

# Catalyst

Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation - International Workers' Association

DECEMBER 2002 #6

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## Blairedvision: The Project

**O**ver 5 years on, and life under Labour is in many ways worse than it was under the Tories. The Labour government since coming into office has embarked on a strategy of forcing people into ever-more casualised, low paid jobs. Sure, it is all dressed up in the language of empowerment. Young people, single parents and now the unemployed in general have all found themselves empowered into jobs paying just over £4 an hour.

Egged on by Labour, there has also been an assault by bosses on working conditions. Again, it is all dressed up in the smooth-talking New labour language of 'flexibility'. In other words, part-time working, short-term contracts and the increasing use of agency staff. This is the means by which bosses can intimidate workers and hire and fire at will. Millions of us in modern Britain have been reduced to little more than day labours with little or no job security.

Added to 'empowerment' and 'flexibility', we have 'team working'. This Orwellian strategy imported from Japan and refined in University Human Resource Departments is aimed at ensuring that the interests of the company are made paramount. Those workers who complain, seek to join a union or, worse still, refuse to work unpaid overtime, are deemed to be putting their interests above that of the organisation. Sanctions range from loss of bonus (which is usually part of wages anyway) to the sack. Such 'modern' Human Resource Management helps to explain why British workers work by far the longest hours in Europe.

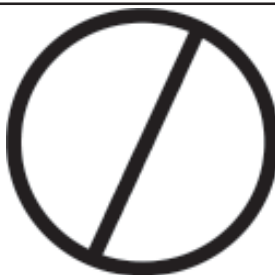
In the face of the casualisation onslaught, the

unions have proved pathetic. Instead of seeking to channel the growing misery of workers into resistance, they have concentrated on trying to convince management that unions can help raise productivity and, as such, are good for the company. TUC union logic now underpins casualisation, since it has the interests of the company first and foremost, not those of its members. Little wonder that on first meeting union officials, workers often mistake them for management.

The bottom line is that workers and management have nothing in common, and that the only way forward is workplace organisation, so we can start to set our own agenda together in the workplace. One small step in this direction is being taken by the Solidarity Federation. SF workers have launched a campaign against casualisation, aimed at informing workers and giving them the support and confidence to resist management attacks. Already, SF has been able to help workers who face sexual harassment, intimidation and bullying, as well as horrendous working conditions. All these cases are evidence of the power the boss class currently has in 21<sup>st</sup> century New Labour Britain. It is only through fighting back that the power of bosses and the Blairdevision Project can be challenged. Contact the ansaphone helpline for more information: 07984 675 281.

### London Weighting dispute rolls on

*UNISON members in Local Government have been undertaking a series of one-day strikes for increased London Weighting. This is currently £2,646 for Inner London Boroughs, and £1,407 for most workers in Outer London. The claim for £4,000 for all 32 Boroughs has been met with "there's no money, pay increases will mean redundancies" from the Bosses. Both the Transport & General Workers' Union and the GMB took part in the fourth (continued over page...)*



### Casualisation Kills:

**And to stop it, meetings for casual workers are being organised at various venues - contact Manchester SolFel for more details: 07984 675 281**

# Fired up

*cont'd from last page... and subsequent days' action after belated ballots. A rolling series of five-day strikes by "key workers" across each London Borough is also being undertaken in support of the dispute. The strength of support for the dispute was reflected in the fact that London Branches of UNISON rejected the National Pay settlement in local ballots. Decent London Weighting is badly needed, as it is virtually impossible to live in London at the present rates, and many Local Authorities have real staffing crises. Failure to win will mean services continuing to collapse because they can't recruit workers with the skills needed to do the jobs.*

*However, with the National Pay dispute sold out, the London Weighting dispute is isolated within Local Government, although other public service workers' disputes prevent workers being demoralised by this. The last successful National Pay dispute in 1989 was only won by NALGO with a rolling program of All Out strikes, followed by indefinite sectional strikes by "key workers" – much stronger action than one-day All Out strikes and five-day sectional actions. Even so, NALGO's negotiators ditched the flat-rate claim (as has been the case on each subsequent occasion), and the lowest acceptable percentage offer was put to the membership.*

*Without indefinite action, at least by "key workers", it is difficult to see how the dispute can be won. Unless the Bosses have a change of heart, the dispute is likely to be settled on a similar basis to the National Pay claim, i.e. a two-year deal with a greater percentage increase for the Outer London Boroughs. Without greater confidence in our ability to win ballots for indefinite strike action, it is difficult to see how this will change.*

**The Labour leadership have been itching for an opportunity to outdo Thatcher in the union-bashing stakes. Finally, these opportunist chinless wonders have their chance; in the form of the fire-fighters dispute. Their public school background combined with New Labour grooming seems to bring out their innate hostility towards working class organisation.**

However, this hostility is media-checked and is dressed up in the modern jargon of New Labour speak. Thus, the Fire Service is portrayed as a bunch of macho thugs determined to keep women and racial minorities out of the service. We are asked to believe that this is a struggle between old and new; the outdated, conservative, reactionary working class against the slick, modern, progressive and politically correct New Labour 'individual stakeholder' mythical citizen. It could be that *Catalyst* is missing something, but surely it is management who hire and fire, so the fact there are so few women and ethnic minorities within the Fire Service is down to them, not the workers. Unless that is, the Fire Service has seamlessly come under workers' control without any of us noticing.

Reality is stark; the strike was brewing all year, and the Government have been waiting for the showdown as a chance to prove their metal to the City and big business. They are desperate to defeat one of the few remaining organised sections of the working class. The aim is to casualise the entire Fire



**New Labour's future Fire Service**

Service. Behind the New Labour rhetoric, their clear intention is to force fire-fighters to work overtime, while bringing in increased part-time working to cover peak periods. This is a classic case of union-breaking in order to smash working conditions across a whole industry in one fell swoop.

The plan is to follow defeat of the professional fire fighters with a rapid implementation of ever-increasing flexibility, along with expansion of the 'Dad's Army' spare time crews, who love to play out their fantasies at being Firemen (sic). Despite the smooth message, there are many unanswered questions. For example, how will longer shifts ensure that more women will want to join the Fire Service? Do those of us from the racial minorities prefer to work longer hours? We and our women colleagues can't wait to start putting in the unpaid overtime.

## Pay sell-out

**While the fire-fighters seem to be leading a second "Winter of Discontent", echoing 1978-79, July's media fad of a "Summer of Discontent" didn't happen. Although the Government's policy of not paying Local Government workers decent wages initially appeared to have finally provoked a coordinated response, Labour can still rely on some unions to control their members for the good of the Party.**

A National Strike for a pay rise of 6% or £1,750, whichever was the greater, took place on 17<sup>th</sup> July, but a second strike on 14<sup>th</sup> August was called off when union negotiators recommended a previously rejected 3% offer to members. This had since been tweaked so that the very lowest-paid would get a slightly larger percentage rise, in spite of the fact that percentage rises for the low-paid are meaningless. Action was suspended while the unions' members were "consulted". (Any further strikes would conveniently have taken place after the Trades Unions Congress and Labour Party Conference.)

Union leaders were not interested in winning the pay dispute. They planned inadequate strike action and called it off on a flimsy excuse. In the minds of the bureaucrats, strike action was not a means of winning the dispute, but a demonstration of the strength of the case. They were really interested in lobbying within the Labour Party to which they, the Local Government bosses and the Government all belong. Workers were used as a bargaining tool in an internal Labour Party dispute between the union bureaucracy and the Government.

They wanted to do a deal with their Labour Party

colleagues in the Government, to demonstrate to workers that if we want anything, we must grit our teeth and vote Labour before so few of us vote in the next General Election that the Tories might win it. Equally, they wanted to demonstrate to their colleagues that unless they acknowledge the need for increased pay, they can kiss goodbye to all but a minimum of working class votes, and that they also need to maintain the Labour Party's links with the unions to secure these.

Workers really needed the pay increase, but being led up the garden path like this inevitably reduced backing for further strikes. Given a choice between settling immediately and fighting on only to be sold out at the next opportunity, workers voted to accept the offer. If this same scenario is not to be repeated "year-on-year", workers must take control of disputes away from the bureaucrats.

To do this, we have to believe we can win and that we're strong enough to take unofficial action if necessary. We need to gain confidence and build organisation by tackling everyday issues in the workplace collectively, through direct action, rather than just relying on Shop Stewards sorting things out with the management.

Local Government workers also need to address the other means by which workplace organisation has been undermined – privatisation. Sections of the workforce with real clout, such as refuse collectors, have been artificially excluded from the dispute through privatisation, weakening both them and the whole workforce. Supporting other workers is not "secondary action", it is solidarity and it is the foundation of all union organisation. We will lose disputes until we recognise this and are prepared to break the law to give solidarity.

# Problems at work

No.5

## 1st steps: Organising at Work

### **What's the point in organising, what rights have we got?**

Workers' rights are indeed in a sorry state, but this only underlines the need to organise on the job, in our own workplaces. What rights we do have, mainly in the area of health and safety, aren't properly enforced, so it's clear that the state has little interest in our welfare over and above the level necessary to keep the economy's cogs turning. Many situations at work fall outside the law and so it is down to workers themselves to 'negotiate'. Often, this is done only in staff meetings where the agenda is controlled by the bosses, or where workers can only voice concerns individually. Clearly this is far from ideal. The employer retains absolute control as no effective threat is posed. Only by organising can workers force their boss to sit up and pay attention.

### **But how can we organise? There isn't a union in my workplace.**

Just because workers belong to a union doesn't exclude them from poor pay and conditions, harassment, dismissal etc. It is the strength of the workers' organisation in the workplace that matters most. Belonging to a union may help in certain situations (they have sizeable resources and enjoy some legal protection) but it can also be restrictive. Most unions have tried to ignore the fact that conflict between workers and bosses is inevitable, preferring instead to try and get the best deal possible out of a bad situation. Encouraging your workmates to join a union might provide a focal point for organising, but it's certainly not the be all and end all. The important thing is to encourage people to draw together and stand up for each other.

### **Won't I get identified as the ringleader though, and get sacked?**

Don't be the ringleader then. Workers can make decisions and draw together without the necessity for bossy characters telling them what they should do. When you reach the stage of pressurising the boss to improve your collective lot, there are ways and means that you can get your message across without placing individual workers at risk. Such methods include sending demands by post, electing ten people to go into the boss's office together and painting demands on the boss's garage door.

### **What sort of action can we take to improve our working lives?**

Whatever you think necessary and appropriate at the time. Some bosses quickly change their tune when faced only with a potential threat, so organising and submitting requests / issuing demands alone often does the trick when negotiating on many issues. Sometimes though, firmer tactics need to be employed. Industrial action can include working



to rule, go-slows, strikes, walkouts, sickies, doing your job more thoroughly using better materials, making deliberate mistakes, etc. The important thing is to gauge the bosses' reaction (including legal repercussions) in the context of your own situation. Skilled workers or those working in times / areas of low unemployment have more power than other workers might. Timing can also be an important factor. All bosses have periods when a smooth running ship is absolutely vital to the success of the business / service. In other words, assess the situation and pick your moments.

### **What can we expect to improve?**

Well, what do you want? Better holidays? More pay? A generous maternity or paternity policy? Nothing is impossible. A situation to aim at is one where all workers feel protected by their workmates and where the bosses' main concern when introducing change is not 'how quick can we get this implemented and how much will it save us?' But 'oh Christ, I hope we get this one past the workers'. Such a state of affairs puts the bosses on the back foot and allows workers to go on the offensive.

### **Well, how can I get things moving? No-one seems interested at the moment.**

That's often how it appears but what worker isn't interested in improving their lot? A good starting point is to find an issue that affects lots of you, or a situation that is particularly bad at the moment. Arrange an informal meeting in the pub or café after work and talk it through, discuss what you think could be done about it, and plan how to get others involved. It's often best to first pick a battle that's easily winnable so as to give you all confidence to move on and up the ante. You also need to be careful who you can trust in the initial stages. It's sad but true that some low-lives will inform on their own at a moment's notice to further their own position.

### **But I've no experience?**

Doesn't matter. There are lots of helpful resources available, and if you've some industrial fight in you, then that's enough. Trade unions, libraries and the internet are good starting points when looking for material. For advice and support, your nearest Solidarity Federation Local will be more than happy to help.

Contact SolFed at the address below.

## Friends of the Earth... but not of their workers?

*In October, workers at Bristol's domestic recycling collection service owned by Avon Friends of the Earth started a campaign of industrial action. They are demanding an end to compulsory overtime, a standard 40-hour week and strong measures to deal with the hostile, duplicitous and uncooperative management at Resourcesaver. Talks between UNISON and Resourcesaver ground to a halt because of unacceptable preconditions demanded by Resourcesaver, namely dropping one of the key members of the UNISON negotiating team, who is an elected representative! As a response to this, Unison members voted unanimously to hold a further 2-day strike that began on the 6th November.*

*It is not just Friends of the Earth; workers for other charities and environmental groups are reporting similar problems. Greenpeace (Canada) are becoming well known for their union-busting tactics and recently broke the contacts of thirteen workers and locked them out, one of them is still facing court charges for being arrested on a Greenpeace action!*

*What is needed is for us to network together across and beyond the union lines, and share experiences and problems and find solutions. If anyone has any experiences they would like to share, any ideas on how to address the problems or would like to get involved in building a voluntary/ community worker's network, please contact Catalyst.*



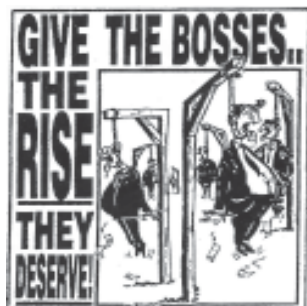
**WRITE TO CATALYST FOR A FULL & FRANK ANSWER TO A PROBLEM AT WORK,  
OR CONTACT THE ANSAPHONE HELPLINE FOR ADVICE - 07984 675 281  
CATALYST, SF, PO Box 29, SW PDO, MANCHESTER M15 5HW. [solfed@solfed.org.uk](mailto:solfed@solfed.org.uk)**

## Stop the war



As Catalyst goes to press, the Bush-Blair war machine is cranking up. Such time can only bring more misery for millions of Iraqi's and others around the world. The Iraqi people have already suffered for years, from sanctions imposed by the west, adding to the terror they have endured under Saddam Hussain. It is worth remembering that the said dictator had the full support of the west, even when he was openly gassing Iraqi civilians in the 1980s. The truth is, it is all about oil, and the US throwing its weight around in the region.

War will no doubt result in US/UK 'victory', and the subsequent installation of a military-dominated puppet regime which will guarantee cheap oil exports to the west in the future. How can Catalyst make such a bold prediction?! We need look no further than the last 150 years of western imperialism, and the tried and tested tactics of state terrorism that are the UK and US standard practice. As anarcho-syndicalists, we at Catalyst do not only oppose the war on humanitarian grounds, but also oppose it as part of our rejection of western imperialism, which has only ever had one winner – the boss class, and one loser – us, the working class.



**Catalyst is produced for workers everywhere, by workers in the Solidarity Federation. To join SolFed, for more information, or for more copies of Catalyst or to send contributions, contact: 07984 675 281 Catalyst, SF, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW. solfed@solfed.org.uk www.solfed.org.uk**

# Workers escalate year-long strike

**Workers in Hackney's libraries have been on strike for over a year - in fact, every Saturday since 24<sup>th</sup> November 2001. They are calling for mass pickets of Hackney Central, Stoke Newington and Shoreditch Libraries to prevent scab labour recruited by the Labour-controlled Council from opening them. These pickets will take place on the first Saturday the scabs are called in, probably 7<sup>th</sup> December, and on each subsequent Saturday until they are withdrawn.**

Hackney Council has declared Saturday to be a regular working day for which regular pay rates will apply. Library workers have struck for the restoration of Saturday-enhanced pay, part of the nationally-agreed terms and conditions (the Green Book) included in workers' contracts, but which has been unilaterally withdrawn by the Council, who falsely claim that it is a "premium payment" abolished as part of Single Status. However, under Single Status the Green Book can only be varied by agreement. Needless to say, no such agreement has been reached, or indeed sought by the Council.

Library workers are poorly paid and rely on the additional half-day's pay (without London Weighting, being paid at national rates) for the Saturday they are required to work each fortnight to make ends meet. The fact that they have been able to sustain the action in the face of losing a whole day's pay each fortnight demonstrates their determination to win back what is rightfully theirs. This is in spite of the fact that the removal of Saturday-enhanced pay is the consequence of UNISON losing a corporate dispute. (See "Hackney showdown" in *Catalyst* #5 for the background.)

That determination is supported by strong

organisation built up in the workplace, which goes beyond the usual trades union formula of electing a shop steward and relying on them to "lead" resistance to management. In contrast to this steward-based organisation, workers have been encouraged to tackle problems collectively themselves through direct action, rather than just asking their stewards to sort the problems out with management. This has made library workers the best organised in the Council.

The Council's response to the success of the strike in closing all the Borough's seven libraries on each Saturday for a year has been to hire scab labour to work only on Saturdays. In spite of the fact that they could re-open all seven libraries immediately simply by honouring workers' contracts, they have hired scabs at an undisclosed additional cost to re-

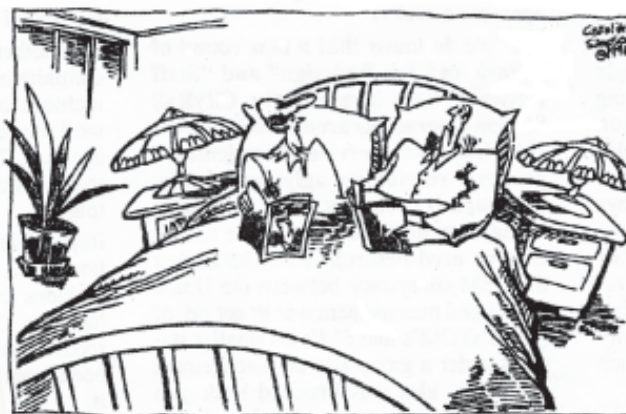
open only three of them. Their determination to try and break UNISON is obvious.

The response of the workers was to organise a five day strike from Monday 25<sup>th</sup> November 2002, marking the Anniversary of the first Saturday's strike, and in support of the London Weighting

claim. In addition, new timetables have been rejected and the scabs will be neither trained nor assisted by regular workers. Anyone who can make it is asked to support the Saturday pickets.

Local Government bosses across London and the country as a whole are watching the dispute closely, because if Hackney can get away with such a blatant breach of contracts and National Agreements, they will all want to try it. Hackney's library workers are showing all public service workers who don't work 9-5, Monday to Friday how to organise effectively and how to fight back. It is in everyone's interests that Hackney's library workers win this dispute; what are you going to do to support them?

**For further information, contact: Hackney UNISON, 2 Hillman Street, LONDON, E8 1DY. (Tel. 0208 356 4071)**



**I'm afraid I'll have that awful dream again - the one where I actually negotiate with the union over weekend overtime ...**

**WINTER 2003: CONSUMERISM**

Direct Action is the SolFed Quarterly magazine. Many of the best bits are available free on the web. Just slip into your local cybercafe or switch on, and at the right moment, type:

**<http://www.direct-action.org.uk>**

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