

THE COURIERS ARE REVOLTING!  
The Despatch Industry Workers Union  
1989-92

By Des Patchrider



Starting a union can be exciting, risky, hard work and a right good laugh... Even when nothing seems to go right there still exists the solidarity of comradeship. It was ironic (or flattering) that the bosses with all their money and power were so scared of our humble union.

I'M IN!

We were only an ordinary group of workers who had sod-all money or power... we hoped that we could provide an example or inspiration for workers to organise similarly in other industries. Workers like YOU! Read on...

Kate Sharples  
Library  
BM Hurricane  
London  
WC1N 3XX

£1.50

ISBN: 1-873605-67-6

THE  
COURIERS  
ARE  
REVOLTING!



The  
Despatch Industry  
Workers Union

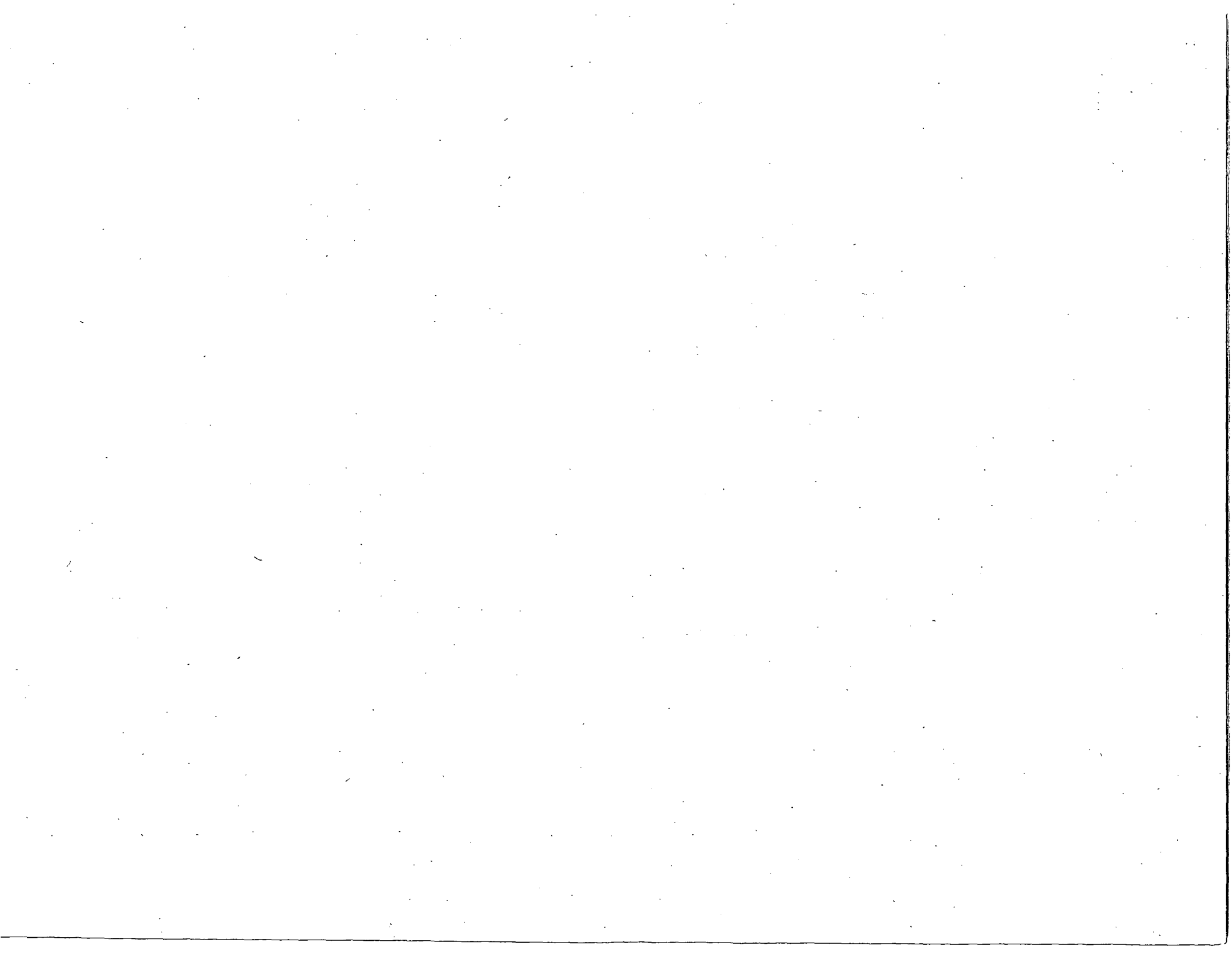
1989-92



UNION  
AHEAD



By Des Patchrider



KSL Publications, co-publications and other titles

Flavio Constantini **Art of Anarchy** £3

George Cores **Personal Recollections of the Anarchist Past** £1

Andrea Ferrari & Aldo Aguzzi **Pages from Italian Anarchist History** £1

Luigi Galleani **The End of Anarchism?** £3

Miguel Garcia **Miguel Garcia's story** £2

Victor Garcia **Three Japanese Anarchists: Kotoku, Osugi, Yamaga** £1.50

Sylvain Garel **Louis Lecoin: An Anarchist Life** £1.50

Daniel Guérin **No Gods No Masters (Vol. 1 & 2)** £11.95 each

Agustin Guillamon **The Friends Of Durruti Group: 1937-1939** £7.95

Ignacio de Llorens **The CNT and the Russian Revolution** £1

Nestor Makhno **The Struggle Against The State And Other Essays** £7.95

Umberto Marzocchi **Remembering Spain: Italian Anarchist Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War** £1.50

G. P. Maximoff **The Guillotine at Work** £5

Albert Meltzer **I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels: Sixty Years of commonplace Life and Anarchist Agitation** £12.95

Max Nettlau **A Contribution to an Anarchist Bibliography of Latin America** £4

John Patten **Ned Kelly's Ghost: The Tottenham IWW and the Tottenham Tragedy** £1

John Patten (ed.) **Yiddish Anarchist Bibliography** £7.50

Antonio Tellez **The Anarchist Resistance to Franco** £1

Antonio Tellez **Sabate: Guerilla Extraordinary** £5.95

Various authors **Prisoners and Partisans: Italian Anarchists in the struggle against Fascism** £1.50

## THE COURIERS ARE REVOLTING!

The  
Despatch  
Industry  
Workers  
Union

1989-92

By Des Patchrider

Kate Sharpley Library

2000

THE COURIERS ARE REVOLTING: The D.I.W.U. 1989-92  
By Des Patchrider

Published 2000  
Kate Sharpley Library  
BM Hurricane  
London  
WC1N 3XX  
ISBN 1-873605-67-6

A list of publications available from the KSL is on the last page. Please contact us for more details.  
4-00

## Uneasy riders start a big push for better working conditions

by Mandy Robotham

LONDON's growing army of bicycle couriers are getting on their bikes to protect their interests.

The CCs, as they are known in the trade, are joining trade unions in a bid to improve conditions. There are reckoned to be up to 1600 operating in the capital.

Membership of the new Despatch Industry Workers Union (DIWU) and a newly-formed branch of the Transport and General Workers Union has been increasing in line with demands for better working conditions among the 500 or so despatch companies now operating in London.

Seasoned couriers say the industry's trendy image, recently portrayed in the TV series *Streetwise*, ignores the realities of surviving regular city snarl-ups, appalling road conditions and profiteering bosses.

DIWU members Shaun Lambden and Paddy Robinson claim self-employed riders can expect to work in all weathers, avoiding "notoriously bad potholes", only to have despatch companies cream off 40 to 60 per cent of the clients' fee.

"Someone worked out that they were covering up to 40 miles in one day in order to earn a decent wage," said Shaun.

"On top of that, some companies don't even have riders rooms to rest in be-

tween jobs, so when it's wet you end up sheltering in doorways or expensive cafes."

Eight cycle couriers have reportedly been killed and many more injured in the last year alone. Andrew Cope, senior accident registrar at Bart's hospital, who is compiling research on despatch riders, says at least three cycle couriers are admitted to the casualty unit every week suffering from minor grazes or serious fractures.

He said: "I have seen two deaths in the last year, where cyclists have collided or been crushed between lorries. Undoubtedly there are many more like that."

Derek Ransom, City of London road safety officer, says cycle couriers often flout the Highway Code and put pedestrians in danger by riding on pavements. In addition, he says many rider don't have proper insurance to cover themselves and victims of accidents.

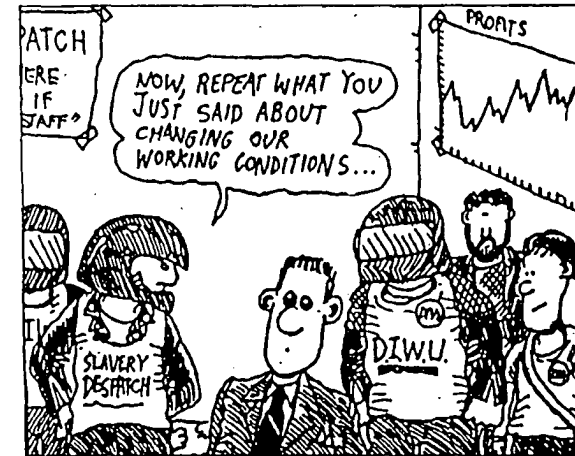
But the 70 or so employers represented by the Despatch Association are dismissive of the current rider's organisation. Secretary-General Gideon Fiegal said: "There is no unionisation as such and no question of them posing a threat to us."

Evening Standard 22nd February 1990

except for Peter Fordham, after three years, having survived the worst London traffic and the bosses could throw at us.

Adam: It was a shame to see the Union dissolved but there was no point in carrying on if hardly any of us still worked in the industry. Belonging to the DIWU was a great experience although there were numerous disappointments along the way. We tried as hard as we possibly could to create a spirit of rebelliousness and unionise this industry. You struggle to be optimistic and enthusiastic but eventually you think bollocks to it all. You need a break. Make up your own mind whether we succeeded or not. Learn from our mistakes, get together with a few mates and have a go yourself!

Note: In 1994 some of the former DIWU members started a courier section within the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW.) The IWW is an international general union that organises similarly to the DIWU. If you want to get in touch contact the IWW at 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester, LE1 4WB.



## CONTENTS

1. Nothing to lose but your chains....
2. Introduction
3. Recruitment/Membership
4. Politics
5. Those charming chaps at the TGWU
6. Say it with picketing
7. Self-employment my arse
8. Cop a load of these bastards.
9. Workplace branches.
10. First Courier.
11. Worst One.
12. Breaking the Speed limit.
13. Apollo
14. Harley Street Runners - literally.
15. Express Bromley
16. Cycle logical victory at Southbank
17. West End Despatch
18. Best insurance quote: "Norwich Union are Tossers."
19. Other activities.
20. We came, we saw, we conked out.

## 1 Nothing to lose but your chains...

Starting a union can be exciting, risky, hard work and a right good laugh. The financial rewards might be little or none, but the satisfaction of getting some justice can be enormous. Even when nothing seems to go right there still exists the solidarity of comradeship. It was ironic (or flattering!) that the bosses with all their money and power were so scared of our humble union. We were only an ordinary group of workers who had sod-all money or power. But when the bosses hear the word 'union' they invariably get into a proper fluster, terrified that their privileges will be challenged.

Of course our unionisation efforts were small potatoes compared to epic social events such as the Miners Strike, the Poll Tax rebellion, etc. But we hoped that we could provide an example or inspiration for workers to organise similarly in other industries. Workers like YOU! Read on...

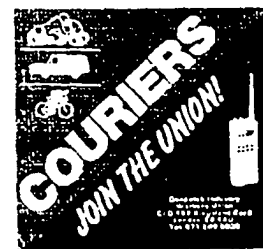
## 2 Introduction

This booklet is meant to be a record of the nitty-gritty details of organising an effective union from scratch in modern day Britain. We wanted as much as possible down on paper before it is forgotten. As such this booklet has its fair share of boring parts, although in fact the DIWU has seen more action in 3 years than most other unions see in 30 years!

Despatch riding and cycle couriership are dangerous jobs with people killed nearly every year. One DIWU member, Peter Fordham, was killed on the Pentonville Road on Friday 13th September 1991 (while working for a firm called Heaven Sent, believe it or not) Most of us have had at least one serious injury. When 'human error' is the cause that is not too bad because we all make mistakes occasionally.

However, a large number of crashes are caused by aggressive drivers cocooned within the safety of their car or van. They nudge, tailgate and generally try to intimidate us. These people are wankers of the highest order, and the resulting bike-car accidents are not accidents at all, but simply caused by these motorists' stupidity.

But the problems couriers get from bad drivers, heavy traffic, pollution, vehicle breakdown, police harassment, bad weather, crap radios and wrongly-addressed parcels pale into insignificance compared to the problems the bosses provide us with. Money, or the lack of it, is of course the obvious one. Some firms are fairly 'honest' in the way they treat us, but many have outrageous rip-offs of the couriers. Cheques get bounced, jobs done are not paid for, multi-drops are charged to the customers at the full rate but only a tiny percentage is passed onto the courier, fines are imposed for lateness, bonuses are fiddled, etc. Dynamo forced their cyclists to buy the company shirts for £15 each,



## 20 We came, we saw, we conked out

It was a very hard decision to dissolve the Union. We kept talking of having a big re-launch, but nobody had the energy to make it happen. The discussions coincided with the West End Despatch dispute which we thought would bring in a lot of new members, but didn't. The idea to dissolve was first raised at the end of 1991 because the DIWU had seemed to stagnate. But we kept going on into 1992. We prepared another issue of *Despatches* but there was no enthusiasm for it and hardly anyone left to distribute it, so we never did the final layout.

It should be noted here that the DIWU had more staying power than many companies during the recession. At the time lots of firms were involved in mergers, take-overs and bankruptcy. Even the Despatch Rider of the Year competition had folded, although this may have been partly due to the DIWU regularly taking the piss and running the parallel competitions of "Despatch Slave of the Year" in 1989 and "Shite Company of the Year" in 1990. The DIWU lasted ten times longer than the TGWU branch, London Bicycle Couriers Association and the Despatch Riders Association - put together, of course.

We came to a Union meeting in June 1992 when we realised that nearly everyone in the room was soon leaving or had recently left the industry. We decided to postpone the decision to dissolve the Union until the following meeting when all contacts had been written to. At the next meeting we still could not face dissolving it, so it was postponed again until 20th July 1992.

At the last union meeting two abstained and six voted in favour of dissolving the union and to send all its assets, nearly £900, to the Network Solidarity Fund. The NSF was managed by the anarchists of the Direct Action Movement who sponsor similar organisational campaigns as ours in other industries. They can take up where we left off. In fact, during the DIWU's existence they had donated about £200 to us.

Alan: *We had a good few bevvies and talked about the fun we'd had making monkeys out of the bosses. In the courier game you cannot be sure that all your friends and comrades will still be alive tomorrow. But here we all were,*

We were in regular contact with the Independent Couriers Association in New York, and had letters from couriers in Germany and Austria and letters from anarcho-syndicalist organisations in Spain, France, the USA and Australia. We also had a letter from a member of the IWW union in Ottawa who wanted to start a DIWU branch there.

Adam: *Being an open organisation the DIWU sometimes succumbed to wishy-washy ideas, consequently we entered into correspondence with Westminster Council re: allowing motorcycles to use bus lanes, with the police re: excessive harassment of couriers, with Delta Despatch re: pay, with Addison Lee re: deductions from wages. I think all of these letter writing campaigns were a complete waste of time and energy, and possibly harmful to the DIWU as they took away the emphasis from organising industrially to begging the powers that be for favours. The DIWU also maintained links with Camden Occupational Health Project and North Kensington Law Centre. But best of all, we wrote to the Anti Trust, which is a kind of philanthropic charity for 'left wing' groups, and to our amazement they donated £800 to us.*

In December 1989 the DIWU delegated Alan to go to Paris to a conference for communication workers organised by the International Workers Association. It was good but geared more towards postal and telecom workers than despatch riders. We also delegated John and Pia to take part in the Trade Union Anti Poll Tax Conference in September 1990, and Adam spoke about the DIWU at that year's May Day Rally in Clerkenwell Green. In October of that year a car load of us were all set to go to Edinburgh at the request of a group of couriers who were organising lightning strikes right across Scotland. After lots of phone calls, letters, delays and changes of plans the trip was eventually cancelled.

The DIWU was in occasional contact with the Motorcycle Action Group and the British Motorcyclists Federation; and we ran a DIWU stall at the Magna Carta rally attended by thousands of bikers. We did some graffiti around London which has lasted well but we wish we had had lots more. Rajiv wrote and recorded a punk song called "Join the DIWU", which is not everybody's cup of tea but some of us like it.

We provided advice and a witness for a cycle courier from Special Delivery (probably the worst firm in London) who took them to the small claims court for non payment of wages and won. Another DIWU member decided to use debt collectors to get wages he was owed and that was successful too.

For several firms we tried to get 'Company Reports' i.e. details on profits, directors, and other juicy bits of information. However, most of the despatch firms we enquired about had covered their tracks very well by using different trading names, addresses, splitting the company into tiny fractions to avoid the prying eyes of people such as us or the Inland Revenue.

then fine you £10 per day if you don't wear it (i.e. don't wear your own shirt!) Creative Couriers even took £10 from one rider's wages to buy some flowers for a customer who the rider had had an argument with. If you complain about any of this the bosses invariably say "if you don't like it you can leave", and firms like 24 Hours Express on Borough High Street will offer you some gratuitous violence as well. After all these aggravations the bosses are then surprised when they don't get a loyal or stable workforce!

Special Delivery Ltd. deserves a mention on its own as an example of what couriers have to face. This company quite simply ran a policy *not to pay* their workers. Special Delivery would continually advertise in the London Evening Standard, and recruit novice couriers. So, people would start work there and not expect to get paid for two weeks due to 'week-in-hand' money. After two weeks the boss would tell the courier that there had been a problem with the computer and there would be a delay of another week. When another week rolls round, another excuse would also roll round. By the time four or five weeks had been worked and no wages paid many people leave. people who try to argue with (or throttle) the office staff don't get very far because riders can only communicate through a small hatchway. Persistent couriers may be referred to the other Special Delivery office in Aylesbury, but those who go there only get referred back to the London office. Any couriers who still have the tenacity to pursue their wages will be told at this point that their wages have not exceeded the radio charges, circuit fees, etc., so that in fact the courier supposedly *owes the company money!*

Special Delivery was not alone in operating like this, although it was probably one of the most blatant. Other companies have other methods to cheat their workforces usually under a smoke-screen of waffle about 'market forces.'

Adam: *My boss at Business to Business threatened not to pay my wages unless I grassed up the person who had been allegedly bad-mouthing the company (in fact the person had only been telling the truth that wage-cheques sometimes bounced). I refused of course, but eventually got my wages after a stand-off.*

But the biggest source of financial complaint amongst couriers is that the firms take on far too many people so the work, and the money, get spread too thinly. To all these money problems add the aggravation of dealing with bullying selfish bosses who usually despise the dirty couriers and you can see this industry is no bed of roses. However, when all is going well, and it's a lovely sunny day, the job can be a real pleasure.

Industrial organisation is such a simple idea, that when all workers stick together we are invincible. United we stand or divided we fall, and all that. But to put it into practice is not so easy. Some gullible workers believe the propaganda

they read in *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, etc., and so are against unions. Other people had better reasons to be apprehensive, e.g. the boss at Challenger told the riders they would be sacked if they joined the Union (what better recommendation could we ask for?!). We discovered that the situation in the despatch industry was that hundreds, even thousands of couriers thought a union was a good idea but felt that the obstacles were too great or that they were too tired to participate after an exhausting day on the road. Our job was to convince them that the DIWU was the best thing since Benjy's snack bars.

Aaron: *On 1st March 1989 Alan, Adam, Mohammed and myself, all couriers, met in Alan's flat and decided to found the Despatch Industry Workers Union, which would be loosely based on the anti-bureaucratic anarcho-syndicalist type of union that they have in Spain, France and elsewhere. Within a year the DIWU had a small loyal hard core and was known by virtually all the 5000 or so couriers in London. We like to think that the bosses thought twice before introducing changes to pay or conditions for fear of retaliation by the Union.*

Although membership levels were never great there was evidence that couriers read *Despatches* (the free DIWU newsletter) then started industrial action on their own e.g. at Routemasters where cyclists went on strike over the uneven distribution of work. This was fine by us. We have never had any desire to control couriers, only a desire to set free the working class.

Note: All events in this booklet are true. However, pseudonyms are used to protect those of us still working as couriers. The only real names used are Pete Fordham (a good comrade, deceased) and obvious enemies of the Union such as Jeffrey Ritterband, Southbank Ray, etc.

### 3 Recruitment/Membership

The growth of the DIWU was usually the most pressing issue at Union meetings. We racked our brains thinking of ways to recruit and retain more members. During its brief lifetime over two hundred couriers got involved with the union to a greater or lesser extent, although only half a dozen consistently kept it ticking over.

Attendance at meetings, which was vital to keep a level of democracy, accountability and dynamism, varied from thirty down to a despondent two. But to put this into perspective, most trade unions in Britain only get a handful of people showing up for meetings even though their branch may consist of hundred or thousands of members. So the DIWU was doing as well, or better, than most trade unions manage.

One DIWU member suggested several times that to get a crowd along to a union function we should hire a stripper. At the risk of sounding prudish we had

to poor attendance. Only the die-hards attended film shows, Christmas piss ups, alternative cabaret, First Aid course and the run out to Brands Hatch to watch the racing.

In contrast to the apathy of many couriers, various solicitors often gave us their undivided attention. We were twice threatened with legal action by West One, twice by Westminster Council and once by a firm in Liverpool. Adam was also threatened with court action by one of the sharks in the despatch industry, Charles Lamb, who handles many couriers' tax affairs. We always ignored the bastards.

For two years the minutes of the meetings were typed, photocopied and posted out to all people on the contact list in order to sustain interest. After that a more readable and more security conscious summary of Union business and forthcoming activities etc was sent out monthly, called Union News. We produced popular booklets on Tax matters and National Insurance, a history of the Independent Couriers Association in New York, badges, stickers, posters, pens, key rings, T-shirts, calendars, membership cards, rule books, policy booklets, information for new members and numerous specific leaflets plus *Despatches* quarterly. Occasionally we had outside speakers at DIWU meetings e.g. TGWU strikers from Liverpool, and representatives from Anti Fascist Action and the Anti Poll Tax Movement.

The DIWU membership took an active part in co-ordinating several national Anti Poll Tax demos and were also involved in Anti Fascist activity. During the 1989 Ambulance Dispute while the TGWU supported a poxy fifteen minute stoppage during what would be most people's dinner break, the DIWU, true to form, at a days notice, organised a demo at Parliament Square where 30 to 40 riders sped round and round blasting their horns causing a right rumpus. This got us on prime time T.V. and cemented links with striking ambulance workers for whom we'd already raised several hundreds of pounds. A couple of weeks after the demo traffic lights were put up on all four corners of the Square, wonder why?!

We contacted all the London Branches of the UCW and BETA unions requesting financial assistance, but got none. However, the (then) National Organiser of the ACTT union offered his services to us after seeing our posters all over town. Journalists from *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *Evening Standard*, *City Limits*, *Ride Magazine*, *Moving Target*, *London Biker*, *Transport Review*, the BBC, LWT and various other bodies and freelancers contacted us for interviews. Some did articles, and John and Sam did a 15 minute documentary on the union for BBC Radio 5. We also assisted in the making of a documentary film about the industry called P.O.B. which was shown at some of our social events. It was very good but has not yet been broadcast.



About 100-150 motorcyclists showed up at Finsbury Square on Monday 2nd December 1991. Alan gave an excellent rabble rousing speech, which he is good at. About ten of us had red and black arm bands which looked tasty and Alan made plenty of DIWU placards.

Rajiv: *When we set off towards the London office of Norwich Union in Fenchurch Street there was so much noise and dust that the city gents just stood there gobsmacked. They must have thought the revolution had started. We went through the city revving our engines, beeping our horns and stopping the traffic. In the confined spaces of the city it was a hell of a racket, and a good laugh. When we got to Fenchurch Street we blocked the road and carried on making a massive din, so all work stopped in the nearby offices as people watched us from their windows. We demonstrated for an hour as planned. By this time the press and the police were running all over the place. We got radio and newspaper coverage, and we plastered the area with DIWU stickers.*

Graham: *Alan and myself went inside and negotiated with Norwich Union but only got some vague promises out of them. All in all it was a very good day, and nobody got nicked as the police kept their distance and seemed frightened of us.*

To help us on the same day Norwich anarchists organised a successful bikers demo outside the Norwich Union head office, and Manchester anarchists organised a demo outside the Manchester N.U. office.

The problems getting insurance caused by Norwich Union signalled the end of a job for many despatch riders. It also signalled the end of the DIWU. The recession had already forced many couriers to change industries, the total number of couriers on the road in 1992 was probably only half of the amount five years previously. Now the remaining couriers were either refused insurance or asked for very high premiums and only Third Party Cover.

The insurance situation stabilised by the middle of 1992 and now couriers can be fairly sure of getting cover from Norwich Union albeit if you pay 50% loading on top of the normal exorbitant rate. It's a huge amount of money to shell out before you can do a days work.

#### 19 Other Activities

Below are listed most of the other activities the DIWU got involved in so that critics who are tempted to say, "why didn't they do such and such?" can see that we probably did.

The DIWU organised a benefit/social in December 1989 which was a great success with about 110 people attending. We also had a public meeting in October 1990 where about 30 couriers came along to find out about the Union. Virtually all the other social events we organised were unmitigated disasters, due

to say that an organisation such as the DIWU, which was supposed to be promoting equality between men and women, could not sponsor an event that would be seen as sexist. The reality was, if we had social events with strippers the union's popularity would probably have soared.

In the early days we had big discussions and mental wrangling whether or not to advertise public events and meetings in case the bosses, grasses or even fascists came along. When people wrote to the union we asked for their name, address, firm and job so that we had the option to check them out beforehand if they sounded fishy. In hindsight we were probably over cautious, with the result that many couriers complained that it took too long to get hold of people from the Union when a problem arose.

The only time we know that 'anonymity' came in useful was when Westminster Council sent the 'heavy mob' to Hackney Trade Union Support Unit (TUSU) from where we collected our mail. The council lackeys arrived and started throwing their weight about attempting to put the frighteners on because the DIWU had stickers plastered all over central London including on council property. But the TUSU staff are not to be trifled with '...and fucked them off.'

#### 4 Politics

It was a point of principle that the DIWU was open and democratic, which was fine, but made us vulnerable to a take-over by Trotskyists. They are infamous for crowding in on *bona fide* workers organisations, then ruining them. However, despatch riding involves hard, dirty work over long hours which the middle-class Trotskyist would not like at all. Consequently only a few independently-minded working class members of the Socialist Workers Party ever joined, which was a relief. Incidentally, one of these people told us that the SWP had been spreading rumours amongst their members that the DIWU was like the UDM and EETPU (two strike-breaking unions) which is the most outrageous lie and insult possible. The only other contact we had with the SWP was after the DIWU dissolved in 1992 and they persistently demanded the names and address of all past DIWU members, allegedly to start a union under the auspices of the TGWU. They were too lazy to do the legwork like we had done. Of course we told them nothing because people had given their names and addresses to us in confidence.

Adam: *There were quite a few couriers around that described themselves as socialists or anarchists who did not join the Union. For example, I had one discussion with an Australian anarchist courier who said he liked everything about the DIWU except the word 'Union'. Another anarchist said he couldn't help the DIWU because Monday evenings were 'cheap night at the Rio Cinema. How pathetic can you get? You can give me your normal working-class courier with mortgage and kids over one of those airheads any day.*

*There were plenty of other trendy lefties and anarcho's who would not get involved in the Union for some supposedly high and mighty reasons that they conjured up in their heads, to avoid getting their hands dirty in the real class war more like. I am very bitter towards these people now, and I think of them as traitors. It was a real shame and a wasted opportunity because just a few more activists in the DIWU could have produced really dramatic results out of all proportion to our small numbers.*

Various lefty and anarcho groups occasionally wrote to the Union arrogantly criticising us. Their criticisms usually boiled down to saying we were not revolutionary enough. That was funny coming from those student-dominated organisations. The DIWU was living proof that an anti-authoritarian workers organisation could win bread-and-butter issues in the present and be the potential basis for a social revolution in the future. This is like the CNT in Spain, and unlike the Leninist parties everywhere. Also we did not need to pass resolution after resolution against racism, sexism, etc. It was obvious from our day-to-day actions that all couriers (black, white, male or female) belong on our side, and all bosses (black, white, male or female) are the opposition.

#### **5 Those Charming Chaps at the TGWU**

In 1985 the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), then Britain's biggest union, had a recruitment drive in the courier industry. They succeeded in getting a few members at Hand and Deliver Despatch, but the couriers and the union big-wigs soon fell out, so that was the end of that. When the DIWU started in 1989 the TGWU noticed we were having some notable impact so they tried to jump on the bandwagon. Not only the TGWU noticed us but so did a nut case called Mark Covell, who preferred to introduce himself as 'Marc Floyd' or 'Sky'.

A few words about Sky. He was, indeed still is a poser who loves publicity. He was a useless cycle courier who was always crashing or getting lost. It took him ages to go from the West End to the City because he seemed to stop at every coffee shop on the way to pose with his bike. He came to one particular DIWU meeting with his arm in plaster after crashing, using an old bicycle inner tube for a sling while dressed in full courier regalia - gloves, helmet, radio - even though he was travelling by bus! His posing was the cause of some mirth. Anyway he liked the high profile of the DIWU and fancied some of the same. He decided to found the London Bicycle Couriers Association, later renamed the London Bicycle Couriers Union, and generously offered the DIWU one seat on the LBCU committee. Of course there were no other members in the LBCU except Sky. He was a complete crackpot with crazy ideas like couriers should lower their own rates of pay to compete etc. We showed him the door.

#### **17 West End Despatch**

In April 1992 three cyclists came along to a DIWU meeting because West End Despatch had just reduced their rates of pay. We helped them draft a letter and Nigel helped dish them out as all the workforce were queuing for their wages on the following Friday evening. The leaflet advertised an early morning Riders meeting in Soho Square the following Tuesday. Nigel and Adam went along to offer the services of the Union, but only ten or so West End riders were there, out of a possible forty. It was decided to try and get a bigger turnout at another meeting the following week. Nigel did a grand job of distributing more leaflets, but the momentum had been lost, such as it was, and only a couple of riders turned up at the next meeting. So that was that, except that management got to hear of "trouble brewing" and the rates cut was put on ice! Bluff can be a wonderful thing!

#### **18 Best Insurance quote: "Norwich Union are Tossers"**

In December 1991 the DIWU took on their biggest adversary, the Norwich Union insurance company. It was not so much an industrial dispute but more like a political campaign. Until that November, Norwich union had covered 80% of all couriers. They then came out with some vague new statement that said couriers may no longer be covered. All the smaller insurance companies panicked and suddenly refused to renew courier policies.

Despatch riders were thrown into an even more uncertain future, and even the bosses shat bricks at the prospect of having nobody left to work for them. Many despatch riders applied to renew their insurance policies, but were refused and thereby forced to leave the industry. At that stage it looked like the whole motorcycle despatch industry would disappear within twelve months as the couriers' policies expired.

Adam: *DIWU members phoned and wrote to Norwich Union but they were totally uncooperative and unwilling to clarify their plans. Consequently most DIWU members were in favour of a demonstration against Norwich Union. I thought it would not do any good and was a deviation from workplace organisation, but I was outvoted and it was decided to go ahead. It turned out to be a great success from the morale boosting point of view. Having a go at the Norwich Union was important; this was an issue that affected all motorcycle despatch riders, we would have failed them had we not "taken up the banner" and waved it about a bit.*

We distributed thousands of leaflets and even the massive Motorcycle Action Group followed our coat tails and produced and distributed their own leaflet for our demo.

## 16 Cycle logical victory at Southbank

John: *I'd been working at Southbank for about six months, keeping my head down. I'd been virtually black-listed so I didn't want to lose this job by organising openly. I plotted up next to two riders from my company one day; they didn't know I was in the Union. Both were saying they should join. "Well" I said "get three people and you can form your own branch, and as I'm already in the Union how about it?" An hour later we had nine members, and a week later we entered our first dispute.*

The main bone of contention at Southbank, for the cyclists at least, was the fact that they had to buy their own uniforms. These cost £46 or more. When a uniform was too dirty or worn out you were expected to buy another. They were made only to promote a corporate image, not as practical work clothes.

John: *In the Autumn of 1991 one of the Southbank cyclists was sacked. He came and told us - the union members - about it. It was because he'd let his uniform get too shabby. Southbank ran a bonus scheme, they'd stop this if you didn't portray the correct corporate image. All of us looked like street urchins, our orange kit faded to a shabby black very quickly. We felt the company had gone too far and could by their criteria sack any one of us just like that.*

*We organised a riders meeting for the cyclists - we operated on a separate radio channel to the motorcycles and rarely saw them. All but two cyclists, who had to catch trains home, attended. I drafted a letter demanding that the sacked rider be reinstated and asked for a few other things such as the even distribution of work and a ceiling on the number of riders. Peter and Mike then rallied the riders and got nearly everyone to sign it. This was impressive, twenty four out of twenty six signatures. The next morning we met at our plot up point, Salisbury Square, at 8.30 am. We started work in theory at 9.00 am but on this day at 9.00 am, we'd all be walking into the office to demand our colleague's job back.*

*About fifteen of us went to the office, some people took the day off, others came into work but they didn't call on until they knew we had sorted out the problem. Only one rider scabbed, Ray: he was subsequently abused or ignored and universally hated for it.*

*At first management tried to bullshit us, saying that the office manager was unavailable. We insisted that they make him available and weren't budging until he was. Eventually he came in to see us. After a constructive discussion and having seen our demands he agreed to offer the sacked rider his job back and put a ceiling on the number of riders. We'd won, the old controller was sacked and the new bloke distributed work fairly. Ironically the sacked rider declined the offer of reinstatement as he'd got a better job elsewhere.*

So Sky went to the TGWU: they loved him! The TGWU promptly allocated £2,000 to Sky to start a couriers branch for them. Some of the money went on a massive publicity campaign which resulted in Sky's grinning boat-race wherever you looked. Sky was in heaven! The rest of the money went to a slippery TGWU bureaucrat called Nick Page, who was instructed to help Sky recruit the great unwashed courier hordes into the Oxford Street shop-workers branch, which seemed a bit odd to us. Worse, the TGWU seemed more pre-occupied with hush-hush negotiations with the bosses club known as The Despatch Association rather than with solving the couriers problems.

The situation was further complicated because a tiny Trotskyist group called 'Socialist Organiser' were trying to encourage a TGWU couriers branch, presumably so they could then infiltrate and destroy what they had just created! The Socialist Organiser armchair revolutionaries sent in an obnoxious ex-public schoolboy called Simon Wynne-Hughes to lead the way, but he was soon badly injured by a car, so that was the end of his flirtation with the working class. Needless to say, despite all their bluster and slagging off the DIWU, the TGWU soon gave up the idea of organising in the despatch industry, their ambitions condemned to the dustbin of history. Sky also left the industry for a while but continued to seek out publicity whenever possible, and was last seen on BBC TV rushing to sign up for the Gulf War.

## 6 Say it with picketing

The "right to strike" is the fundamental safeguard to prevent us slipping into a slave society. The "right to assembly" (i.e. unionise) is embodied in the United Nations Charter of Human Rights. The only way to have an effective strike is to have picket lines to prevent scabbing. Despite police provocation and what the media say picket lines need not be just areas of violence and mayhem. So picketing, seen in this context, becomes an activity to be proud of which can improve your lot and safeguard your rights.

It has always been in the DIWU Constitution and on every membership card that workers should never cross picket lines, unless the strikers consent. This statement was probably too hard hitting for many couriers, and may have put off some from joining, but we wanted the DIWU to have honourable principles or none at all.

Dennis: *One courier, when given Despatches, argued that the purpose of the despatch industry was to provide a delivery service for companies or the Post Office when their workers went on strike! (i.e. rent-a-scab) I should have just whacked him.*

Since 1979 it is probably more common for workers to say that they must cross a picket line or they will be sacked. The founders of the DIWU wanted to

challenge this attitude. In some ways it was a bold step because nobody has less job security than a self-employed despatch rider in the 1990's. On the other hand, it wasn't so bold because at the time it was easy to get another courier job, without references, within a day or two of getting sacked. In the beginning some of us were a bit worried about getting the sack, but now we consider it a badge of honour!

Consequently DIWU members refused to cross picket lines on numerous occasions. For example, Alan refused to cross a picket line at a striking factory in Dagenham, Rajiv refused to cross one during a BBC strike at the Aldwych, and...

Adam: *I twice refused to cross picket lines at VNU publishers in Broadwick Street and once at the Daily Telegraph in Docklands. None of us got the sack. The bosses and the customers seemed to accept "can't cross picket lines" better than most of our fellow workers. I wonder if this is because in the bosses minds they think strike-breaking requires armoured buses and thousands of cops, as used so brutally against the miners, the printers, and others.*

One courier called Joe, who worked at ADC, briefly joined the Union, then over a few pints described how he had been one of the strike-breakers at Wapping (during the printers dispute). He proudly told us that his boss said it was the motorcyclists who had kept Wapping running by bringing in photos, news, etc. Joe said he originally felt sympathetic towards the sacked printers until someone threw a brick at him, which supposedly made him more determined to cross the picket line. It had nothing to do with being paid the scabbing bonus of course! Anyway we politely told him we were on the other side with the sacked printers at Wapping. He never came to another DIWU meeting, the poor lonely soul.

In hindsight, when in dispute with a courier company DIWU's tactics should have been to picket the customers premises not the courier company's. There is almost no point in picketing the courier company because all the work is given out over the radio or by phone. But a bunch of hairy-arsed couriers making a racket outside the precious toffee-nosed customers addresses would soon have the courier bosses begging for mercy. If the situation got too heavy with the police we just disappear in different directions on our bikes then re-appear at another customers address and start again! This is, officially, known as Secondary Picketing which the toadies in parliament declared illegal. But rules are for breaking, right?!

Lastly, although not exactly on the subject of picket lines, there existed for years an informal boycott of South Africa House during the apartheid era. We never heard of any courier delivering there, only refusing to go there, which was heart-warming.

because the bosses create plenty of causes themselves. At HSR the pushbikers were getting very low wages and one person in particular was often put on part time working without notice. There was also great disparity with motorcyclists' wages which caused resentment. At short notice the cyclists decided to have a meeting in Cavendish Square one evening to discuss their grievances. All the cyclists and one motorcyclist, Adam, attended the meeting and it was resolved to confront the boss the next morning to get better wages and conditions.

Darren: *At the showdown the next day the grievances were aired but not resolved. Added to this, the boss's patronising, overconfident attitude really pissed the riders off. At one point he leant back in his chair, put his hands behind his head and his feet on the table, although this posture changed along with his composure when John uttered the immortal words, "In that case we shall have to withdraw our labour," and all the cyclists then got up and walked out. During the negotiations all the motorcyclists, except Adam, worked extra fast trying to cover the work (i.e. they scabbed). Adam refused to leave the office until the cyclists had got a satisfactory deal. Another motorcyclist who had joined the DIWU scabbed, although to be fair he had no warning, he just found the six strikers walking down the stairs as he came in. He talked to us and wavered, but didn't have the bottle to go on strike. The six of us went round to one of the rider's homes and spent a lovely afternoon because we all felt on top of the world. For one brief day, by our collective power, we got revenge and achieved freedom from the subservience and obedience that is expected of workers in the capitalist system. It was a great feeling.*

We heard through the grapevine that HSR had real difficulty covering all the work that day. The boss was forced to literally run round the West End on foot doing deliveries! Shortly afterwards HSR lost their biggest client, which may or may not have been caused by our strike. Two of the strikers went back to work after a few days. In hindsight perhaps we should have done some planning and got the support of all the motorcyclists, before the dispute started although it was felt likely that the motorcyclists may have sided with the boss.

### 15 Express Bromley

This is a small mini-cab firm with just four motorcyclists who deliver the small parcels. One DIWU member, Nigel, had worked there for many years. The pay and conditions were pretty bad, so Nigel organised riders' meetings to improve the situation. These meetings were in reality just a battle against the apathy of the other riders, but the boss seemed to think there was more of a threat (of industrial action) than there really was. Nigel played on the boss's fear when presenting the riders' grievances and generally things improved a bit. Which goes to prove that you don't get anything unless you try.

the customer was charged. In those days there was an unwritten rule that the riders got 60%, the bosses 40%. So when this was discovered, the riders were well pissed off. As we all chatted one day I suggested we have a riders meeting to discuss what to do, and this idea was favourably received. I typed up a little leaflet and used a marker pen to write the headline. This proved to be my undoing, because after I had given them out to other riders, management got hold of one and went through all the job sheets to try and match the hand writing. They traced it to me. They then produced a three page "Urgent reply to Anonymous Circular" which whinged on with their point of view (as if we don't get the bosses point of view every fucking day in the newspapers and TV) which they gave to all the riders.

They then dragged every rider into the office individually to see who else was against the glorious, benevolent, shit scared management. Three of them grilled me in two sessions of about an hour each. They asked questions like, "Do you resent it that we drive around in expensive sports cars?" and "Aren't you the one who started the strike at West One?" My defence was that I only wrote the leaflet to express what everyone else was feeling, I just wanted to earn an honest living etc. To my surprise they believed me and didn't sack me. Anyway the Riders Meeting went ahead at the Cartoonist pub in Little New Street. Only about eight riders, plus Rajiv and Alan from the DIWU, showed up but worst of all the Apollo management came too. It was a useless meeting as the bosses presence hampered free speech. A few days later Apollo plucked up the courage to give me the boot. In fact, the bosses were so confident that they had crushed any rebelliousness that they introduced even lower rates shortly afterwards. In hindsight I should not have produced the leaflet as it produced a frenzy of searching for "reds under the bed." I should have just approached one person at a time to see if they would be interested in taking any industrial action.

Alan: The Apollo dispute, and others, taught us that there is a huge difference between people who moan and grumble about how pissed off they are and people who have the bottle to do something about it. It takes a long time to discover who you can trust. The DIWU went into dispute with Apollo with all guns blazing but no real industrial base. Consequently it was a total disaster. Oh well! You'll learn from our mistakes.

#### **14 Harley Street Runners - literally**

After getting sacked by Apollo, Adam worked for Delta for a few months, then John recommended Harley Street Runners where he was working. It was a small firm with only five cyclists, six motorcyclists and two van drivers. Within a few months of starting there a dispute had materialised. In the despatch industry, like most industries, union activists don't have to create the causes for disputes

#### **7 Self-employment my arse**

Being self-employed is quite good when you are earning bundles of money. Then you can budget for the fact of no sick pay, pension, job security or holiday pay, and you can handle the expenses of buying and maintaining your own vehicle.

However, courier companies have the consistent habit of recruiting too many riders thereby diluting every-body's wages no matter how good or fast you are. Courier companies appear to have zero loyalty towards the workers from this point of view.

Ninety-nine percent of us work for one courier company at a time, maybe for a few days if its really shit, but usually people stay at a firm they like for several years. The courier companies decide the rate of pay and most other conditions of work. This is not true self-employment as defined by the Inland Revenue, no matter what your boss says.

On the face of it the courier companies have all the advantages of a self-employed workforce with no benefits to pay out for, no responsibilities towards our welfare and no expenses for maintaining a large fleet of high-mileage vehicles. On the other hand the bosses also have the advantages of treating us like the normal employed wage-slave, i.e. being told what to do and when. Despatch riders and cycle couriers are getting the worst of both worlds. This might explain why some people refer to self-employment as self-exploitation.

#### **8 Cop a load of these bastards**

London police almost daily put up road blocks for despatch riders. In important thoroughfares like Newgate street, Soho square or Pall Mall the police would stop and harass all couriers while allowing other traffic to pass freely. This is very frustrating and time consuming and costs couriers money because they are delayed and miss jobs. Officially the road blocks are to check road worthiness of motorbikes hence the euphemism "Free MOT's", but the police use the checks to search for other things e.g. drugs, tax disks, immigration etc and generally to assert their nagging authority over couriers. The funny thing is, that through the courier grapevine, via the radios, within minutes of a road block being set up hundreds of couriers know about it and avoid it like the plague. This will leave the hapless rozzers scratching their helmets at the road blocks and saying to themselves, "This is strange, usually there are loads of couriers down this road."

John: Cyclists too were stopped and bike frame numbers checked against a stolen list. This caused resentment as most cycle couriers have at least two bikes stolen in as many years, yet the police make no effort to recover them. I caught a couple of kiddies trying to nick my bike one day. I scared them off and said to a passing copper that he ought to keep his eyes open: "No point," he replied.

*On the pretext of checking for stolen cycles the police also searched couriers for drugs. Myself and a couple of others at First Courier were plotted up (waiting) at Bow Church Yard in the city, when plain clothes coppers swooped down on us, (well sort of), and before we knew it they had us face against the wall assuming "the position" and were saying things like, "I see you smoke tobacco, what else do you smoke?" After terrorist attacks around Westminster, couriers were unable to plot up around the area; when they did they weren't simply moved on. I'd stopped on the corner of The Mall and Birdcage Walk, which runs behind Downing Street. This is just minutes from the West End or SW1. I'd been there an hour waiting for a job, and a copper had been walking up and down opposite me for some time. He kept looking over, I could hear his brain slowly churning over so I started to stare at him. Eventually he came over and searched my despatch bag, while eyeing my bike suspiciously. Then he asked why I had a radio. I was tempted to say it was for launching lorry mounted mortars but I think he would have believed me. As luck would have it a job came across the radio, so I just rode off.*

#### **9 Workplace Branches**

Mark and Sam managed to get a branch of 10 members organised at Megacycles, but they soon left the industry. This coupled with a company take-over by West One forced other riders to leave and so the branch collapsed. John and Mike also got a 9 member branch, going at Southbank Couriers.

We also had nascent branches at West One, First Courier, Cain Dispatch, ADC, Harley Street Runners and Cyclone. These were initiated when three or more people said they wanted to join but not much else concrete came out of it.

To be fair, the difficulties of sustaining workplace branches may have been mainly due to the transient nature of the job, rather than the deficiencies of the DIWU. Also the riders who stay in this game long-term tend to gravitate towards the better firms anyway, so perhaps then feel less need to unionise.

People are always leaving this industry and if one or two energetic organisers left a firm the possibilities for a branch would often evaporate too.

Despite the difficulties, and the weaknesses of the DIWU, workplace branches probably hold the key to long term unionisation for couriers.

#### **10 First Courier**

In December 1989 John, a DIWU member, was working at First Courier. There had been various small confrontations with management over pay and conditions. The issue of single drops to the other side of Town, which pay poorly, came to a head when John refused to do one. This was a challenge to "management's divine right to manage." However, the issue was not hot enough so that soon four

never took his helmet off during the interview and never takes it off when he goes to the office for his wages!

Note: Eight years later, in 1998, a friend in the West One office told us that the DIWU dispute still gets mentioned occasionally - and Ritterband appears to give a little shudder!

#### **12 Breaking the Speed limit**

A Speed rider had written to the union previously and so they knew where and when we met. Then one evening in July 1990, as we sat down to a normal DIWU meeting, two Speed riders arrived and asked if we could send some delegates straight away to a mass meeting with the Speed management in Docklands. Alan and Adam jumped onto their bikes, followed them there and joined the meeting. The management didn't even realise that they did not work for them. The talks ended in deadlock and so the riders decided to strike from first thing next morning. Next morning Alan, Pia and Adam went along from the DIWU to offer help and advice. Four Speed riders went inside to negotiate and had the good sense to bring a tape recorder which they plonked down on the table to prevent management from making promises that they would not fulfil.

*Pia: The strike involved 30 out of 32 riders which was a very good percentage. The two scabs were despised anyway. In addition, the Speed management had got two more riders down from their Cambridge office, who possibly did not know there was a strike on. As each minute ticked away the management became more and more panicky, coming out sweating and begging the riders to go back to work. After one and a quarter hours the management offered a deal that the riders accepted. It was an improvement on the original proposed cuts in wages, but not a total victory.*

Afterwards we bumped into some Speed riders and asked them about things, some said it was a good result and that the DIWU had helped. Others said it was bad and that the DIWU should have done more. You can't please everybody. About six months later we heard that the Speed riders had another strike that was a total disaster. The management were well prepared this time and got West One to cover all the jobs, so the Speed strikers went back to work completely defeated. The tactic of picketing the customers premises would have particularly helped the Speed riders during the second strike.

#### **13 Apollo**

*Adam: In the summer of 1990 I was working at Apollo Despatch. I'd been there about three months when the management decided to reduce the amount the riders get for 'cash jobs.' This would only have reduced our wages by a couple of pounds a week, but it indicated that the bosses were taking over 60% of what*

riders were discussing what to do next. After a while Ritterband came out, with a smirk on his face, and tried to verbally pressurise riders not to cause trouble "or else." Some of us argued back and reiterated the riders many grievances. Ritterband gave various promises - hollow as it turned out - to improve pay and conditions. It was a shit situation for us, the union had been defeated. The only light relief was when a wasp flew in amongst us as we were arguing with Ritterband. He got in a right flap and shouted, "look out! There's a wasp!" We just stood still and someone said, "we're not afraid of wasps." Ritterband looked a right wanker. After further discussions amongst ourselves, the three of us who were sacked, went off to other courier firms that afternoon and got new jobs straight away. The next working day, at 6 am, I got a knock at my front door and there was a bailiff from Peter Mercadante and Co. representing West One with a high court injunction which demanded that I return their radio immediately or I would be fined, go to prison etc etc. Ritterband must have been very frightened that we would jam the radios again, because it must be quite a palaver to get an injunction like that.

The temporary industrial muscle we had at West One had vanished, so Gary and Len were encouraged by us to pursue a legal case of unfair dismissal because they had worked at West One for more than two years. The South Islington Law Centre said they would be happy to handle the cases for the DIWU for free. However, both Gary and Len didn't want to make a name for themselves (i.e. get blacklisted) and didn't want to take time off sorting it out and going to court, so they didn't pursue it.

After the dispute West One returned the radio fee back to its original level. The riders also noted that the controllers treated them with kid gloves, they must have been frightened of 'rider power' resurfacing again. So in some respects the dispute was not a total disaster. However, from a union point of view it is completely unacceptable that anyone should get the sack for industrial activity. This dispute taught the DIWU that 'No Victimisation' has got to be the top priority before any sensible discussions on pay and conditions can take place. In the course of the dispute we had collected some sixty names and addresses of West One riders. We then took the liberty of inviting all these people to join/start a West One DIWU branch at a meeting on May 9th. Only the original five members showed. We sent out more letters and even did home visits, but still nobody new joined. This was a very great disappointment. Lastly on the subject of West One, Dennis, a union member and an excellent and outspoken activist during the dispute, had managed to see his personnel file at work. It had been marked on top 'Union?', but luckily he had not been sacked. A few months later he went abroad then came back to London. He went for a job at West One and got it. We asked him "Didn't they recognise you, Dennis?" he replied that he

other cyclists had refused to do the job. There was in effect a mini-strike. The job was eventually palmed off onto a new rider who was unaware of what was going on.

John: *We made our money at First by doing multi drops from Schroders and Touche Remmant, these came out at set times each day. We had little work and I'd just had what we called a two hour dinner break (i.e. standing-by unpaid). Then, just minutes before a multi drop came out I was told to go to Westminster SW1. I was in the City, this would take as long as a multi drop and pay £15 less. We were treated like scum at First, I'd had enough. I argued for at least half an hour over the radio, the job could have been done by then, instead it just sat on someone's desk. First never did themselves any favours. We never claimed to be on strike, but self employed and therefore had the right to do the work we wanted to.*

This dispute was significant for the DIWU because it was going to be the first event we publicised via *Despatches* where the participants could be pinpointed as DIWU members. We discussed the disadvantages, like John might get blacklisted, and we discussed the advantages, like it would give good publicity to the union. Eventually with John's consent we printed an article in *Despatches* No.3.

There are many firms to choose from in the courier industry, yet John had some problems getting a job after leaving First. ADC who have links with First refused to take him on and Go Between asked if he was "the same John who started the trouble at First," and this was one year after the dispute and the article had mentioned no names. Several other firms also appeared suspicious and did not take him on.

### 11 Worst One

In December 1989 we had three union members working for West One despatch when the bosses decided to double the radio fee from £17.25 per week to £34.50. The radio fee is a deduction from your wages if you don't work a full week without notice.

Adam: *We decided to organise a protest meeting in Queen Square, Holborn. We hand wrote a leaflet, photocopied about thirty and gave them to riders, or left copies on their bikes. Only a dozen or so riders showed up, and somebody must have passed a leaflet onto management because one of the bosses turned up, a particularly slimy creature called Jeffrey Ritterband. Alan also came along, partly to give a pro-union viewpoint but also to be able to talk to the bosses without fear, as he was working at another firm. Anyway, Ritterband sidled up and tried to get us all talking and he repeatedly asked us who the organiser was and what our names and call signs were etc. He tried to*



*present himself as a reasonable person to work for then blurted out, "I'm against unions and against communism". The little jerk probably fancied himself as a Ronald Reagan figure fighting to save the civilised world from the Reds. After more discussions he agreed, to our surprise, that we had a fair case and he backed down on the radio fees. So we had won! Ritterband then got into his company van and drove off, presumably thinking he had saved mankind from the revolting peasants.*

At this point Alan saw the opportunity and announced "Now he's gone we can have a proper meeting." Subsequently we had a very constructive meeting and took names and addresses of everyone present, what we hoped would be the basis of a future work place branch. These events were summarised in the next issue of *Despatches* along with the conclusion that it was a victory for the workers.

Then surprise, surprise, in March, West One decided to reintroduce the double radio fee. Whether they did this to throw down the gauntlet to the DIWU is a matter for speculation, but we think they did. By this time the DIWU had five members at West One: John, Dennis, Rajiv, Colin and Adam. We decided to call an early morning protest meeting for West One riders at Conway Hall on the 21st March, produced a professional looking leaflet this time, and distributed them as best we could. Thirty riders showed up. Five people volunteered to do 'security' on the door in case the bosses tried to disrupt the meeting. Sure enough, Ritterband and a crony showed up again and expected to be let in to intimidate the riders. They were very miffed when the people on the door refused them entry. They left and Alan chaired the meeting and did a brilliant job. DIWU members sat with the crowd so as not to be singled out too easily by grasses. The meeting was very good but everyone agreed we needed more people and also we agreed a list of improvements that was to be sent to management. The plan was to have another meeting on 6th April and get more riders along. In the meantime the list of desired improvements in pay and conditions would be sent to Ritterband and he would be invited to reply.

*Adam: On the evening before the crunch meeting, the West One controllers were announcing over the air things like, "Tomorrow will be really busy," "We want everyone at work bright and early." They were obviously trying to persuade people not to go to the meeting. My controller asked me directly if I was going, I replied "maybe," although in fact wild horses could not have dragged me away from it.*

On 6th April Ritterband did not show up even though he had been invited this time. More worrying was that there was only about 30 West One riders present. There were lots of new faces as many riders from the first meeting had failed to show up. The meeting started and we decided that Alan would phone

Ritterband and ask why he was not attending. Alan did this and Ritterband replied he was too busy. This got everyone's back up, he was ignoring us. It was suggested that we ride round and tell more riders, then meet at the office at one o'clock, and in the meantime jam the radios for 10 minutes, just to show we were serious. This idea was enthusiastically received and after a unanimous vote all trooped out into Red Lion Square and switched our radios to transmit, then held them next to noisy Honda CXs which were revving like crazy. Some people turned on to "squelch" on their radios and held them next to other transmitting radios. This made it impossible for other riders to communicate with the controllers, who could only hear interference and Honda CX's. Everyone had a right good laugh.

For most people this was undoubtedly their first experience of industrial action and acting collectively in the individualistic world of despatch riding. At the time West One had about seven bike channels and we managed to block six of them. We heard later, from another source, that the management went absolutely apeshit. After fifteen minutes people started drifting away, as had been agreed. A few of us went to a nearby cafe, and by chance saw a very serious looking Ritterband arriving at Red Lion Square with a car full of the 'heavy mob'. One of our comrades went to watch what they got up to and saw Ritterband talking intimately with two riders who had remained in the square. We suspected these two were grasses. One of those riders/grasses, David Leadbetter, was involved in the Socialist Organiser group. Socialist Organiser was involved in entryist politics, trying to recruit couriers to the TGWU. To put it another way the TGWU was, unfortunately, a rival to the DIWU as mentioned previously. We now suspect that the Socialist Organiser/TGWU gave information against the DIWU in an attempt to bring about our downfall. We considered tracking down David Leadbetter with these accusations, but nothing's come of it, yet.

Anyway, at one o'clock riders started assembling outside the West One office in Caledonian Road. Some riders had bottled it and we had lost a certain amount of momentum. We were down to fifteen people, plus John, Alan and Derek, from the DIWU. Some people went in for their wages (it was Friday) and came out alright. Gary went in for his and was asked if he supported the scrapping of the radio fee. He said he did and was sacked. He had worked for West One on and off for eight years. Likewise, Len went in for his and was sacked. He had worked for West One for five years continuously. Len and Gary seemed to have been sacked just to set an 'example'. Other people got their wages then Adam went in...

*Adam: Ritterband told me to hand in my radio as I was sacked. I refused until I had received my week-in-hand money. I went outside where the assembled*