

Catalyst

Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation - International Workers' Association

SEPTEMBER 2000 #2

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NEW LABOUR FOCUS GROUP LEAK LATEST:

WORKING CLASS ABOLISHED!

The inane race for the next US president is getting the usual widespread coverage here in Britain, Uncle Sam's unofficial 51st state. Hardly surprising, since all the main political parties (and most of the media) in Britain look to America for their economic and political direction.

New Labour have their policies overseen by Clintonite focus groupies. In Britain, as in America, the working class no longer matters. Both political parties are now exclusively fighting over the 'middle ground' and for the 'middle' votes. The trendy political scientists have decided that the working class no longer exists. The media are only too happy to ignore working class lifestyles and the problems we face. The working class is not news and doesn't sell papers.

The major political parties may tinker around the edges. The odd tax break here, a pathetic concessional minimum wage there. But no-one proposes the major change needed to start redressing the enormous and widening inequalities which have developed since Thatcherism. Fearing that any redistribution of wealth may upset big business and 'middle England' voters, New Labour assiduously courts the middle ground. The result is that the working class is at best an afterthought in the social, political and economic life of Britain.

How can the working class have 'disappeared' overnight? The largest single group of workers in Britain today is domestic cleaners. The government's own Dept. of Employment estimates there are over 800,000 people cleaning for a living. This doesn't include the army of mainly women who are forced to scrape a living cleaning for cash in the black economy.

Economists both here and in the US estimate that in the first years of the new century, the occupations which will offer the most new jobs will be cleaners, cashiers, caretakers, security guards/attendants, care workers and waiters/waitresses. Hardly the upwardly mobile high-flying middle class professions that New

THE MOST EFFECTIVE FORM OF DIRECT ACTION HITS PROFITS DIRECTLY - THE STRIKE, OCCUPATION, OR SIMILAR... IT ALSO CHALLENGES THE MANAGERS' AUTHORITY AND THE POLITICIANS' POWER

Labour and the media would prefer to go on about.

In the last two decades, the working class have experienced lower incomes in real terms, longer hours at work, less and less protection from unions and government regulations, and increasingly run-down schools, housing and health care.

The reality is that the working class still very much makes up the massive majority of the population. The working class has not disappeared, rather, it is the power of the working class that has evaporated. For much of the 20th century, change could be forced from the unwilling capitalist elite, through the economic power workers exercised in the workplace. Changes to the economy and the inability of trade unions to resist the worldwide capitalist onslaught of the last two decades have left us where we are today.

There is nothing preordained about this. The type of work undertaken by workers may have changed from manufacturing to service industry, but the potential power of the working class remains as strong as ever. However, if this potential is to be realised, there will have to be a big break with current trade union thinking (which incidentally, amounts to little more than going cap-in-hand to employers for 'partnership' deals TUC-style). Workplace organisation based on confrontation rather than collaboration with management has always been the only way workers can force their concerns onto the agenda. The basis of this confrontation must be direct action. From Seattle to London to Prague, in all aspects of life, direct action is on the increase. The most effective form of direct action hits profits directly - the strike, occupation, or similar. Not only does this hit them where it hurts, it also challenges the managers' authority and the politicians' power.

It is not just about pay and conditions, in fact, these are merely an indication of the current lack of power being exercised. The priority is getting organised to challenge the power of capitalism in all aspects of our lives. It cannot be done by political parties of any shade. Only working class people ourselves can do it, by coming together and organising in a broad-based movement. Already, from environmental actions to anticapitalist protests, people are taking direct action. The task now is to spread this growing dissent to the workplace.



UNOFFICIAL ACTION GETS RESULTS

Over one hundred postmen and postwomen at Runcorn Delivery Office decided to celebrate Bastille Day in style and hold a 24-hour unofficial strike against working conditions.

Postal workers have now been promised a five day, forty hour week, but must find it themselves by increasing their workload. Deliveries have been over-loaded at Runcorn for years and repeated requests to management and the union have fallen on deaf ears. Even when proposals were put forward, management refused to implement them.

Eventually, with the introduction of the 'Fit To Deliver' programme, there was some hope that deliveries would be cut back to the standard of two and a half hours. This proved not to be the case when management decided to revise the indoor aspects of postal work without giving consideration to the actual deliveries. They then tried to bring in a five-day week for full-time staff, but excluded part-time staff from getting one. The workforce decided to stand together and vote out this divisive proposal. CWU members at Runcorn view the national union as just another layer of management who are looking after their own interests, and are fair game to be taken on in a fight. The vast majority of staff have opted out of paying into the political fund on the grounds that the Labour Party does not look after the interests of the working class. Disillusionment with 'politics' is further reflected in the fact that before the 1997 General Election, there were ten Labour

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Party members working at Runcorn, and none now. Union meetings held outside working hours are very well attended and, in the past, guest speakers have included Unison members who were suspended by Labour controlled Sefton Council. Over the years, there has been a growing feeling that, to gain any improvement in working conditions staff, must look to themselves and not to the union. The elected local representatives routinely refuse to sign any proposals without calling a meeting for staff to discuss the issues and then holding a vote.*

On the day of the strike, only two scabs continued working as seventy plus staff stayed on picket duty for most of the morning. A further twenty turned up that night in case management tried to bring mail in. Management have now promised to review overloaded deliveries, look at the lack of catering facilities, which currently consist of an ancient chocolate machine and an unreliable coffee/tea machine, and investigate the lack of car parking facilities.

Staff have been working to rule since the middle of June. This involves not starting work before their official start time and breaking off deliveries at 09.30 to return to the office at their official break times. The mood is there to take on both the bosses and the union and it will be a sharp operator who gets anything past the staff at Runcorn Delivery Office. Mind you, this will never stop them trying - as Catalyst goes to press, there are signs the management are already trying to go back on the agreements which came out of the strike.

Do you work in the postal service or communications industry?

Do you want a fair deal for all workers?

To join a network of like-minded communication workers, or simply find out more, contact Communication Workers' Network;
**CWN-SF, PO Box 29
SWPDO, Manchester
M15 5HW**



RECOGNISE THIS?

'AUTOMATIC' UNION RECOGNITION IS HERE AT LAST. BUT ALL THE SIGNS ARE IT IS FAR FROM AUTOMATIC.'

The much-heralded legislation giving unions the right to force employers to negotiate over hours and conditions is now in force. But, as so often is the case with New Labour, it doesn't add up to much.

The legislation is modelled on US labour laws and has not prevented union membership plummeting to below 18% of the workforce. To make sure it stays that way, bosses in the UK have been learning from US 'experts' on how to confront workers to keep unions out of the workplace. UK legal firm Eversheds has been prompted to put on a nationwide roadshow tour, aimed at providing precisely this advice to employers. Meanwhile, PTI Labour Research, an anti-trade union US consultancy firm, have stated that they have held meetings with a number of legal firms interested in union busting work.

The legislation itself is complex and places a number of hurdles that must be overcome before union recognition can be granted. Firms that employ less than 21 workers are excluded from the act. Such small companies are often the most exploitative in terms of pay, conditions and safety. For larger firms, even when a clear majority of the workforce are union members, a ballot must take place. For automatic recognition, the result must be a clear majority in favour, with at least 40% of all those entitled to vote backing union recognition (-if political elections were undertaken on this basis, Labour would have failed at the last election, despite their huge 'majority'!) If the employers then refuse to accept automatic union recognition,

then the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) can (and theoretically should) impose collective bargaining methods on them.

The government hopes that unions and employers will reach agreements prior to the involvement of the CAC. Even when the CAC is involved, time is allocated at each stage of the process to encourage early CAC-assisted agreement. In most cases, the likely outcome is that union leaders and management will reach a deal over the heads of the workers themselves, with very little worker involvement.

This need not happen. The act can be used as a cover for establishing the framework for effective future workplace organisation. The process of recruitment and the meeting allowed under the Act in the run-up to the ballot can be used to establish the democratic principles of a new type of union organisation - one run by the workers and not the union leaders. In order to do so, it is crucial that workers keep control of the recognition process, especially the size and the nature of the bargaining unit.

The Act gives considerable scope as to what form the bargaining unit can take. It has only to consist of a definable group, for example, it can consist of all hourly paid workers, or those in certain grades or departments. Workers should collectively restrict the bargaining unit to those who are interested in union organisation based on worker participation. Setting up for direct democracy at the start will prevent union organisation being made up of an apathetic paper membership in the future.

IT'S OFFICIAL; POOR MEANS SKINT

A recent government report into poverty paints a depressing picture of inequality in Britain.

The Acheson Report on Health Inequality, set up by New Labour, found that working class people die younger, and suffer more from lung cancer, coronary heart disease, strokes, and suicides than the rich. They also suffer more house vandalism, and their children are less well-fed, despite the fact that their mothers often go without. Children are less likely to have any form of pre-school education, and have less access to child care. Not surprisingly, after this start in life, they do less well at school. The list goes on...

The report shed light on the cause of this poverty. Lack of money. While this is blindingly obvious to anyone reading this, it is not apparently obvious to politicians. They keep harping on about how throwing money at the problem will not solve it. New Labour's approach is that those in poverty should help themselves to their New Deals and whatever else is 'on offer'. The report recommended raising benefits by 25%, and a massive low-cost housing re-building programme, as a first step to reducing poverty. Ultimately, the report argued that poverty can only be overcome by reducing the gross and growing inequality that exists in British society.

The report is now, we presume, gathering dust somewhere. New Labour certainly have no plans to implement it.

FLOPLAST BOSSES SHOW THEIR TRUE COLOURS

Management at Floplast in Bobbing, Kent responded to moves by the workforce to get recognition under the 50% rule by promptly sacking 6 people. Since the new legislation came into force, employers in Britain have been employing law firms to get advice on union busting and intimidating workers. If Floplast get away with it, other bosses will follow suit. So, send support/solidarity and get action details;
**Floplast Workers C/O GPMU Kent Branch,
155 London Rd, Sittingbourne, Kent ME10
1PA Telephone: 01795 423 993
Fax: 01795 471 791
Email: dannym@gpmukent.demon.co.uk.
Also, let Floplast Operations manager Derek Bartrip know what you think -
Fax him on 01795 431 188.**



PROBLEMS AT WORK No.1

Can the boss keep ignoring us?

I work in a textile factory that employs around 30 workers. We have complained to management about low temperatures, the lack of heating and poor ventilation but they ignore us and have threatened to victimise some workers. Some of us are members of a union, but there is no recognition. What are our options?

Whether you are in a recognised union or not, the first step for dealing with a health and safety issue is to establish what the problem is and how it is affecting workers. The best way to do this is for as many workers as possible to meet together to talk about the problems. The boss may immediately try and victimise any workers involved. Decide what, where and how to meet to get organised. Consider what contact you want with the union, if any.

In law, you are protected from dismissal for Health and Safety issues. But this can be difficult to prove in an industrial tribunal (and will realistically only get you financial compensation, and not get you your job back). So your only real protection is for workers to all stick together in what you agree to do. Also, document everything for use in a future tribunal, if necessary.

If workers lack confidence to get together, you could sort out some relevant health and safety information, with some suggestions about actions workers could take, and circulate a few copies anonymously (the Solidarity Federation's new pamphlet "Health and Safety at Work" has info. to help with this - available from *Catalyst* for £1.50). This will probably get people talking. Once the first few people are interested, others may get a bit more confidence to come forward and speak up. And then you can start looking at what action you can take.



Health and safety information can also be documented through questionnaire, inspection, or "unofficial" documentation by means of a diary or record book, depending on your situation. You can get model questionnaires or suggested checklists for inspections from most unions. Your own union (I would guess you are in the Transport and General Workers Union) will have information on this, plus staff who can advise on health and safety issues. Or you can devise your own. Inspections don't have to be just going round ticking a clipboard - they could involve simply taking statements from workers about a particular problem, and how it is affecting them.

The next step is to find out what your boss should be doing about it. The Labour Research Department (78 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HF; tel: 020 7928 3649) is a vital source of information. They produce a monthly magazine and regular pamphlets on health and safety, etc. They also have a list of local resources/hazard centres up and down the country. Your local SolFed group can also help (contact *Catalyst* or write to SF, PO Box 1681, London N8 7DN).

It's workers that are the experts about what is unsafe or unhealthy, and we can collectively force the boss to implement health and safety improvements - by well-chosen direct action.

**WRITE TO CATALYST FOR A FULL & FRANK ANSWER TO A PROBLEM AT WORK.
OR CONTACT THE ANSAPHONE HELPLINE FOR ADVICE - 0161 232 7889**

PLUS:

- FEEL FREE TO SEND YOUR SNIPPETS, NEWS AND VIEWS TO CATALYST**
- WRITE TO MAKE CONTACT WITH OTHERS IN YOUR TYPE OF WORK, AND FOR DETAILS OF DOING LOCAL ACTIONS WITH LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE**

CATALYST, SF, PO Box 29, SW PDO, MANCHESTER M15 5HW.



CASUALISATION KILLS

Simon Jones was killed in April 1998 as a casual worker at Shoreham dock. A student, he was forced to take the job after threats from the dole, and was decapitated within hours of starting work. He had received no training, nor had the employment agency who hired him checked that the job was safe - as required by health and safety law. The Simon Jones Memorial Campaign is fighting against such injustices happening again in the future. See www.simonjones.org.uk. Stickers, posters and a campaign video are available for a donation; cheques should be sent to Simon Jones Memorial Campaign, PO Box 2600, Brighton BN2 2DX.

POWER THREATS

Scottish Power, Britain's biggest energy group, have withdrawn their threat to axe 450 jobs in the face of threatened strike action. Candle sales have plummeted. D. Rooney, AEEU energy officer commented on the bosses' climbdown: "This is a victory for common sense. We have avoided confrontation and now have an opportunity to work with the company in partnership". Trust the union to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

CHEAP LABOUR

North Ayrshire Council has a website which proclaims us to "invest in North Ayrshire". Fairly standard stuff, until the bit which boasts that workers in the area get paid a full 12% less than the national average. The low wages are described as one of the key attractions of the area. Especially for businesses looking for cheap labour, apparently. Yes, you guessed, North Ayrshire is a solid Labour Council.

WOMEN STRIKE BACK

Women's groups in Spain are trying to get a book by one of Spain's foremost Muslim leaders banned. In "Women in Islam", by Mohamed Kemal Mostafa, instructions are given as to how men can beat their wives without leaving any external marks. Translations into Arabic and English are planned. Prepare for 8th March 2001 - strike for a world which values all women's work & all women's lives, an end to no pay, low pay & too much work. Called & co-ordinated by the International Wages for Housework Campaign, Crossroads Women's Centre, 230a Kentish Town Road, London NW5 2AB. Website: <http://womenstrike8m.server101.com>

UNEQUAL OPPS

After 30 years of equal pay legislation, pay is anything but equal. The average gap between full-time male and female workers stands at 20%, while that between part-time workers is over 40%. It is the part-time, casual, manual women workers who have been left furthest behind. Worse, the statistics do not take into account the many areas of low-paid work types dominated by women workers. For example, cleaners are the lowest paid workers in Britain, and they are mainly women.

GLOBAL NEWS...

US

Direct actionists calling themselves the 'Dusty Desperadoes' destroyed five acres of genetically engineered canola at Monsanto facilities. Since November 1998, there have been at least 37 reported anti-genetic direct actions in North America.

CANADA

The CCLC ('Concerned Citizens Labelling Collective') have been helpfully going into supermarkets and labelling up their GM foods. DIY: Their Website (<http://www.voluntarylabelling.com>) is full of labelling tips and PDF files with ready made labels to download.

KOREA

On July 1st at 4am, 3,000 riot police stormed the Lotte Hotel, downtown Seoul, to drag out 1,000 striking workers. The Lotte Hotel Workers Union went on strike on June 9 demanding 17% wage increase, permanent contracts, 40 hour working week, and extension of retirement age. Police sprayed and fired tear gas into the rooms where striking workers were sleeping. They beat the workers with their truncheons causing serious injury to some 70 workers.

IRELAND

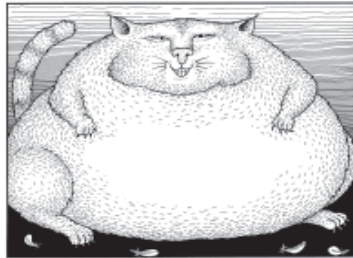
Six workers have been on strike since June. When the workers joined MANDATE (the union for shop and bar staff), management sacked two union workers for "poor performance" and suspended three others.

CZECH REPUBLIC

In August, yet another chapter of the monster trial against the group of 10 Czech anarchists in Zlin (to the East of the country) unfolded. They were arrested after a large group of Nazis attacked them. One of the defendants is David Srott, age 22, metalworker, dedicated anarchist militant from Otrokovice and FSA-IWA member. He is a regular target of police persecution, and friendly police-Nazi links are a regular problem for activists in the country. Send donations for the legal fund to; CZ ABC Defence Fund, Federation of Social Anarchists, International Secretariat, PO BOX 5, 15006 Praha 56, Czech Republic. Tel: 420-0604-773440. Email: intersec@atlas.cz

COLOMBIA

On August 3rd, a national 24-hour strike to protest against austerity measures and record unemployment saw 700,000 workers walk off the job, with subsequent street battles with police, which brought riot gear and tanks to Colombia's capital, Bogota.



FAT CATS IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

No luck on the lottery? Consider getting a job with the MSF (Manufacturing, Science and Finance union). Then all you have to do is blow the whistle on some shady goings on and get unfairly dismissed before walking off with a six figure payment.

When Marcia Solomon, a secretarial assistant, saw £35,000 worth of cheques made out to Roger Lyons (general secretary) and Nelson Mendes (head of finance) from a supposedly defunct bank account containing £160,000, she was sacked for gross misconduct. She settled out of court for £140,000. Her original allegations were investigated by assistant general secretary, John Chowcat but he was dismissed, also for gross misconduct, after uncovering a string of false expense claims made by Lyons. Chowcat was paid

off with another £250,000 of MSF members' money. Next to walk was north Thames regional officer, Howell John, who allegedly leaked information on Lyons' lavish lifestyle. To avoid their corrupt manoeuvrings being aired at another tribunal, Lyons & co. authorised another £200,000 pay off plus car. With around £750,000 already spent on covering Lyons' arse, there are calls for him to resign and for an independent forensic investigation of the union's books. Another tribunal is looming with the threat of more revelations. This time it involves Bryan Keegan, Lyons' former chauffeur, sacked after claiming £7,000 in back overtime payment. This indicates Lyons' true mentality - begrudging rightfully earned wages, yet spending over 100 times that amount in trying to cover his own tracks. For a union that claims to defend whistleblowers, the treatment of their own whistleblowers is disgraceful. Still, six-figure settlements soften the blow somewhat.

EVENTS, ACTIONS, CAMPAIGNS...

JUSTICE FOR MARK BARNESLEY

Mark Barnesley is an activist, fitted up prisoner and victim of the state. He has refused to bow to the prison regime. As a result, he has had his radio smashed, been confined to his cell, and recently had the 4th in a series of punishment transfers this year. Contact the Justice for Mark Barnesley Campaign for details on how you can help with actions and solidarity.

Justice for Mark Barnesley - c/o 145-9 Cardigan Road, Leeds LS6 1LJ.

Mark's case on the web:

www.openlyclassist.org.uk/

Write to Mark; Mark Barnesley - WA2897, HMP Parkhurst, Newport, Isle of Wight PO30 5NX.

SHOPPING ASDA

People are picketing supermarkets up & down the country, demanding 'cash not vouchers' for asylum seekers. Collections are also being held for toys and other 'luxury' goods which refugees are banned from buying under the voucher scheme.

More days of action against vouchers and in solidarity with refugees are planned. Contact Catalyst for details, or the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns;

www.ncadc.demon.co.uk or phone 0171 701 5197 or CAGE; www.veggies.org.uk/cage or phone 07931 401 963 or; www.corporatewatch.org



Prague

September 24-26 - resisting the World Bank and IMF at their 55th annual meeting in Prague. For info. before and after - <http://x21.org/s26> or <http://go.to/s26>

McDonalds - week of action

October 12th is McDonalds Workers' Day; October 16th is world anti-McDonalds day. London pickets details from <http://www.mcspotlight.org/> or NELSF, PO Box 1681, London N8 7LE. Tel. 0181 374 5027

Civil Rights Caravan

Solidarity with asylum seekers, migrants and victims of racism. 15-17th Sept.; Coventry, Birmingham, Leicester, Oxford: 22-24 Sept.; Dover, Margate, Brighton: 29-1st Oct.; Sheffield, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, Liverpool: 6-8th Oct; Exeter, Plymouth, Bristol: 14th Oct.; London - national demo, 1pm, Embankment. CARF, BM Box 8784 London WC1N 3XX. Email: info@carf.demon.co.uk Tel: 020 7837 1450.

Anarchist TU Network

To subscribe and get a bimonthly newsletter, Bread and Roses, send six stamps with your name and address and any union affiliation details to: Box EMAB (ATU), 88 Abbey Street, Derby DE22 3SQ. williamgodwin7@hotmail.com <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Parliament/2522>

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Address.....