



Crisis, cuts and class conflicts



Cleaning up an industry

Page 2: Round up and analysis of recent cleaners struggles for a living wage.



You can't take our education

Page 3: What happened with the wave of occupations of schools by parents across the country, and why were they frequently successful?



College bosses get schooled?

Page 5: A look at the recent Tower Hamlets College ESOL workers dispute, claimed by the union as a complete victory.



2009 has seen a wave of workers' struggles against the effects of the recession.

Firstly, workers at Lindsey Oil Refinery (LOR) in Lincolnshire staged an unofficial walkout over claims that foreign workers were being used to undermine a national agreement on pay and conditions. Solidarity walkouts rippled across the country at 13 refineries and power stations from Longannet in Fife to Milford Haven in South Wales to Langage Power Station near Plymouth, involving in total upwards of 4,000 workers.

While the media were quick to pick up on the slogan 'British Jobs for British Workers' that some strikers echoed back to Gordon Brown, the reality was the demands of the LOR workers reflected working class solidarity - making no reference at all to 'British workers' and calling for assistance to migrant workers.

Not only that, the refinery strikers openly defied the laws banning solidarity strikes with impunity - and won - providing the latest example that 'direct action gets the goods!'

Shortly after the refinery strikes, laid-off employees at Prisme Packaging in Dundee occupied their plant. They succeeded in re-opening the factory as a workers' co-op, securing the income of the

nine workers after bosses had tried to withhold even redundancy pay.

Following hot on the heels of the Prisme occupation, workers at Ford-Visteon in Belfast responded to being laid-off with only 6 minutes notice and no redundancy pay by occupying their factory. As news spread, workers at Visteon's two other UK factories in Basildon and Enfield followed suit.

OCCUPY! RESIST!

The Belfast occupation was maintained for over a month, ignoring union 'advice' that the occupation was illegal (it wasn't) and ceremoniously burning court possession papers granted in favour of Visteon.

When the dismissed Visteon workers began preparing a delegation to visit Ford's UK factories to encourage solidarity strikes, bosses suddenly returned to the table (as union bosses tried to call-off the delegation).

A partial victory was won, although some issues, such as pensions were left unresolved.

Coinciding with the Visteon occupations, several schools in Glasgow and South London were occupied by angry parents protesting against closure plans.

The occupation of Lewisham Bridge primary in South London was inspired by the ongoing

Glasgow 'Save Our Schools' campaign and the Visteon occupations.

Workers from Visteon visited the school and spent some nights on the roof in solidarity with the occupiers. Charlotte Turner primary in nearby Deptford was also occupied after the council ignored a sham 'consultation' exercise which returned 296 out of 297 responses opposed to closure. Lewisham Bridge was a resounding victory, with parents forcing the council to abandon their plans to demolish the school.

PROFIT BEFORE PLANET

Another high-profile occupation began in July after 625 workers at Vestas Blades, a wind turbine manufacturer in the Isle of Wight were laid off in similar circumstances to the Visteon workers earlier in the summer.

Around 20 workers responded by occupying the plant, pointing to the farce that the closure of the UK's only wind turbine plant came just hours after the government announced plans to build 10,000 more wind turbines as part of its green energy 'commitment.' Vestas had had no problem pocketing several million pounds in government cash just before the redundancies were announced.

After resisting management and

police attempts to literally starve them out - one worker was taken to hospital with low blood sugar levels but supporters risked arrest to break the siege and deliver much needed supplies - the workers ended their occupation after nearly three weeks.

Whilst the occupation did not achieve its goal of keeping the factory open, it highlighted the severe lack of jobs on the island and drew attention to the fact that despite the rhetoric, the environment will also be made to pay for capitalism's crisis.

There have also been ongoing official and unofficial postal strikes up and down the country before voting overwhelmingly, for national strikes (see page 8), disputes including refuse workers in Leeds, Edinburgh and Brighton, and an indefinite strike over cuts by education workers in Tower Hamlets, London which secured a partial victory guaranteeing no compulsory redundancies.

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

This resurgence in working class militancy has already got sections of the ruling class scared. The 'favourite think tank' of Tory leader and likely next Prime Minister David Cameron has even warned of a "new age of militancy."

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Troubled tracks as pay claim looms for the underground

The triple dispute on London Underground (LUL) over redundancies, pay and victimisations appears at first sight to have fizzled out after the initial 48 hour strike

back in June.

The redundancy issue was resolved for the time being by a compromise where management have not conceded the principle

of no compulsory redundancies but no RMT member will be made redundant, for now.

The deadline for unions to accept or reject the pay offer has been extended until the beginning of October, as ASLEF, Unite! and TSSA have asked for more time to consider it.

Activists from these unions have admitted that they had been waiting for the RMT to "punch itself out" fighting Transport for London (TfL) management on its own, intending to come in, win the dispute and poach members from it at the last minute.

RMT activists are now biding their time and seeking to get the other unions involved in any future pay dispute.

The single 48 hour strike followed by a long wait for further industrial action jarred with RMT's reputation as Britain's most militant union.

The lack of sustained strike action compared unfavourably with the postal strikes in London which have occurred weekly for months and even the successful united action RMT took with ASLEF on Liverpool Street station.

The cynicism of the other unions combined with doubts about the

commitment of RMT officials and some activists to winning the disputes to make much of the membership reluctant to lose pay for strikes which might prove fruitless.

Much of the RMT's reputation for militancy at LUL stems from what was the Metronet contract.

Not only did they square up to an unscrupulous private consortium for years but the work involved fighting privatisation meant that the officials had to leave the work to lay activists, ceding control to them in the process.

RMT activists directly employed by LUL and TfL by contrast have had a cosier relationship with management and their stomach for a fight is questionable.

The ex-Metronet workers brought their rank-and-file organising model, based on a standing strike committee, into LUL with them.

The strike committee was subject to sniping from established LUL activists, and Bob Crow and Pat Sikorsky took control of the dispute.

The latter pair, who had previously victimised LUL Regional Officer Bobby Law also sidelined his successor in the role, Steve Headley.

The union's leadership had shown indecent haste in agreeing the terms for transferring Metronet workers to LUL without their reps' agreement and are suspected of

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not wanting a fight over pay and redundancies.

Nevertheless, what was originally billed as London Mayor Boris Johnson's attempt to break the RMT on LUL has failed.



Contract cleaners fight poverty pay

Workers in contract cleaning face low wages, a lack of basic employment rights, bullying management and victimisation for union activities. However, especially among Latin Americans, self-organisation has sustained struggles against their unscrupulous multi-national employers, and the fight against the immigration controls which are used to sack unwanted workers and victimise union activists.

Workers are detained by riot police and immigration officials and subject to fast track deportation if they can't prove the right to work in the UK. Another is to claim that National Insurance numbers under which NI has been paid by workers for years are "suspicious" and to call workers in for immigration checks, knowing that anyone whose status is questionable will disappear - redundancy without the costs.

do this they have to work with the bosses, and get the Labour Party to provide a legislative framework to force the former to do so. A top-down model of large, passive unionised workforces, negotiation controlled by full-time officials and a concentration on "headline" issues such as the London Living Wage rather than the full range of workers' concerns is their objective.

Contractors use immigration controls to sack unwanted workers and to punish them for organising. A favourite tactic is to organise an immigration raid under the pretext of "health and safety" training, where

Grassroots struggles highlight the inadequacy of the "organising model" of trades unionism favoured by the social democratic unions who believe that capitalism can and should be managed better to benefit workers. To



they are constantly cutting costs on their existing contracts and winning more contracts through undercutting their competitors. As well as giving their investors a greater return this attracts further investment and keeps the share price up. Their wealth proves they are ruthless, but makes them attractive "partners" for the social democrats.

Consequently, the Justice4Cleaners campaign organised by T&G/Unite! has concentrated on "easy targets" and neglected small groups of workers in "hard to organise" workplaces. Cleaners sacked by Amey at the National Physical Laboratory (NPL) in Teddington outside London, working for Lancaster at Schroders bank and for Mitie at Willis insurance company in the City of London have organised themselves, and showed up the

unions and why they find such workers "hard to organise".

These campaigns have been sustained by support from the Latin American Workers Association, No Borders and the Campaign Against Immigration Controls. Other supporters have included SF members from the two London Locals. Noise pickets have been organised at contractors' offices, and outside events organised or attended by their clients, to embarrass them into taking responsibility for the contractors' actions.

Our aim should not just be to shame capitalists into acting against their own interests, but to expose their true nature and to advocate their abolition. The existing unions cannot and will not do this; it is not just the methods but the aims and objectives of the social democrats which fail the working class.



To the dismay of head-teachers everywhere, this year has seen a marked rise in parent militancy in response to closures and handovers to private companies.

June. Soon after, Lewisham Bridge primary school in London was occupied by parents after the council voted to demolish the site and hand the school over to the medieval Leathersellers livery company as an academy school.

The agenda of handing community schools to private interests means less accountability, selection procedures, job insecurity, and a focus on grades to the detriment of education and care. Facing closures, academies and foundation schools, people up and down the UK have resisted with grass-roots campaigns and, in several cases, occupation.

In early May parents at Charlotte Turner, a primary in Greenwich, took the building to fight a planned closure. In all cases there had been a 'consultation' resulting in overwhelming majorities opposed to the changes and in all cases these were ignored. With official lines of negotiation an obvious sham, direct action became the only weapon left to the parents.

The first occupations occurred in Glasgow where twenty-two schools are threatened with closure, as part of a council plan to plug a £6 million overspend. Wyndford, St Gregory's, Our Lady of the Assumption and Victoria primary were occupied in April and Wyndford was subsequently reoccupied in

Of the occupations, only Lewisham Bridge has achieved some of its goals; the children will be returning to the school in November, the building remains and it

is still not an academy school. Although this was nominally achieved by an English Heritage listing, the force of the campaign and the media attention it got undoubtedly played a big part. Even without victories (Wyndford and Charlotte Turner have been closed), the occupations have brought self-confidence to participants and bolstered campaigns frustrated by officialdom. There is a new willingness to take action for our schools and every occupation is an example to the next.

With coming cuts in education and the onwads march towards privatisation, we should expect more campaigns and more occupations. Both main parties plan to attack education after the next election. Labour's Ed Balls' claims of savings in education can only be achieved by merging schools and making

them ever bigger. The Tories intend to take more schools out of local authority control and into unaccountable companies.

With a pay freeze on the way, education workers will be involved in their own struggles. If the school campaigners and workers can act together we could see more victories in this academic year.

The workers will be able to draw confidence from the support of parents, so long as parents are actually able to speak to staff, something that the unions have tried to block in some cases. However, the student occupation at SOAS in support of detained and deported cleaners demonstrated the solidarity links that can be made, as did the vociferous student support at Tower Hamlets College (see pages 4-5).

FROM PAGE 1

Against this backdrop, the BBC's economics editor writes that "the crucial difference between Labour and Tories is not so much the scale of spending cuts - but the timing." The Liberal Democrats say no public services should be "ring-fenced" from cuts.

Then when the recession hit, workers were urged to tighten their belts for the good of the economy, as unemployment rocketed, pay was slashed and home repossessions reached record levels. Now there is talk of economic recovery, politicians of all stripes are already planning how best to make workers pay.

The political consensus is clear: drastic cuts are on the way, with talk of spending being slashed by at least 10% over the next three years.

This underlines a simple fact absent from most mainstream commentary: it is not the health of the economy that determines workers' living standards, but our ability to collectively impose our needs on the bosses. Without this collective power, economic growth is simply accumulated by the bosses as profit, and economic crises have their costs passed on to weak and disorganised workers.

Reportedly the favoured model is Sweden, where major cuts were made following a budget crisis in the 1990s. According to the BBC "even though it was a Social Democrat wielding the axe, it was Sweden's overarching welfare state which received most of the cuts."

By contrast, when workers take collective direct action, they are able to improve their conditions regardless of whether the economy is in boom or bust.

With an election looming all the politicians will deny it, but there's no doubt they intend to make the working class pay for the crisis. The last years of the 'economic boom' saw numerous workers' struggles against sub-inflation pay offers and deteriorating terms and conditions, which came following years of real-terms decline.

Sections of the ruling class are alert enough to fear this; it's up to us to make their fears into reality.

Prescription heroin 'cuts crime'

When it comes to drugs, the state's policy has traditionally been hard-line; blanket prohibition and the criminalisation of users. However a recent government-backed study has cast doubt on the wisdom of this approach, by showing that prescribing heroin to addicts both drastically cut the use of street drugs and markedly reduced crime.

drug related. The Randomised Injecting Opioid Treatment Trial (RIOTT) reported over a two-thirds reduction in crimes committed by the participants.

Drug-related crime is a major problem in working class communities, with former colliery areas in south Wales and the north of England having some of the highest rates of heroin addiction. Research suggests that between half and two thirds of all crime is

Professor Strang, who led the RIOTT programme, said that the aim of the trial was to determine whether prescribing heroin or similar substitutes could help turn addicts' lives around and prevent the cycle of crime and imprisonment. "The surprising finding - which is good for the individuals and good for society as well - is that you can," he said.



Will the evidence influence policy? Or will the upcoming election see another futile contest between politicians to appear the most hard-line on those already at the bottom of capitalist society? While the government has indicated it will "roll out" a supervised prescription program, concerns have already been raised about the £15,000 per person annual cost. However, compared to the £25,000 per person annual cost of imprisonment that seems like a bargain - even in the crude cost-benefit terms of government ministers. That's before even taking into account the broader social costs of widespread heroin addiction.

Take the public sector and squeeze

May 2010 will see a general election where the main parties will compete with each other in promising cuts in public expenditure and attacks on public sector workers pay and conditions.

This offensive is egged on by the media and parts of it are fast becoming accepted wisdom - even if the supposed facts underpinning this version of events are wrong.

While the media like to talk about public sector bureaucracy, the vast majority of public sector workers do things that are useful - nurses, doctors, street cleaners, library assistants, meals-on-wheels drivers, carers, teachers - are just a few examples. Whoever gets in after the next election, these groups of workers are a prime target for cuts to balance the State's books after the multi-billion pound bank bail-outs. The bureaucrats will for the most part not be the victims of these cuts, but those doing the cutting.

The attacks will be three-pronged - straight cuts in numbers of workers doing a job, cuts to pensions and speeding up privatisation. Pensions have been demonised in the press. A decade ago many workers in all sectors had final salary pensions. Most private sector bosses have now closed these, whether for new starters or all workers, and if replaced, it has been by inferior 'money purchase' pensions, where the individual worker takes more of the risk and the company pays less.

All the media talk of 'gold-plated' public sector pensions is part of the agenda to drive down workers' wages across the board through divide and rule. It turns out the average public sector pension is about £7,000, but many have pensions of less than £5,000 per year. This is hardly 'golden', and is low enough that many pensioners will qualify for additional benefits because their income is so low.

All main parties are also committed to selling off more public services on the pretext that the private sector is more efficient and cheaper at providing services. This is just free market dogma. Privatisation is about cutting both pay and conditions of workers, and the level of service received. Sometimes, under accounting scams like the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), the cost is actually higher and the service poorer, with examples such as a £75 fee to change a light bulb at a PFI hospital.

But the political consensus of pay cuts, attacks on pensions and privatisation need not go unopposed. Workers in other sectors have already shown the way with a wave of direct action from strikes to occupations putting a stop to bosses plans for cuts. Public sector workers can do it too - but there are obstacles to overcome.

One of these is that even within one place of work in the public sector workers are often divided up into two, three or more different trade unions. For example a typical university campus will have academic staff in UCU, administrative staff in Unison and perhaps cleaners and manual workers in Unite. When we consider the whole public sector, this problem is magnified. Each union organises independently of the others, and none of them organise with those workers who are not union members - but who also have a class interest in opposing cuts.

A first step to overcoming this is to open up workplace meetings to all workers. Getting members of other unions as well as non-union staff to discuss the cuts and how to resist them shifts the discussion from sectional trade interests to united class interests; united we stand, divided we fall. Against the cuts agenda, we should be pushing for coordinated strike action by all public sector workers. We cannot rely on the trade unions to do this on our behalf - workers need to network, agitate and organise to make the solidarity we need to resist the cuts a reality.

Why did we risk it all? Because we will not go down without a fight.

Catalyst

talks to the Tower Hamlets strikers

While the recent media spin is suggesting that we're 'on our way out of recession', the reality on the ground is that workers are still facing attacks across sectors in the forms of job cuts and community provisions. Education has been one of the sectors worst hit in this period, with £65m slashed from higher-education (HE) budgets, schools closing left, right and centre, and jobs to go at approximately 100 of the 150 HE institutions in the UK. The situation is as bleak as ever.

In August, around 250 members of teaching staff at Tower Hamlets College (THC), East London went on indefinite strike over threats of compulsory redundancies, and cuts in provision of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses. Catalyst spoke to Rachel, a member of the striking staff, about the background of the dispute, the issues at hand, and the feelings after the strike came to an end in late September.

We began by discussing the background to the strike, going back to June of this year. - "There was new management, a new principal, new senior managers ... and in June they issued a document 'Securing the Future'." The nature of this document turned out to be a plan for "very brutal cuts in provision and jobs, and on June 5 there was a 30 day notice for consultation", with the projection in June being that "40-60 jobs in THC would be cut, while approximately 50% of ESOL course places would also be lost, and some in A-level teaching."

Prior to the attack on jobs and provision, Rachel said that she had experienced "good working conditions with a strong union ... we were comfortable". But that all changed, and with a suddenness typical of many disputes, the plans to cut jobs and ESOL provision were an aggressive assault on the workers and students. Management were strategic in their timing - "proposing to do it all at once, and at the end of term so it was hard to do anything about it... coming up

Ways to fight back: London Education Workers Group

The London Education Workers Group (LEWG) was established so that education workers throughout London can come together to oppose the coming assault on education.

LEWG reject the division of workers into separate unions and recognise that politicians, political parties, and union bureaucrats have nothing to offer workers. Instead, LEWG believe that direct action must be our weapon. Power comes from



to exams, most of teaching finished for the summer" - indeed the choice of timing had put the workers in a more difficult position to fight back, but they had no choice.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST CUTS

"A campaign started against the cuts, they were talking about 60 people being made redundant but they offered voluntary redundancy and a lot of people took that - which was unfortunate but meant fewer compulsory redundancies". The campaign began right away, and on 27th June in Bethnal Green, a demonstration of workers, students, and supporters marched to Altab Ali Park in Whitechapel. In addition, staff and students were writing letters in anger at the proposed job and course cuts, but it was clear that direct action would be the only way of fighting back if the workers were to have any hope of defending themselves.

In early July, the attempts to formalise the redundancies had become more concrete. Rachel told us of a "letter sent by courier at night" which targeted 19 people at that stage for compulsory redundancy, which had made a ballot for indefinite strike action all the more vital. In the meantime, over the summer weeks, some people accepted voluntary redundancies, and some appeals had continued between July and August.

STRIKE BALLOT

The teaching staff, who were members of the University and Colleges Union (UCU), decided to step-up the fight-back. "We balloted for strike action in late-June and we had a

the grassroots and that education workers, must democratically and collectively control their own organizations. Besides supporting fellow education workers, LEWG extend solidarity to student and community struggles, believing that in the long term, it is only through opposition to both capitalism and the state that the problems that face education workers can be solved. LEWG can be contacted at londonewg@gmail.com

"We got strike pay from national union (UCU), but we don't quite know how much for full-time staff. There were 250 people on strike; we were able to collect a lot of money, about £20-25k, through colleges and workplaces, especially FE colleges, and places like local fire station. There was a hardship fund and any striker can say 'I need this much money' on the basis of trust and solidarity."

MIXED RESULTS

"In the end officially there were no compulsory redundancies, but in a few cases I saw them as compulsory because certain people were selected through a scoring process, put through a meat-grinder, going over summer, in the end offered redeployment/demotion or voluntary redundancy." Basically some had been forced into taking 'voluntary' redundancies.

"Six teachers got their jobs back... seven people I believe took voluntary redundancy. Nothing else was included in negotiations about what happens next." Rachel was very honest about the shortcomings, but she does feel that the gains that had been made, which were mostly in confidence terms, are worth building on. Despite the feeling that they could have achieved more, she says, "we are strong going back, heading to more of a shop-steward model. If we keep that going where we can meet and continue the feeling of strength."

"I think people thought we couldn't stay out too much longer. If we carried on we'd be divided. I think people want to feel good about it and we did accomplish a lot. It could have been much worse without our action."

SO WAS IT A 'VICTORY'?

In the immediate aftermath of the vote, Rachel had written on the class struggle website libcom.org that "this deal was

sold through with the most outrageous manipulation of the mass meeting where discussion was suppressed before and during the meeting as far as possible, with members being shouted down by union officials."

"In the short time there was for debate, many people spoke against accepting the deal but in the end there were 24 votes against, many abstentions and the clear majority voting to accept and go back to work. (though the meeting was of course smaller than our usual weekly meetings)."

Having had a few days to reflect on the outcome by the time we spoke, Rachel was acknowledging that there were positive elements in the outcome. While compulsory redundancies were defeated, and this would also mean some ESOL provision would be saved (though not nearly as much as the 1,000 places under threat), Rachel and many of her fellow strikers are not getting carried away in the euphoria expressed by some on the left and higher up in the UCU.

"It was quite a bittersweet thing. A lot of people don't wanna talk about it as a victory - we could have done more heading back to work, but we feel great about what we did... I think at Poplar you've got an SWP branch, they were the ones that kind of ended it when it ended. They wanted that result and got it in the mass vote - 'This is a great victory lets go down to the Brighton Labour party conference.' But cracks have started to appear very quickly in those celebrations."

"People feel it's a mixed bag. It's not just me - 24 of us voted against going back. I didn't think we could stay much longer, but the vote wasn't done in the spirit that other meetings had been done."

The action by teaching staff has had a ripple-effect in terms of other staff - "the Unison people were promised no compulsory redundancies because we were on strike." So despite the mixed feeling concerning the outcome, the are definite positives that



should not be under-emphasised.

Rachel made clear that while she felt the THC workers could have held out for more, it was only through taking their action against the bosses that they were able to make the gains they did. A feeling among many of the 'THC staff' that were on strike is that they learned the value of fighting back and standing side-by-side in solidarity with each other - had they allowed these attacks to go unchallenged, they'd certainly have been in a considerably worse position. While there are many lessons to be learned from the strike, Rachel felt that many of her colleagues gained a sense of confidence in what they could achieve when they took collective action, and in times when indefinite strikes are almost unheard of, the THC workers have set an example for workers everywhere.

The fight-back in education is on, and there have been glimmers of hope. From THC to the victorious parent-led occupation at

Lewisham Bridge Primary School (see page 3) winning an education for their children, examples are being set for workplaces and communities under attack: the only way we can defend our interests is to fight for them. One of the lessons learned has been that it was not the union that 'won' this 'victory' for the Tower Hamlets strikers; it was the collective action and solidarity of the workers themselves.

In a support leaflet for the strike, the London Education Workers' Group said, "The Tower Hamlets strikers have set a fantastic example for the rest of us in education to follow. Through their direct action and solidarity they have shown [principal] Michael Farley and all those seeking to make cuts in education that we will not go down without a fight."

Rachel has been very honest about the shortcomings after the strike, but the most important thing coming out was the sense of confidence and solidarity they felt going back to work, and no-one can take that away from the Tower Hamlets College workers.

Catalyst thanks Rachel for taking the time out to chat about her experiences.

Uniting across all job roles: The EWN

The Education Workers' Network (EWN) is an industrial network for revolutionary workers in education, uniting workers across all job roles, whether they be porters, lecturers, cleaners, teachers, clerical staff, technicians, or anything else in the education sector. The Network seeks to organise through the entire education system, from schools, to colleges, to universities.

The EWN works to support education workers' struggles through self-education, agitation and activism, both to win immediate demands, and also with the long term aim of building a revolutionary labour movement in the anarcho-syndicalist model (see page 7).

The EWN publishes a regular newsletter 'Education Worker'. Contact details for EWN can be found in the contacts section on page 6.



When equality means cuts

Councils attack pay in the name of 'fairness'

In 1997, councils across Britain came to an agreement with unions to undertake 'Single Status' job evaluations to end the discrepancies between manual and white collar jobs. Parallel to this, claims made about the historic pay discrepancies between traditionally male and traditionally female jobs were won at various Employment Tribunals. Historically, workers in female dominated jobs (such as those working around childcare) have been paid significantly less than those in jobs usually seen as 'men's work', such as refuse collection.

Since the Equal Pay Act in 1970 these pay discrepancies had been open to legal challenge, but Single Status was supposed to be an across the board solution that would see every job within the councils evaluated and regarded equally based on the content of the job. In theory, this was of course a good thing.

However, perhaps predictably, things did not go so smoothly. Many councils ignored this, and those that did look at it spun the process out for so long that they are still ongoing 12 years later.

A few councils attempted to lower men's pay rather than raising women's. The results of this differed across the country - in some places it was accepted by unions with little protest, in Birmingham there was unsuccessful strike action against the re-grading, while Greenwich UNISON ran a largely successful campaign demanding "Equal pay, not low pay".

Fast-forward to 2009, and several councils are now attempting to force through far more punitive settlements, often using the recession as an excuse. In several places the level of pay cuts demanded have been so great that unions have been unable to ignore it. Perhaps the most militant response has been in Leeds, where at time of press refuse collectors have been on strike for over a month, after wage cuts of thousands of pounds per year were demanded from these already low paid workers.

The strike began on 7 September and has so far been largely solid, with a demonstration of over 200 marching on Civic Hall on the first Friday of the strike. On the 15th September, 16 bags of rubbish

were dumped at the home address of council leader Richard Brett's home. On the 16th, six workers were arrested for repeating this, allegedly under anti-terrorist legislation! The council has bussed in strike breakers from the Preston-based firm Noblet Municipal Services, but the majority of the city's rubbish has remained uncollected.

Similar disputes are appearing elsewhere in the country, for example in Brighton, refuse workers have balloted for strike action after they were told to take pay cuts in some cases up to £8,000 per year. The Brighton bin workers have a long militant tradition - in 2001 launching wildcat strike action and an occupation against the private firm who held the tender, forcing the council to take refuse collection back in-house.

They have made it clear they are not prepared to take these attacks and announced in no uncertain terms that they will strike if the council attempts to implement them. Other workers facing pay cuts are also pushing for a ballot for strike action against these

attacks. Desperate to avoid what happened in Leeds, the council has unsuccessfully attempted to divide the GMB refuse workers from those in UNISON by offering separate negotiations.

In Edinburgh, UNITE refuse workers are on overtime ban and work to rule against similar cuts, with the council threatening redundancy if they are not accepted. Scabs have been brought up from Liverpool to cover the work. Responding to this, several lorries have been blockaded by supporters. Other manual workers affected look set to join the action, as UNISON also rejected the deal.

These disputes show that bosses are prepared to use any possible opening to attack workers' wages. Taking progressive demands such as equal pay and turning them against the working class is a New Labour hallmark. The unions, who pushed for the deals in the first place have frequently been impotent now they have been turned against them - such attacks can best be resisted where workers take control of the struggle themselves, and do not allow a union backroom deal to



sell them out.

They also show that legislative solutions offer no answer for the working class - if we are not strong enough to defend our gains and back up law with industrial strength, then such attacks will continue to be made against us.

Direct action not legal action is the terrain on which to fight. While the principle of equal pay is something that must be supported and fought for, it needs to be won on our terms. We must fight to ensure women's pay is raised rather than the state's preferred option of attacking the pay of male workers

Mail strike's roots in unfinished business



Workers at Royal Mail have voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action over management plans for job cuts.

76% of workers who responded to the ballot voted in favour of industrial action. The roots of the dispute go back to the settlement that ended the 2007 national postal strike.

At the time it was announced as a victory, but in fact the CWU union agreed to management plans to cut jobs. The 'victory' was that the CWU and Royal Mail management would negotiate the details of the cuts at a local level.

Now postal workers are unhappy with the results of those negotiations. One trigger is the Royal Mail's refusal to "Pay for Change."

In unilaterally imposing such changes by so-called 'executive action', Royal Mail have reopened the dispute.

Other issues behind the strike include 'absorption', where workers are expected to take on the workload of those that lose their jobs for no extra pay, and the increased levels of bullying and harassment that have accompanied such attacks.

A further issue is pensions. First the final salary scheme was closed on the grounds of expense, now the replacement scheme is due to suffer the same fate. Royal Mail are demanding year-on-year 10% cuts to expenses.

The pretext for this is to enable Royal Mail to compete with rival private firms. However, this is a cleverly devised scam.

The government has opened all of the profitable areas of the business up to private competition, whilst retaining control of the costly 'final mile' delivery which delivers 99% of small letters.

Then the government says this 'proves' the inefficiency of the public sector, justifying further moves towards privatisation, attacks on workers conditions and service levels.

Government privatisation plans were only shelved in July after they were unable to find a buyer in the current economic climate.

In 2007, as soon as the strikes began to exert serious pressure on Royal Mail management, the CWU called them off for "meaningful negotiations", the outcome of which was the 'victory' at the root of today's dispute. Postal workers have already shown a willingness to fight this summer with a series of local official and unofficial actions. There is also a widespread realisation that far more than their immediate terms and conditions is at stake.

Freedom for the Belgrade Six!

Six anarchists from the ASI, Solidarity Federation's Serbian sister organisation are currently imprisoned by the Serbian state. Tadej Kurep, Ivan Vulovic, Sanja Dojkic, Ratibor Trivunac, Ivan Savic and Nikola Mitrovic are accused of attacking the Greek embassy in Belgrade remain imprisoned, with (at time of press) no charges yet levelled at them.

The six have been targeted by authorities because of their politics and visibility, and face the ludicrous prospect of international terrorism charges - on the basis that as the embassy is sovereign territory, the attack had crossed an international border. The attack itself caused negligible damage, and has even been claimed by another group. If international terrorism charges are brought, the Six face over 10 years in prison.

October 4th marked thirty days of detainment, at which point charges would normally have to be made or prisoners must be released. However, as the charge holds a sentence of at least ten years, they can be held for a further 6 months, before they even get to see charges.

Anarchists from across

Europe have held a series of demonstrations demanding that their release, with demonstrations held at Serbian embassies and consulates in several countries, including Poland, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Norway and Holland. In Britain, members of the Solidarity Federation were joined by comrades from the Anarchist Federation and others for a series of demonstrations outside the London Serbian embassy.

This repression unfortunately demonstrates the lengths the state will go to the attack those it sees as a threat, and is a chilling reminder of the depths the state will sink to. Unable to repress the work of the ASI in a conventional manner, they are forced to resort to an obvious fit up. However, the situation does demonstrate that the work the ASI do is perceived as a danger by the Serbian ruling class.

Until the 'Belgrade Six' are released, it is important to keep up the pressure on the Serbian government, and not let this attack go unchallenged. Further updates to the situation, and ways you can support the campaign to release them can be found at: <http://asi.zsp.net.pl/>

