

~~Peter Hildrew~~ looks at a growing form of workers' protest

Unions pin hopes on sitting in

THE SIT-IN as a form of industrial protest continued to gather support in the Manchester area yesterday, with the engineering workers' union claiming three more factory occupations, bringing their total to 20, involving more than 12,000 people.

Arriving in shifts and loaded with sleeping bags, sandwiches, and packs of cards, the men seem convinced that they have an effective new tactic for embarrassing the management, and keeping up their own spirits into the bargain.

The sit-ins differ from the events which inspired them—the UCS and Fisher-Bendix work-ins—because no work is being done at all. "It's really an inside form of picketing," said Mr John Dougherty, AUEW convener at the Mirrlees Blackstone diesel engine factory in Bramhall, part of the Hawker Siddeley group and one of the biggest plants affected.

The men at Mirrlees elected to sit in for 24-hour shifts, noon to noon, to save on bus fares. There are four shifts, each of 200, and Mr Dougherty claims the attendance rate has been excellent. "We need to have 200 there, so that if they try to keep us out we can gather at the gate and all push our way in together," he said.

There has been no attempt at eviction so far, but the

canteen is shut, and the heating is off. Camp beds have been brought in, with primus stoves for cooking, and the entertainment ranges from darts and dominoes to film shows featuring last summer's holidays.

No beer is allowed into the factory. The shop stewards maintain a duty rota to enforce discipline, see that the toilets are cleaned, and keep out intruders. But some of the machinery is rusting through the damp, cold atmosphere.

The other unions at the plant—the clerical workers and the supervisors' union, ASTMS—are continuing to work "normally," which in the case of supervisors may mean watching the sit-in; while the DATA division of the AUEW is mounting its own sanctions in support of a separate wage claim.

The people who have suffered most so far appear to have been the apprentices, more than 100 of whom have been laid off, and six canteen women who were also sent home, much to the union's annoyance. "They're keeping on the chef for the director," Mr Dougherty said.

For the Mirrlees men, the difficulties will start next week, when wages in hand run out and they will have to rely on social security for dependants. Mr Dougherty, a member of the AUEW's district committee, whose experience of disputes goes back to the Roberts-Arundel—believes that Hawker Siddeley as a major engineering employer

will stick firmly to national policy; but he is ready to sit it out, and believes the employers will have to give ground eventually on the main issue, the length of the working week.

At the Bredbury steel works, part of the GKN group, where the sit-ins began three weeks ago, the men are already "past the point of no return," accord-

ing to Mr Alan Wells, convener for the General and Municipal Workers, the majority union. Bristling with complaints about their social security claims, these men are also playing cards, doing jigsaws, and prowling round a damp, cold, and largely unlit factory.

At Bredbury, there are nine sit-in shifts of 60 men, eight hours on then two days

off. Of the other unions at the plant, the AUEW, the electricians and the woodworkers are part of the sit-in, while the British Iron, Steel and Kindred Trades Association has been expelled from the joint shop stewards' committee for continuing to work with machines serviced by what they call "blackleg" labour in the adjoining strip mill.

Negotiations were attempted this week, but broken off when the unions found the management would discuss only productivity, not hours. Another dispute has now arisen, over holiday money that was due at Easter, and the men seem resigned to a long battle.

Yesterday's new sit-ins involved 1,000 workers at the Linotype and Machinery works in Broadheath, Cheshire; 300 at Metal Box, Timperley; and 120 at Barlow and Chidlaw engineering, Salford. Mr Bernard Panter, Manchester region secretary of the AUEW, claimed that 23 firms had now made individual settlements, and that he knew of only three other firms where work-to-rule sanctions were not in operation.

The union is pursuing a claim for pay rises, shorter hours, and longer holidays at the local level. Mr Panter said the appeal by Mr Michael Fuller, director of the regional employers' association, for a resumption of national negotiations was unlikely to be taken up unless the unions were approached at national level.



Mr Dougherty: an inside form of picketing. Below, sitting in at Bredbury steel works. Pictures by Don McPhee.

