

Second Worker-Priest Employed at Cowley

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THE industrial belt at Cowley, Oxford, now has two priest-workmen.

The Rev. John Strong, who has had experience of combining pastoral work with coal-mining and engineering, has joined the staff of the Blackbird Leys Conventional District on the outskirts of the city. During the day he is at the Morris Works recording the number of new cars as they come off the assembly lines.

Not far away the Rev. Tony Williamson, a Labour councillor at Oxford, is employed as a manual worker at Pressed Steel, the company that makes motor bodies.

Before moving to Blackbird Leys Mr. Strong, now forty-nine and the father of three children, had for nearly two years been living in Blackburn, and doing a variety of labouring jobs. He has been a "priest-workman" — one of only seven in the Church of England — since 1951, when the then Archbishop of Canterbury put him and the Rev. Michael Gedge in charge of Eythorne, near Dover.

Luton Shop Steward

The two men received no money other than their wages for working in the local coal-mine. Five years later, because of ill-health, both priests had to resign and the experiment ceased.

Mr. Strong then moved to Bedfordshire, where once again he and his family lived on his factory earnings while he looked after the parish of Harlington, near Dunstable. During his six years in the place, Mr. Strong worked as an oil meter calibrator and shop steward in a Luton instrument factory.

When he left in the summer of 1962, the Bishop of St. Albans, through his suffragan, denied that Mr. Strong had been dismissed for working in industry while running a parish.

The time had come, he said, for Harlington, one of the growing villages of Bedfordshire, to have a full-time priest. The Bishop agreed that Mr. Strong had worked very hard, but said that there were people, especially older ones, who did not like the idea of a priest dividing his time between secular and pastoral work.

WORKER-PRIEST WAS A MINER

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MANY parishioners who attend the Church of the Holy Family at Blackbird Leys, Oxford, have grown accustomed to greeting the Rev. John Strong not only as a parish priest—but also as a fellow employee at Cars Branch. Very odd it seemed to them at first, but for John Strong, who has been in Vehicle Progress since last July, factory work is no novelty.

Thirteen years after he had been ordained he acted on his conviction that, by becoming a wage earner and subjecting himself and his family to the same economic risks and pressures as the man in the street, he could help to close the gap between them and the Church.

In 1951 he became the first worker priest in the country

when, with a fellow priest, he took charge of a coal mining parish near Dover. Drawing no stipend they earned their living working in the pit—a gruelling test. It took time before they were no longer suspected of 'putting on a stunt', but after three years the parish church had a miners' choir and a greatly enlarged congregation.

Since then John Strong has never drawn a stipend. For six years he worked in a Luton factory and was in charge of a small parish. Later, at Blackburn, he continued to fend for his wife and young children as a wage earner doing a variety of labouring jobs. Now there are seven worker priests in the country, one of them on the shop floor with Pressed Steel, Cowley, for



REV. JOHN STRONG

some years now.

John Strong does not pretend to any self-sacrifice in renouncing the normal parish priest's life. 'I enjoy working with my hands,' he says, 'but I know the meaning of the

struggle to make both ends meet—something that still goes on in other parts of the country, very different from here in the motor industry.'

A member of the A.E.U., John Strong has been in his time a shop steward and a parish councillor. He is a family man and his two elder children attend school on Blackbird Leys.

He does not seek to preach in the works, though quite ready to discuss anything with anybody who wants it. The Christian faith is, he says, essentially rooted in the working world, and must lose its vigour when separated from it. So, too, he says, should the life of the ordinary parish priest be so rooted, though involving radical changes in parish set-up.