

Pickets ring mill in 'blackleg' fight

by Chris Tighe

TWENTY-ONE Pakistani millworkers tomorrow enter the ninth week of a bitter Grunwick-style dispute which has aroused strong feelings in the Asian community in Bradford where most of them live.

The men walked out in mid-March to protest at the dismissal of a colleague who, they believe, lost his job because he had been organising a union branch at their workplace, the Aire Valley Yarns wool spinning mill at Farsley, between Bradford and Leeds.

They, too, have now been dismissed and replaced by other workers, but they are mounting a round-the-clock picket at the mill gates in an attempt to win reinstatement and the guaranteed right to become union members.

Production at the mill is continuing with the newly recruited workers, some of them Asians. They are collected from their homes and brought into the mill by bus and car with the windows blacked out with plastic sheeting to avoid identification.

Derek Bedford, director of Aire Valley Yarns, says: "We don't expect people to walk through a picket line and be sworn at."

Picketing is peaceful at most times, but there has been trouble at shift changeovers in the early morning and evening. The police turn out for shift changeovers and there have been two arrests so far.

The English management and the dismissed Asians, few of whom speak much English, are so far apart that there is little agreement on even the most basic facts.

The strikers, for example, claim they

received only £1.02 per hour, taking home as little as £49 for a 60-hour week. The management says the £1.02 was only a basic rate and was supplemented by many bonuses, bringing the average rate to £2.50, a high wage in the textile industry.

Both sides are agreed on one point – the dismissed men worked nearly 60 hours a week at the spinning and carding machines, and sometimes 70 hours or even longer.

The man at the centre of the dispute is 28-year-old Liaquat Ali, a former shop steward of the Transport and General Workers' Union. When he joined the firm in December he was the only trade union member among the 22 shop-floor workers. He claims he was warned by management not to help his colleagues in joining the union and was sacked when his workmates refused to relinquish their membership.

However, Derek Bedford, who started the firm five years ago, says he did not even know Ali was unionising his workmates. He claims that someone had to be made redundant because of fluctuating orders and Ali was selected because of reservations about his work and behaviour. Bedford says he accepts that workers have a "basic right" to belong to a union, although he prefers his employees not to be union members.

An industrial tribunal will meet in Leeds on Tuesday week to hear Liaquat Ali's claim of unfair dismissal.

The union, which is keen to recruit more members from the Asian community to stamp out alleged abuses, has made the dispute official.

Meanwhile Ali is now keeping himself, his wife and four children on £12 a week strike pay and loans from relatives.