts to rebuild its financial and numerical strength after the years of depression.<sup>52</sup> The keynote of the AEU’s policy in the 1930’s was caution: incremental gains through established conciliation procedures and steady membership growth were considered to be mutually reinforcing elements of a pragmatic bargaining strategy. Secondly, the question of apprenticeship was inseparable from that of the industry’s labour supply. To support the apprentices would inevitably involve negotiations about the adequacy of the skilled-labour supply at a time when rearmament was straining available skilled-manpower resources. The AEU leadership feared that independent negotiation on the issue of dilution – the upgrading of non-skilled workers onto skilled work – would isolate the AEU from the wider labour movement and damage executive authority inside the union.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the AEU could not entirely disown the apprentices for fear of

<sup>48</sup> Albion Motors, telephone message to NWETEA, 8 April, for example.

<sup>49</sup> CCO Report, 9 April.

<sup>50</sup> All the veterans of the strike interviewed were involved in at least one of these diversions; one recalled that for the duration of the strike a boxing gym offered free tuition to apprentices.

<sup>51</sup> AEU, Executive Council, 13 April, Clark.

<sup>52</sup> R. Croucher, *Engineers At War* (London, 1982), pp. 28-33, for examples of significant strikes which the AEU failed to support or actively discouraged during this period.

<sup>53</sup> AEU, Executive Council, 17 and 18 March 1936, 19 January; R. Parker, “British Rearmament 1936-39: Treasury, trade unions and skilled labour”, in: *English Historical Review*, XCVI (1981), for discussion of these issues.

alienating a large number of potential members in one of the union's strongholds. As Jack Tanner, the leading left-winger on the Executive, argued,

All the unions in the Confederation [of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions] appeared to have granted their support, and if it goes out that the AEU are not supporting the Dispute, it will, undoubtedly, create an extremely bad situation for the Union.<sup>54</sup>

The AEU Executive decided to pay strike benefit to apprentices who were union members before the strike began, but to repudiate any sympathetic action by journeymen or efforts to recruit apprentices while the strike continued.<sup>55</sup>

The apprentices' strike had an immediate impact on production – reflecting their importance within the occupational structure of local factories. By 7 April many firms were “in a pickle” because of the shortage of components normally produced by “older boys”.<sup>56</sup> The disruption was compounded by the refusal of many journeymen to perform “apprentices' work”.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, engineers in Govan threatened to “join the boys on the street” if any adult was suspended because of bottlenecks caused by the strike.<sup>58</sup> Faced with the prospect of adults being dragged into the dispute, the NWETEA held an “informal” meeting with local union officials. The latter were almost apologetic for their members' “intense sympathy” for the apprentices, but warned that if adults were suspended they would be “compelled” to declare the resulting strikes official. Employers and union officials alike were no longer certain that the strike would collapse because of a lack of organisation. For, as one union official remarked, without apparent irony, “organisation among the boys was something wonderful. Many of them were extremely intelligent, some of them being University lads.”<sup>59</sup>

The publication of the Apprentices' Chapter on 8 April shattered the tacit collusion between local employers and union officials. The Charter, composed by the strike executive, made four main demands. Firstly, that the employers introduce a standard-wage scale ranging from 15/- to 30/- for all apprentices irrespective of trade. Secondly, that all apprentices receive a

<sup>54</sup> AEU, Executive Council, 13 April, Tanner.

<sup>55</sup> AEU, Executive Council, 13, 20 and 21 April.

<sup>56</sup> NWETEA, Apprentices' Strike: Current Position, 9 April.

<sup>57</sup> AEU, Executive Council, 13 April.

<sup>58</sup> *The Bulletin*, 7 April.

<sup>59</sup> NWETEA, Notes of Informal Meeting with Unions, 8 April; NWETEA Minutes, 12 April.

technical education through paid day release to supplement their workshop training. For the boys, trade training was a demand of paramount importance. Not only did apprentices suffer the indignity of being confined to repetitive tasks, but they were intensely aware that circumscribed workshop experience limited their future employment prospects.<sup>60</sup> Thirdly, that “a reasonable ratio of apprentices to journeymen” be established to regulate the industry’s skilled-labour supply. Fourthly, the right of trade-union representation for apprentices. For the employers, the Charter was evidence of the impotence of local union officials and that “the old relationship of the apprentice and master [was] now at stake”<sup>61</sup>.

Within the local engineering union there was mounting pressure for an immediate overtime ban and an indefinite strike in support of the apprentices. The left wing of the local AEU hoped a sympathy strike would force the employers not only to negotiate about apprenticeship, but also to re-establish shop-stewards as a third force in the area’s industrial politics. In the words of one prominent union activist, the apprenticeship issue

established the possibility of working class Clydeside directly confronting the organised employers for the first time in eighteen years on a *local, industrial* issue. These issues presented the *opportunity* for a royal showdown with working class forces mustered for the first time in many years, by shop stewards and an unofficial movement, the apprentices.<sup>62</sup>

The two-hundred-strong meeting of shop-stewards rejected this eloquent plea by a two-to-one majority because “it would be bad tactics [. . .] to issue such a strike call to our members who, we are satisfied, would not give the necessary support.”<sup>63</sup> The shop-stewards decided that local engineers should demonstrate their support for the apprentices by a one-day strike on 16 April. The patchy nature of workplace organisation on Clydeside, the shop-stewards’ uncertainty and the lack of official union commitment combined to limit the effectiveness of the one-day stoppage. Including the 17,000 apprentices on strike, a total of approximately 40,000 workers came out on 16 April.<sup>64</sup> Two-thirds of the Govan engineers struck work, twice the proportion elsewhere in the region – a difference reflecting the relative strength of the AEU’s workplace organisation on Clydeside.<sup>65</sup> In all, the

<sup>60</sup> Challenge (YCL), 8 April.

<sup>61</sup> J. B. Mavor, telephone message to NWETEA, 9 April.

<sup>62</sup> AEU Glasgow, Report of Special Meeting of Shop Stewards, 11 April. Emphasis in original.

<sup>63</sup> AEU, Glasgow District Committee, 9 May.

<sup>64</sup> NWETEA, Returns: One Day Strike, 16 April.

<sup>65</sup> NWETEA to EEF, One Day Strike, 16 April.

sympathy strike was, as the AEU's local organiser observed, "not all that was expected".<sup>66</sup>

Despite its shortcomings, the sympathy strike of 16 April was the zenith of unofficial support for the apprentices. The informal blacking of apprentices' work receded and manufacturers gradually adjusted their production processes to reduce the disruption caused by the strike.<sup>67</sup> Thus, despite the strike's "astonishing solidarity", its impact was rapidly diminishing.<sup>68</sup> In effect, the process of adjustment and the employers' refusal to negotiate with the apprentices' leadership transformed the strike into a lock-out. On 30 April, local union officials urged a mass meeting of strikers to resume work so that their grievances could be pursued through established channels. Failing this, the officials predicted a gradual, disorganised return to work in which the boys' spokesmen would be victimised.

Either they could accept the Union's advice and return to work, or they could continue on strike allowing their solid movement at the present time to break up gradually until a dry rot set in and they went back eventually at the mercy of the employers.<sup>69</sup>

In such circumstances the apprentices had little option but reluctantly to agree to re-start work on 5 May. The employers responded by introducing a new *minimum* apprentice-wage scale, ranging from 12/6d to 27/–, designed to allow plant-level settlements to defuse any future youth unrest. While the Clyde employers conceded wage rises, the apprentices' strike had confirmed "more strongly than ever" their aversion to trade-union representation for apprentices.<sup>70</sup>

For all the hostility of the AEU Executive, the leadership of the Clyde strike remained active through the summer of 1937, maintaining a skeletal organisation ready for any fresh turbulence.<sup>71</sup> The summer marked an impasse in official negotiations, the normal three-month delay between an issue being raised at local level and progressing to central conference. In the interim the AEU Executive confirmed its refusal to be bound by the Charter; moreover, its primary objective was to secure the union's rights to

<sup>66</sup> AEU, Divisional Organiser, Quarterly Report, June; Gollan, *Youth in British Industry*, op. cit., p. 315; Croucher, *Engineers At War*, op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>67</sup> NWETEA, Apprentices: Urgent Memo, 18 April.

<sup>68</sup> Clyde Shipbuilders' Association, Minutes, 22 April; by this date only 209 apprentices – "mostly pieceworking apprentices" – had returned to work.

<sup>69</sup> NWETEA to EEF, Memo, 4 May; CCO Report, 4 May.

<sup>70</sup> NWETEA Minutes, 21 April.

<sup>71</sup> Challenge, 15 June; W. Maitland was threatened with expulsion from the AEU for his part in maintaining the apprentice committee; see AEU, Executive Council, 21 and 28 October.

negotiate about apprenticeship issues *in principle*. In his presidential address to the AEU's 1937 National Committee – the union's lay policy-making body – Jack Little stressed the Executive's intention to negotiate about broad principles rather than particular issues: "I tore up that mandate as you were wrong. [. . .] Do not entangle the Executive with this [Charter] which does not amount to much anyway."<sup>72</sup>

In September 1937 youthful frustration at the failure of industrial-relations procedure to resolve the issues raised by the Clyde apprentices sparked off a second wave of strikes, which swept through the main English engineering centres. The English boys failed to generate the cohesive organisation characteristic of the Clyde strike. Unlike the latter, the English apprentices were willing to settle at factory level, eschewing the universal demands of the Apprentices' Charter.<sup>73</sup> By failing to adopt the Charter the second wave of strikes – which left Clydeside untouched – was exposed to Pyrrhic plant-level victories, which prevented the development of a centralised leadership.<sup>74</sup> For both these reasons a national conference of apprentice activists was convened in Manchester under the unofficial aegis of the YCL.<sup>75</sup> At this conference the Clydeside experience was invoked as justification for calling an indefinite national apprentices' strike from 18 October. This audacious move was considered the only way to galvanise the faltering English strike wave, which, if allowed to collapse, would effectively end any chance that official negotiations would satisfy the demands of the Apprentices' Charter.

The employers' private deliberations reveal the astuteness of the apprentice activists. Prior to the Manchester conference, organised – as the employers noted with alarm – "not by the Trade Unions, but by certain disruptive elements in the industry", the Engineering Employers' Federation strategy had been to grant minor wage rises to stem apprentice unrest, but to preserve "the purely domestic relationship between apprentice and master".<sup>76</sup> The threat of a national strike by workers beyond the reach of trade-union discipline and openly contemptuous of procedural constraint prompted an abrupt shift in the employers' strategy. The Engineering Employers' Federation justified its decision to agree to a qualified incorporation of apprentices into industrial-relations procedure by reviewing "the radical change which has taken place in the last six months".

<sup>72</sup> AEU, National Committee, June, p. 209.

<sup>73</sup> Croucher, *Engineers At War*, p. 54.

<sup>74</sup> F. Carr, "Engineering Workers and the Rise of Labour in Coventry, 1914-39" (Ph.D. thesis, Warwick University, 1978), pp. 439-40.

<sup>75</sup> Challenge, 14 October.

<sup>76</sup> EEF, Circular Letter to Regional Associations, 28 October, pp. 1-2.

Hitherto the federated employers have had to deal with, in their apprentices, boys and youths, a body unorganised from the point of view of collective bargaining. Arising out of the apprentices' strike on the Clyde, however, there is now growing up very rapidly a tendency on the part of the boys to combine and make demands upon the employers. The total number of boys and youths employed by federated firms represents over 120,000 workers in respect of whom there is no machinery of negotiation and with whom the Federation has no point of contact. As a result there is plenty of evidence that subversive elements inside and outside the factories are ready to support the boys in undisciplined action. The problem facing the Federation, therefore, is to consider whether it is desirable to create some form of limited contact with the Unions on juvenile questions that would bring these matters under constitutional authority.<sup>77</sup>

For the employers, the erosion of their personal power over apprentices and the absence of union controls over them created an authority vacuum in which more volatile forms of leadership could develop. The problem, as they saw it, was how to stabilise relations between employers and young workers without substantially augmenting the AEU's bargaining power. To defuse the threat of a national apprentices' strike the employers hurriedly conceded the principle of trade-union representation for apprentices; henceforth youth wages would fluctuate with those of adults. The qualifications to the apprentices' individual and collective rights were, however, significant.<sup>78</sup> Most important was the employers' attempt to maintain the individualised status of apprentices on the shopfloor. That is, any complaint by an apprentice was to be made directly to his foreman, a mechanism designed to limit complaints because, as the AEU Executive realised, "in many cases the Apprentice would be afraid to make direct approach to his foreman".<sup>79</sup> If the apprentice remained dissatisfied, the complaint became a matter for local union officials. Apprentices were, therefore, excluded from union protection through shop-stewards in the workplace and prohibited from striking either on their own behalf or in support of adult workers. In return for gaining the right to represent apprentices the AEU, in effect, accepted responsibility for preventing further apprentice unrest.<sup>80</sup> The employers clearly regarded trade-union intervention as a form of safety valve which would channel the dissatisfactions which had spilled onto the

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> NWETEA Minutes, 28 October.

<sup>79</sup> AEU, Executive Council, 16 November 1937, Little.

<sup>80</sup> CCO, Memo, November, pp. 1-2, Ministry of Labour Papers 10/80; EEF, Circular Letter to Regional Associations, 8 November; J. Mortimer, *History of the Boilermakers' Society*, II: 1906-1939 (London, 1982), pp. 288-89, for similar agreement between shipbuilding unions and employers.

streets in 1937 into the less volatile forum of the negotiating chamber.

This study of the 1937 apprentices' strikes has suggested some initial conclusions for the development of apprenticeship in the engineering industry. We have argued that from the late nineteenth century a combination of technological, organisational and socio-legal processes transformed apprentices from industrial serfs to an important form of productive wage labour. This overarching process, which we have termed partial proletarianisation, left one essential feature of the apprentice-master relationship unchanged: the atomisation of apprentices as a category of wage labour remained a definitive element of their employment contract and their unorganised status in the workplace. For engineering employers, apprentices were both a form of cheap and increasingly productive labour, and non-union workers of immense strategic value during industrial disputes. The 1937 strikes challenged both aspects of apprentice employment, the enormous disparity between productivity and payment, especially pronounced on Clydeside, and the absence of trade-union controls over earnings and working conditions. It was at this point that the apprentices' demands became fused with the traditional craft expectation of a full technical and practical education, an expectation thwarted by their confinement to repetitive detail tasks. The purpose of the strike was not only to win a wage rise, but also, as the Clyde boys put it, "to hit hard and obtain the chance to become brilliant mechanics, a chance which their employers deny them".<sup>81</sup> In short, the strike was a reaction to the progressive degradation of apprenticeship as a method of skill acquisition begun in the late nineteenth century.

The 1937 apprentice strikes transformed the status of apprentices from atomised individuals with minimal employment rights to unionised workers. Unlike previous apprentice strikes, notably those of 1912, the apprentices were not forced back to work on the employers' terms, but succeeded in wresting major concessions on earnings and trade-union rights from the employers. Moreover, this was a success won despite an almost total lack of trade-union support for the apprentices, a fact which guaranteed that employers would think twice before contravening the newly established procedural proprieties governing their relationship with apprenticed workers.

<sup>81</sup> Challenge, 8 April, cited in Croucher, *Engineers At War*, p. 46.