

CANE SUGAR AND THE TRADE UNION IN BRITAIN

J. T. Hardy,
Convener, Joint Craft Unions, Tate & Lyle Refineries,

The best place to start is at the beginning. Back in 1971 we picked up in the local press that there were suggestions of excluding ACP sugar from Britain and as a result, 3,000 jobs would be in jeopardy. The trade union within the refinery approached the management which was uncertain, so we made it clear that within our industry we were not going to sit on our backsides and let things happen. We lobbied Parliament, the Ministry of Agriculture and organisations like the World Development Movement. We made a point of learning about the sugar situation, not only within UK, but also in Europe and the international markets.

In 1971 when Britain was negotiating to enter the EEC Mr. Geoffrey Rippon finally came back with his solemn bankable assurances regarding the supply of ACP sugar. When our sugar industry looked at them, we found, in reality, they meant nothing. By 1974 the new Minister of Agriculture under a Labour Government was, as far as the trade unions were concerned, still waffling concerning cane imports. Eventually, it was not until we stopped sugar leaving the refinery that the Minister was pressurised into taking action on our behalf. Out of this came the figure of 1.4m. tonnes.

When lobbying in Brussels we were described as a rugby team that had just come off the field after losing a match. But we are proud of this because we care about our industry, and in the process we found one good friend - Mr. Taselaar - the author of the first ACP regime. He had the grace to admit that had our points of view been taken into account he would have written a very different paper.

With all this experience behind us, by 1977 the trade union was urging Governments and industrialists to meet to talk about sugar. We felt this was necessary in order to bring people concerned together. Over the next three years we spoke to various people - like John Edmonds and trade unionists like yourselves - and it became clear that no one in the sugar world can live in isolation. That if the three groups - Governments, industrialists and trade unions - could put aside their differences and work together in a common cause, then those differences would become less important.

On the other side we could see the result of beet expansion. Six cane refineries in UK were reduced to two.

The last to go was Liverpool - which in our opinion was closed much too soon. We heard yesterday that 800 more jobs in Thames Refinery are in jeopardy from the modernisation process. We have not accepted this, but we understand the pressure we are up against through the expansion of beet. We do not like these situations nor do we like the price we trade unionists have to pay, but we must face up to them. In spite of unemployment in Europe and America we intend to stay in the cane refining business - and more important, we intend to stay in business with you, but we are not blind to the problems.

Over the years we have heard remarks from various places that we must mechanise and reduce labour in order to become more efficient. We have also heard that the problems are caused by incompetent management. Talk to someone else and he will tell you that he can get his sugar to the mill but he cannot get it unloaded. These are real problems that have to be faced. We have no doubt they can be overcome, but I am not here to tell you what to do nor to brainwash you. Only you can solve your problems and it is important to be masters of your own destinies.

Ian McDonald rightly emphasised the problems of the Caribbean and I would point out that we here do not enjoy losing four refineries and still being under pressure to contract. But I do want to underline that we have failed to unite to oppose the massive beet expansion of the last ten years and now we are all paying the price - us with the lost refineries.

Earlier this week the Prime Minister of Fiji stated that the industry was being pressurised to diversify. Are you going to stay with sugar or not? It is, of course, your choice but we would be grateful to know if you intend to stay with us. If so, then you must realise that the problems facing sugar will not just go away. We must sit down together to discuss them and come up with an answer.

I feel the best way to achieve this is by a marriage of management and trade unions within the industry, even if it is only a marriage of convenience so that we can sit down together and decide how to ensure our industry is viable. I use the word 'marriage' deliberately. My wife and I have our differences and our arguments, but we do have a common denominator. We want and need each other. I liken that to our industry. A marriage of management and trade unions working in a common cause, but it has to be worked by both sides, with affection, respect and trust. I'm not asking you to have a love-in with your management. I work for Tate & Lyle - I do not have to love them, but I do have an attachment to them. I believe this is the way we have to

work. I'm sure when I talk to management on my favourite subject of wages they do not really love me, but when we have joint problems we must sit down together and face them equally.

We, the joint trade unions in the cane industry, would like to float certain ideas. They are not only our ideas but those put forward by fellow trade unionists in the Caribbean and other areas. We would like to see an international trade union cane sugar organisation where there can be cross fertilization and a sharing of ideas and problems. Perhaps this international organisation could form a joint trade union association covering Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Three groups with a co-ordinator for each group. His role would be to exchange information with the other groups, to convene meetings with trade unions and to liaise with Governments and industrialists so that we work together with the common objective of the survival of our industry.

I would compare such an organisation with the symbol on the Barbados flag - the trident. A common shaft with three spikes - Government, industry and trade unions. I want this to be such an organisation that if the shaft (the industry in general) is attacked (and it is constantly under attack) then all three spikes will defend it jointly. Here we are not talking only of 2,000 people employed in UK, but of millions employed in it all over the ACP countries. We have to move in this direction in agreement with each other. If we achieve this, then we must face Europe together, for it was the Europeans who brought your ancestors to your lands and for one reason only - to grow sugar for the Europeans. Don't let them forget it.

Britain joined the EEC on the understanding that 1.4m tonnes of cane sugar can continue to come into Europe to its traditional markets. Don't let them forget it.

Let us examine who is creating our problem. In the last ten years Europe has moved from being a net importer of cane to being a huge exporter of beet. This year it has produced a surplus of approximately 5.6m. tonnes. Look at America which has expanded its high fructose syrup production so much that it has had to reduce beet acreage and close factories in addition to reducing and restricting cane imports. As a result of these two factors - Europe dumping its surplus on the world market and America reducing its imports - the world surplus goes up and this means low prices. We are also aware that whereas Tate & Lyle make £2 a tonne profit refining sugar British Sugar can make £30 a tonne.

I was very glad to hear Edwin Carrington say 'attack'. I loved that word, it was music to my ears. I believe we should attack and attack the real culprits - those who created the suprluses through the expansion of beet. It was reassuring to hear Ambassador Jackman say that 1.3m. tonnes are sacrosanct. Fine, but let's be realistic. It's no use saying a commodity is sacrosanct unless there is someone to buy and sell it. We could find that if cane can't be sold because of cheap surplus beet, we may be told our cane isn't wanted.

It was encouraging to hear David Williamson say there must be a cut back in beet. GOOD, but he was not saying that when we first went to Brussels. This year I agree with him; I believe there should be a cut-back of about 3.5m. tonnes of beet sugar. This is the line Europe should be following and I believe the best way to achieve it is by membership of the International Sugar Agreement (ISA), which represents not only European views but your views also. We must see a cut-back in production of food mountains - particularly beet sugar.

To us it is important that the EEC joins the ISA and I think we should be very firm about this. We have had determined people among us such as Lord Campbell and Sir Guy Sauzier. Why, then, are we not getting together to agree to say 'in the best interest of all the cane growers and refiners, this is what we want'? We need to fight for it jointly and positively.

Other speakers - Ambassador Chasle and Jonathan Fryer - have implied that to make progress we must be 'nice' to people in Brussels and not upset them. That's fine. I don't want to be aggressive, but it's rather like mother saying 'be nice to your big brother', when big brother is knocking hell out of you. I want to be nice to everybody, but I insist that they are also nice to me.

When we look back we find that Europe with its beet expansion is constantly pressurising our cane industry. I would add that if you think the big white boss in Europe is going to look after you, you are wrong. He is too busy looking after himself. It is therefore important we get together and talk collectively in one voice in our industry - Governments, industrialists and trade unions - to do what is best for it.

We feel if we can develop an organisation such as I have described - and it is possible - even shortfalls should be dealt with collectively and administered by yourselves. Arrangements could perhaps be made by hemispheres - northern and southern - so that if anyone has shortfalls, the

particular hemisphere makes them up, possibly on a proportional basis. But this is something to be thought and talked about.

The trade unions within our refineries want to build up an international sugar movement with not only Governments and industrialists but also trade unions in our industry. This would enable us to have the knowledge to discuss all aspects affecting the industry. I feel the trade unions have the right to insist on certain information. Consider the Labour Party - it is saying it wants to take Britain out of the EEC. Whether or not this happens, trade unions should be saying to the Labour Party 'hang on, if you take us out of the EEC, what food policy are you going to have?' The Sugar Protocol is part of the EEC and not the UK, but I say, don't wait until it happens, let's think about it, prepare for it, then do what is best for all of us.

To conclude, I want to say this. This seminar is supported by Ministers and High Commissioners and many other people and we are grateful for their help. We wanted to set the stage and we wanted you to come. But what is more important, we have tried to give you the honest facts, and with these facts, we hope you - the actors - will perform your own show.