

Agency Exploitation

The unions hailed the agreement on equal pay for agency workers "as a victory for union campaigning". They must be joking. The agreement excludes sick pay and pensions and only guarantees the same pay as permanent staff after twelve weeks.

The unions admit that around 50% of agency staff won't be covered by the agreement as they are rarely employed for 12 weeks at a time. Nor do their figures include the thousands of staff who will be let go just before the 12-week entitlement to equal pay. The reality is that beyond TUC hype about "a breakthrough on workers' rights", the majority of agency workers will still receive less pay than permanent staff.

The tragedy is that, for once, the unions were in a powerful position. The EU was about to impose an agreement on Britain introducing a 6-week period that would later lead to agency workers getting the same pay as permanent staff from day one. All they had to do was refuse to compromise and wait for the EU directive to be effective.

As things stand, the government can go to the EU arguing they have the agreement of the unions, which should be enough to ensure Britain can keep the 12-week period. Not only that, Labour is hopeful that, having conceded the principle of equal treatment for agency workers, they will be allowed to keep Britain's opt-out in the soon to be renegotiated working time directive.

A victory for union campaigning? Or unprincipled trade unionism? Union leaders have sacrificed the right of hundreds of thousands of low paid agency workers to show they are business-friendly and prepared to put the interests of the bosses before those of union members.



Shelter in a Storm

Workers at Shelter, who provide advice and support to the homeless and badly housed, are fighting to defend their pay and conditions, as well as the core value of the organisation itself.

Shelter's senior management have responded favourably to New Labour's policy of tendering public services to the lowest bidder. Management are seeking to implement proposals that would see staff work extra hours for no extra pay, downgrade jobs, remove pay increments and see compulsory redundancies.

While telling dedicated, experienced workers they were not value for money, the charity's head offices were refurbished at a cost of £750,000, new managers have been employed and senior management gave themselves a pay increase.

Workers at Shelter were left with no choice but to take industrial action. In March, a two-day strike was called for the first time in Shelter's 41-year history. Picket lines have been well attended, with strong support from other union branches. London Solidarity Federation members went along to join the picket on the second day but found the workers had had to rush off to catch

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a meeting that management had rescheduled and only informed them at the last minute.

Strike action continued in April and May, when striking Shelter workers joined the May Day march and spoke from the platform. No new strike dates have yet been announced.



You can keep up with the dispute on the National Shop Stewards Network website: <http://www.shopstewards.net> You can send Messages of support to: shelterstewards@googlemail.com

Who we are...



Anarcho-syndicalists believe that workplace organisation has to be based in the workplace and to involve the membership of all the unions in each workplace. Pay rises, job safety and control over how we work will not be won by representation, but by workers taking action for themselves, independent of their bosses or any would-be representatives.

"Workers rights" will only be won by direct action, or by negotiations backed up by the credible threat of direct action, regardless of legislation. Confusing workplace representatives with the rank and file only obscures the real task we face - that of

building effective organisation in the workplace.

To this end, we organise in Networks across industries and in Locals geographically, to support each other in our struggles and fight for our interests, both in and out of the workplace.

Solidarity Federation is part of the International Workers Association, organising with like minded people across the world.

We'd like to distribute Catalyst as widely as possible, so if you'd like to distribute locally, get in touch at one of the addresses' below or - Catalyst@solfed.org.uk



Catering bosses tip rip-off

Workers in some of the UK's most prominent restaurant chains, including Pizza Express,

Carluccio's and Café Rouge, are being ripped off by unscrupulous bosses who use staff tips to subsidise low pay.

The catering sector, already notorious for low pay, poor conditions and long hours, is cynically involved in even worse exploitation of its workforce by using credit card tips to top up wages as low as £2 an hour to make the minimum wage. Another trick used is to charge

staff an "administration fee" on tips added to card transactions. The cost of using the card (between 1% and 2% of the bill) should be met by the restaurant, but the bosses pass that cost on to their workers, who are largely foreign, young and inexperienced. They can easily be threatened with the sack if they tell customers that the bosses keep credit card tips.

The Unite union has a campaign to close the legal loophole where tips count as wages. So far the Government have done nothing but promise a vague "consultation".

Restaurant workers - organise to

fight against this theft. Together tell the bosses that you will not stand for tips to top up pay, that you should get the minimum wage (or more!) regardless of tips and credit card tips should be shared out equally amongst staff. Make your demands together, stick together you will achieve more than by making individual complaints.

As for customers - tip directly, in cash. Don't allow your appreciation to feed the boss's greed.



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Know your rights

Working Time Directive

The Working Time Directive limits the hours you work to an average of 48 over a 17-week period. However, many employers make workers sign an 'opt-out' that means they can be expected to work more than 48 hours a week.

What most bosses don't tell you is that if you've signed this opt out, you can tell your employer that you want to opt back in. All you

need to do is put it in writing. It will take effect in 7 days time unless a different period is specified in the original opt-out, up to a maximum of three months.

The employer has no right to sack you or take any disciplinary action for exercising this, or any other rights. If they do, going to an Employment Tribunal might force them to

pay modest compensation. Workers are protected from discrimination on grounds of race, sex, disability, age and sexual orientation from day one. Other rights kick in after 12 months. You should be careful if you think your boss will react badly to you claiming your rights early on, as they can sack you without giving good reasons.

Some types of work are partially exempt from the Directive, such as training doctors, domestic servants, security guards and those doing a seasonal job, such as in agriculture.

For more information on your rights at work: www.stuffyourboss.com

Migrant Workers Under Attack

No-one accuses non-unionised workers of driving down wages by taking low-paid jobs. So why are migrant workers who do accused of undermining pay and conditions? Migrants just want to earn a living and, like everyone, would love to have better pay and conditions. Many of them would like to organise to improve pay and conditions for all. Immigration controls prevent people working legally and make them vulnerable to super-exploitation. The direct effect is to undermine the pay and conditions of migrants, and then all workers. To improve pay and conditions in sectors where there are many migrant workers, offer them solidarity. Organise with them and oppose immigration controls which hinder resistance. Immigration controls can't stop immigration - they don't work, but politicians continually try to step them up. They are a

workplace issue. Employers are now obliged to ensure all their workers can work legally or face five-figure fines. Systematic checks on National Insurance numbers and documents are being carried out. Many underhand tactics are used, including calling workers in for a fake "health and safety meeting". Instead, police and immigration officials carried out paper checks, then detained and deported workers without them. The Border and Immigration Agency have

carried out aggressive raids, sometimes involving armed police, in order to brand migrants as dangerous. The latter is a tried-and-trusted tactic to create suspicion and fear among those who might otherwise object to the treatment of vulnerable people. The key to improving the lot of all workers is to improve that of the most vulnerable - undocumented migrant workers. The tools we need are class solidarity, internationalism and direct action. Oppose all immigration controls.



Equal opportunities - New Labour style



Remploy employs over 5000 disabled staff in specially adapted premises, receiving £111 million in government funding. In May last year, the government announced the closure of many factories, with between 500 and 2000 job losses.

These factories provide a safe place to work for many disabled people unlikely to find "mainstream" employment. The government pretends that it is now opposed to segregated workplaces for disabled people, but the real reason for closing the factories is cost.

Union activists called for industrial action, most Remploy workers are union members and over 80% voted for action.

West Yorkshire Solidarity Federation members joined a demonstration in Bradford in January where Anne McGuire, Minister for Disabled People, was loudly heckled.

There have been blockades

and pickets of factories across the country. In York, strikers blocked lorries from taking away equipment before the factory was due to close.

Some charities, like MIND and Mencap, have supported the closures, stating that disabled people should be working in mainstream employment. However, there are many barriers to mainstream jobs such as access and discrimination. How many disabled people do you know in "mainstream" employment?

Many Remploy workers feel they can't move to the merged factories because of the disruption involved, so how would they fit into mainstream employment? They feel they are being dumped on the scrapheap; their rights ignored and wages forced down.

Since this article was written, 30 factories have been shut. The GMB union stated that the "campaign goes on", and that more action is planned, although there is no indication of what this might be.

Summer of discontent?

Following hot on the heels of recent strikes across the public sector (including teachers and the civil service), UNISON members in local government have voted to reject the government's desultory pay offer, which amounted to another 3 years of pay cuts. This follows years of below inflation "pay rises" (in the real world, pay cuts), and comes as the government attempts to limit public sector pay claims to 2% across the board. Last year, UNISON members voted to reject the government's initial offer, and voted to take industrial action when the offer was only raised to 2.475% - still well short of inflation, which remains at over 4%. However, despite this vote for action, UNISON instead folded, and accepted another pay cut - perhaps unsurprising from a union led by Dave Prentis, one of New Labour's biggest supporters in the union movement.

Workers in local government need to take firm control of their struggle, and demand and force a better settlement, whether the local government bosses, Gordon Brown or union leaders like it or not. It's our wages that are being cut, so we need to be the ones to stop it! Workers across the public sector need to unite across artificial union boundaries - with the government intending on holding down pay across the sector, workers need to work together to make a co-ordinated response. While unions may offer token co-ordinated one day actions, these are not enough, and will not defeat a government intent on showing it is tough on unions, and workers must take the lead and go beyond this.