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"More (crap) Jobs than Ever"

...TONY BLAIR CLAIMS...

The Labour Government repeatedly claims that there are more people in work than ever. "This year, for the first time, there are more than 30 million in the workforce" boasted Gordon Brown recently. But sadly, there's more to it.

On the face of it, Labour's record on employment is good. According to the International Labour Organisation, unemployment in Britain stands at 4.8%, not bad when compared with the Eurozone's 9%. But, as always with Labour, the devil is in the detail.

For instance, the unemployment figures do not take into account the 650,000 claiming long-term sickness benefit. Nor are the "economically inactive" (those who would like to work but for some reason (!) feel that there are no decent jobs to be had). The government itself estimates that 6% of the potential workforce currently falls into this category. If these "inactive" workers where added to the "official" unemployment figures, the unemployment rate would be in the region of 11%, and if the long term sick were added it would be even higher. So, we are hardly close to the near-full employment that Labour likes to claim.

What also has to be taken into consideration is the type of jobs being created by Labour. Quality is as important as quality, yet the biggest rise in jobs has been in part-time work. A third of all jobs are now part-time, and this figure is set to grow even further (last year alone, part-time employment grew more than one and a half times faster than full-time employment).

Even worse, many of the jobs that have been created under Labour are low paid, with no prospects or long-term security. Behind Labours spin, the British economy increasingly resembles that of the US, where a large underclass is dependent on low-income, part-time jobs to survive. The US experience has shown that, come recession time, it is the part-time jobs that are first to go, leaving a large sector of the workforce dependent on welfare (in many cases in the form of food vouchers).



Not surprisingly, this flexible "hire and fire" economy suits those companies who take on workers in boom time and get rid during recession. Crucial to the hire and fire economy is the welfare system. US welfare pays the bare minimum, with welfare payments being withdrawn if work is refused. Consequently, welfare is used to force the poor into terrible minimum-wage (or worse) part-time, casual jobs in order to survive. The system ensures they are so desperate that they will take any job that comes along. With little or no job protection, these workers can be discarded at will, and thrown back onto welfare until such time as they are needed again.

It is this US-style 'welfare' system that the Labour Government is trying to create in Britain. The value of unemployment benefit is being reduced in real terms, while a whole new load of benefits have been introduced for those willing to take on low-paid jobs. If this doesn't coax/force people to take these (crap) new jobs, the backup is to threaten to end benefit altogether if people refuse to take a job.

What we are seeing in Britain is not the end of Thatcherite mass unemployment, but the creation of a semi-employed underclass, languishing somewhere between employment and welfare - a pool of casualised workers who can be utilised or discarded at will by employers. This is the true reality of Labour's much-vaunted 'flexible' labour market.

FLEXPLOITATION: The inevitable result of Labour's 'flexible' labour market is more poverty and more dangerous working conditions - see health and safety features and focus on 'accidents' at work inside...

Overwork = madness

A survey, "Whose Life is it Anyway?", compiled by the Mental Health Foundation, has found that Britain's intense work culture is having very serious effects on mental health. In what is already the EU's hardest working country (in hours, at least), 61% of workers interviewed were suffering severe disruption to their personal lives due to having to work excessively long hours. This is hardly surprising - between 2001 and 2003, the number of people working more than 60 hours increased from 1 in 8 to 1 in 6. Within the same period, the number of women working over 60 hours doubled.

The report found that 48% of people sacrifice exercise to work longer hours, with 45% saying they lost time with partners and 42% losing contact with friends and other social activities due to overwork. A clear linkage was established, finding that workers experiencing pressure of overwork are more likely to suffer specific mental health problems, including from irritability and anxiety, to depression, to attempted suicide.

Pension-snatchers

It looks as if Labour has finally overcome the 'problem' of funding pensions. By raising the age of retirement to 70, Labour hopes that we will all drop dead before we are able to draw them. The treasury has commissioned reports from several right wing "pensions experts" who, surprise surprise, argued for an increase in the age of retirement. As one of them shamelessly put it, "the role of the state is to alleviate poverty and not to fund a long and active retirement with a good standard of living".

Research has shown that one in five people and nearly one in three men will die before they retire, if the pensions age is raised. Just think of the savings! Better still, pushing up the retirement age will hit the poor disproportionately. In Britain's more deprived areas, the death rate at 70 is almost half of men and more than a third of the population as a whole. The fact that it will hit the prols hardest will prove a big selling point to Labours natural constituency, the average Daily Mail reader.

Exposed - 'accidents' at work

As the Health and Safety jargon goes, 99% of accidents are preventable. Here are just a few examples of cases where negligence by employers - who would rather make extra profits than prevent accidents - has been exposed.

What a waste

A recent HSE-commissioned report, *Mapping health and safety standards in the UK waste industry*, found that death rates in the waste industry are over 10 times the national average, which makes the waste industry now more dangerous than construction. It also found accident rates are four times the average, and says incidents predominantly occur to refuse and recycling collection workers who manually handle and sort waste. The handling of bags, wheelie bins and skips feature strongly in the HSE accident reports.

Responding to the findings, the HSE does not mention any plan to enforce higher standards, but instead says it will be 'good partners' with the industry, encouraging self-regulation. As reported in the last Catalyst (Cat10), this "good partnership" approach adopted by the HSE in recent years has proved totally ineffectual in stemming the rise in death and injuries at work. The bosses will always put profit before the heath & safety of their workers. The only way of ensuring proper safety at work is through workers organising and forcing the bosses to take action to ensure safety.

Geest Greed

Food multinational Geest must pay out fines and legal costs of just £10,000 after an untrained teenage migrant worker lost three fingertips while working at one of its Spalding factories. Portuguese worker Diana Fernandes, 18, was cleaning a moving conveyor belt on a night shift at Lincs Cuisine when her clothing got caught and her hand was dragged into machinery. When Miss Fernandes, an agency worker, started at Geest, there was no formal training on health and safety, she was "just shown how to put on her clothing and cap".

Crown killers get off lightly

Company bosses criticised in court for a series of fatal safety blunders have escaped with fines totalling £17,000. A safety review has now been ordered by Crown Holdings plc following a fireball explosion at the Carnaud Metalbox factory in Westhoughton, which killed Craig Whelan and Paul Wakefield. Factory bosses Ian Billington, Colin Stevens and engineer John Kither were found guilty of breaching health and safety laws. They were originally charged with manslaughter, but these charges were later dropped. The court heard that company bosses had been warned of the fire risk. One witness said he was 'flabbergasted' by the poor quality of the risk assessment prepared by the company for the demolition job.

Railway contract killers

A 21-year-old railway worker was hit and killed by a train in London because a construction company and a recruitment agency failed to train him properly, a court heard recently. Balfour Beatty and McGinley Recruitment Services both denied they had employed Michael Mungovan, but pleaded guilty at City of London Magistrates' Court to failing in their duty to ensure he was not endangered while at work, and failing to make sure he was informed properly about his hazardous work.

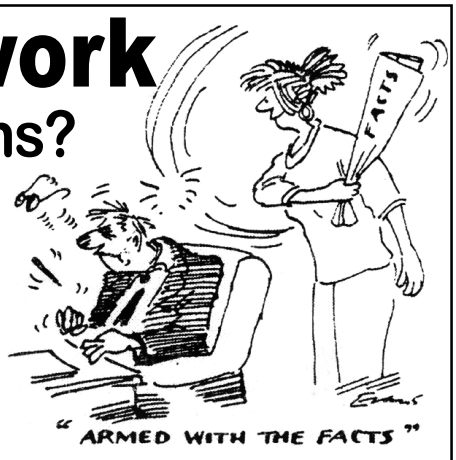
Michael Mungovan, a Brunel University student from County Cork in Ireland, was earning holiday money as a casual railway worker and had been in the job just three days when he was killed. Mr Mungovan's family said he had received just nine hours' training and did not hold a valid track safety card. Directors and managers from both firms were in court, although neither company would accept they were Mr Mungovan's employer, instead facing charges relating to safety duties to non-employees.

This case follows the May 2002 inquest, which ruled that Mr Mungovan was 'unlawfully killed'. It also highlights that, in Britain's flexible deregulated labour market, firms can truly get away with murder.



Problems at work

No. 9: Who needs Unions?



Of course, a trade union is usually better than nothing - but if you have the chance, why not dissafilliate from the Labour Party or, better still, take the union under direct workers' control? Here's two recent events to prove it.

Union Grows after Cutting Labour Ties

Since being thrown out of the Labour Party, the RMT, the biggest rail workers' union, has increased its membership by more than 3,000, and is one of the few trade unions in the country which is growing.

Even given this evidence, the union is still planning to take legal action to challenge the decision that it had effectively disaffiliated itself in February because it was giving financial support to other political parties. The RMT is still sending affiliation cheques to the party, but they are being returned.

What does it take for the RMT leadership to realise that not being affiliated to the Labour Party is a positive advantage? Instead of trying to get back in, they should be releasing the political fund for campaigns to support rail workers in their continuing fight to defend their workplace wages and conditions.

Syndicalism Out West

Voluntary sector workers in Bristol are moving away from the passive local UNISON branch and forming their own solidarity networks. In one workplace, a mass meeting. voted to disaffiliate from the Socialist Workers' Party-controlled union branch, and form their own syndicate. Administrative posts are rotated amongst the workers, and delegates are instructed by mass meetings. There are no officials, and subs are to be kept and controlled in common by the workers. Self education, mutual aid and solidarity are the watchwords of the independent syndicate.

Beyond individual workplaces, workers in the city are organising to resist the bullying, summary dismissals and harassment that are endemic in the voluntary sector. Many voluntary sector organisations are little more than personal fiefdoms for power-crazed middle-class poverty pimps, and working conditions are generally awful. The realisation that it is the workers themselves who must take the fight to the bosses is spreading, and confidence is growing.

Write in 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

BACC Actions

Back in May, the Recruitment & Employment Confederation (REC) held a 'National Temporary Workers Week'. In reality, this was a propaganda exercise promoting the casualisation of work. In response, the Bristol Against Casualisation Campaign (BACC) held a series of counter-events under the title 'Opposing Temporary Work Week'. BACC is a group of workers and trade unionists who have been organising against casualisation for the past three years or so.

During the week, there was the showing of 'A Job to Win' at the Cube Cinema, Bristol. The event was co-hosted with the International Solidarity Movement and was introduced by a representative from BACC, who linked the part played by agencies in exploiting migrant labourers in Palestine with the role of agencies in promoting temporary work in the UK. The film was followed by a discussion that highlighted the growing exploitation of migrant workers in the UK, and how to forge solidarity with them.

Also, the Randstad employment agency outlet in Bristol city centre was leafleted. There was a good reception from the agency workers, but not so good from Randstad staff, who complained it was 'inappropriate' to give out such leaflets outside their premises. The leafletters replied that, as Randstad are involved in casualising the labour market, it was totally appropriate.

Then the focus shifted to London, where there was a 'Cider and Pork Scratching Reception' (veggie option available) at Parliament Square. Five people from BACC plus a camera crew confronted agency representatives as they queued up to enter Parliament, shouting 'We are all one in a million' (reference to the prize presented by the REC to the 'Temporary Worker of the Year) & 'Remember Simon Jones' (reference to Simon, a casual worker who was killed due to his employers' negligence). Banners were unfurled reading: 'Casualisation Kills' & '999,999 agency workers ask - Gerry Sutcliffe MP, Who the f*** are you?'

Then there was the picket of Manpower, Britain's largest employer of agency staff and the world's second largest agency - a symbol of the growth in job insecurity and poverty pay. Over 500 leaflets were distributed and Manpower staff were indignant that anyone should challenge their right to exploit and locked the door, but not before providing demonstrators with a copy of the TGWU publicity that they provide to new staff. The T&G is apparently proud to work in partnership with Manpower, and BACC is proud to oppose their role in promoting the casualisation of work.

At the weekend, was the 'Fight Temporary Work Conference' at Easton Community Centre in Bristol. The sessions included a talk on 'flexploitation', and discussion ranged from the proposed legislation on 'gangmasters' through the nature of campaigning (targeting the state?), onto the role of the unions. Other presentations included 'Fighting Casualisation', with information on the 'Workmates Collective' operating on London Underground; 'McDonalds Workers Resistance', and individual strategies for surviving on benefits and agency work. Another thing discussed was something to look out for soon - a short film on 'Casualisation in Bristol'.

Formaldehyde kills

It has now been accepted that Formaldehyde, a chemical to which millions of workers are exposed to, causes cancer. The International Agency for Research on Cancer had already concluded that formaldehyde was probably carcinogenic to humans, but new studies have now found hard evidence showing that formaldehyde causes nasopharyngeal cancer in humans.

Formaldehyde is used mainly in the production of resins that are used as adhesives and binders for wood products, pulp, paper, glasswool and rockwool. It is also used extensively in the production of plastics and coatings, in textile finishing, in the manufacture of industrial chemicals, and as a disinfectant and preservative (formalin) used in labs and in morgues for embalming.

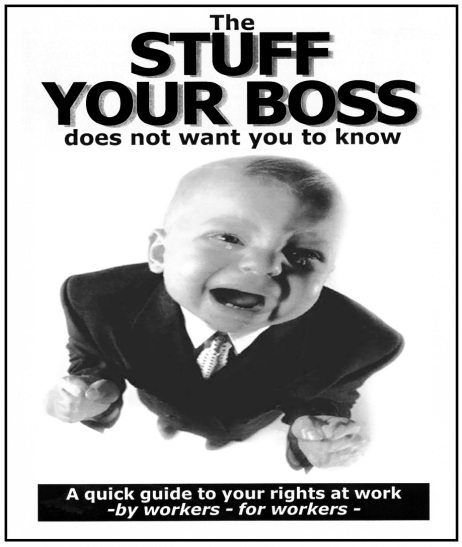
Asbestos death - of an office worker

A health-conscious pensioner died after developing the asbestos cancer mesothelioma, decades after breathing in asbestos from the clothes of shipyard workers. Alison Corbett worked for just seven years in the offices of a shipyard more than 40 years ago. Ms Corbett's only contact with asbestos workers was when they came into the office with wages queries and other enquires. This tragic death demonstrates yet again that even limited exposure to asbestos can kill (see previous Cats).

Meanwhile, the Canadian government has confirmed it will try to block a global agreement that aims to curtail trade in the deadly chrysotile (white) asbestos. Lobbying led by the Canadian government and asbestos industry bodies succeeded last year in blocking the addition of chrysotile to the list of Prior Informed Consent substances covered by the Rotterdam Convention. It has now said it will try and repeat the manoeuvre at the follow up meeting, scheduled for late September - despite the fact that this substance continues to kill millions across the planet.



Catalyst is produced for workers everywhere, by workers in the Solidarity Federation. To join SolFed, for info, for 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



Basic rights leaflet - free copies: SolFed, PO Box 1095, Sheffield S2 4YR. solfed@solfed.org.uk

Government-funded deaths

The Centre for Corporate Accountability has revealed that, in the last 20 months, 9 apprentice workers - all under the age of 23 - have been killed on work placements as part of Government-funded courses. It is not known how many apprentices have been injured.



One of the deaths has resulted in a director and company being prosecuted for manslaughter. The trial is due to take place later this year at Exeter Crown Court. Another has resulted in the company pleading guilty to health and safety offences, whilst five of the deaths continue to be under investigation.

At the time, all of the apprentices were undertaking the work-placement part of their course/apprenticeship, and were on vocational courses funded by the government's Learning and Skills Council, which funds all post-16 training and education for young people.

The manner in which these young people have died is truly shocking, but sadly unsurprising, given this government's record. Health and Safety Executive (HSE) figures show that last year, 21 workers between the ages of 16 to 24 who died at work - a 20% up on the previous year. Details about the 'apprentice' deaths emerged as the Government announced a major expansion in the funding of apprenticeships. It also comes at a time when the HSE has been forced - due to cuts in government spending - to reduce its activities.

Apparently, the HSE already has too few resources, and has opted to try and persuade employers to be safe, even though its own research shows that enforcement is a more effective strategy. The reality is that the only way the wholesale slaughter that is now taking place in the workplace will end, is by rebuilding workplace organisation as the means of forcing management to make changes. Ultimately, workplaces will only be truly safe when capitalism is got rid of and replaced with a system based on collective workers' control.

Tesco - sick pay targetted

Despite the headline in the last Catalyst, Tesco carries on oppressing its workers regardless! The recent moves by Tesco to axe sick pay heralds the beginning of yet another attack on workers' rights. Tesco makes £4.4 million profit every day, yet the bosses have decided this isn't enough, and they are axing sick pay in some stores, and testing other schemes to stamp out the 'sickie' once and for all. Where Britain's biggest retailer leads, others are expected to follow, and worse still, the shopworkers union, USDAW, which represents about half of Tesco's 220,000 workers, is co-operating with the plan.

Instead of looking at why workers take time off, usually through low morale caused by crappy pay and conditions, the bosses typically label us 'shirkers' and try to cause divisions in the workforce. One scheme, introduced in two new stores in the south, doesn't even make any sense. What happens is that workers get no pay at all for the first three days off sick, but after the fourth day they start getting paid again, with compensation for the first three days. So, if you are feeling a bit shit one morning you might as well take four days off instead of one, otherwise you will lose pay. Of course, inevitably, the next step will be to insist on a doctor's certificate rather than a self-certificate.

Unfortunately, management apparently haven't realised yet that people can't be bullied into being well.

They have targeted new stores because they know if they tried it on existing workers they would have breached contract rules. Still, if they like it, no doubt it will be slowly introduced. After all, it is unlikely that individual workers on low salaries will successfully take a large employer to an employment tribunal, especially if their own union has backed the scheme.

Another store, Asda, which employs 130,000 people in 265 shops, says it offers incentives to reward low absenteeism. Again, this is divisive and means people will come into work when they are not fit, thus compromising their own health and the health and safety of their co-workers.

Meanwhile, that mainstay of workers rights, the Royal Mail, has announced a new incentive scheme for staff who are not ill over the next six months. They will be rewarded by being entered into a prize draw to win a car or a holiday. While I wouldn't refuse such a prize, it hardly does anything to address the real problems of morale and sickness within the industry.

However, the main point is that this prize idea was given publicity, but what is less well-known is that, for people who aren't would-be prize-winners, there are plans to bully and harass them back to work, even when they are genuinely sick. People are being forced to phone up daily and long-term sick people are being forced into interviews. Unfortunately, management apparently haven't realised yet that people can't be bullied into being well.

Workers in all sectors need to be aware of this new battleground that the bosses are going to try to exploit. Whether your union is co-operating or opposing a new sickness scheme, in the end it is down to the collective strength of the workers as to whether these schemes come into operation or not.