6 The Ministry of Labour

The Ministry of Labour (MOL) was formed on 11th January 1917 and given responsibility for the management of industrial conflict. The decision to set up the Ministry was taken by Lloyd George ‘after a few minutes’ consideration’ in December 1916.¹ Until 1916 various government ministries had had a hand in labour matters. The new government sought to co-ordinate its labour activities and also to secure the allegiance of labour leaders and invited members of the Labour movement to participate. There was to be a seat in the Cabinet and two new Ministries headed by Labour (MOL and the Ministry of Pensions). The Minister of Labour acquired the role of labour adviser to the government. The Ministry of Labour was given responsibility for conciliation and arbitration. It was to administer the Conciliation Act 1896, the Labour Exchanges Act 1909, the Trade Boards Act 1909, the National Insurance (Unemployment) Acts 1911–1916 and Part 1 of the Munitions of War Act (concerning arbitration). The implementation of much of this legislation was previously the province of the Labour Department of the Board of Trade. The Ministry also acquired responsibility for the implementation of the Whitley Report, which proposed offering a measure of control over the running of industry to workers.²

However, much of the work which the new Ministry took over from other departments had arisen out of the war and was temporary, and not all of the activities of other Ministries which fell within the scope of the MOL were transferred to it.³ This made the management of industrial conflict so difficult that George Askwith felt compelled to report to the Prime Minister that ‘the Ministry of Munitions has established a Disputes Department, the Admiralty has at least two. There is nothing to prevent the Board of Agriculture, the Shipping Controller or the Controller of Mines following the same course and the Ministry of Labour is itself divided’. The number of overlapping departments was causing ‘uncertainty and confusion’ and ‘is seriously impairing the relations and responsibility of actual employers and workpeople to settle their own differences’. It was causing unrest in the ranks of labour, weakening the authority of trade union leaders, spreading bureaucracy throughout the country and pitting one Department against another.⁴ Askwith’s protests appeared to fall on deaf ears and ‘internecine struggles’ between the MOL and the Ministry of Munitions, in particular, ‘continued

on such a scale that the two Ministries prepared entirely different versions of the May 1917 engineering strike for the Official History of the war.\textsuperscript{5}

The version compiled by officials of the MOL focused on the part played by the Ministry of Munitions in the May strikes in order to demonstrate that officials of the MOM were guilty of such a degree of incompetence that the stability of the country was jeopardized. The May strikes were seen to be the clearest example of labour mismanagement on the part of Ministry of Munitions personnel. Their action in connection with the strikes had ‘provoked a reaction from munitions workers which turned a non-revolutionary situation into a potentially revolutionary situation’ and against this background ‘the account prepared in the Intelligence and Record Section of the Ministry of Munitions . . . appears to some extent to have been framed as an apologia for, and an explanation of the action of the Ministry.’\textsuperscript{6}

The seriousness of the industrial situation which the MOL had inherited, the extent to which the approach adopted by the Ministry of Munitions towards the shop stewards had contributed to it, and the responsibility conferred on the MOL for the management of industrial conflict made a ‘fuller and more accurate record’ necessary and so ‘the point of view adopted in our history is of course different’.\textsuperscript{7} Events leading up to the ‘potentially revolutionary’ situation are set out below.

THE MAY STRIKES

On 3rd April 1917 the Trade Card Scheme was abolished on the grounds that insufficient numbers of men were volunteering for the army. It was replaced by the Schedule of Protected Occupations, making exemptions the prerogative of the National Service Department which then narrowed the grounds for the exemption of skilled workers.

The extension of conscription increased the shortage of skilled labour and on 29th April 1917 a Bill was introduced to spread dilution to private work. This broke an agreement made with the unions at the Treasury Conference. Skilled workers had agreed only to dilution on war work protected by legislative safeguards and ministerial promises; ‘now they fancied that they saw the cloven hoof.’\textsuperscript{8}

On 3rd May there was a strike arising out of these new proposals at Tweedale & Smalley, near Rochdale, which anticipated the passage of the Bill. The firm instructed workers to teach and supervise women on work previously done by skilled men. The workers refused and were