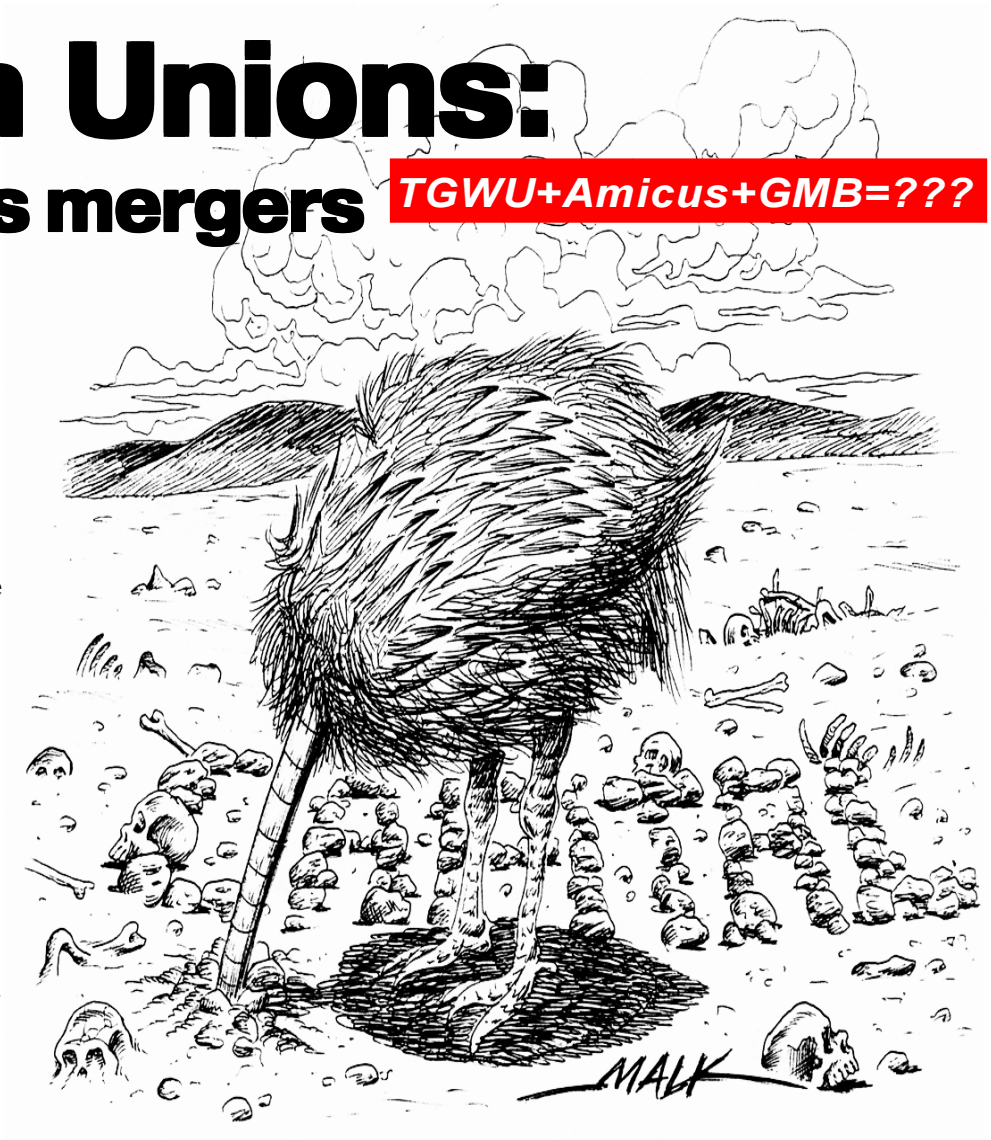
Catalyst
Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation - International Workers' Association
April 2005 #12

Inside -
Childline
Bullying and Big Business
Unpaid overtime
Sicknote Britain - Sick Harrassment
Deaths at work -
The killing goes on...

Ostrich Unions:
Meaningless mergers

TGWU+Amicus+GMB=???



Plans have been announced to create an 'historic' merger between the TGWU, Amicus and the GMB unions. If it comes off, this will create Britain's biggest-ever trade union, with 2.5 million members, £200 million assets and 300 sponsored MPs. Apparently, this new super union will be much stronger and better able to defend its membership.

The argument goes that we must have a bigger union to have clout with the government and with multinational employers. How so? For all the blustering done by the big unions, very little happens. Why? Because there is no longer the workplace organisation to carry any threats through. The bosses and the government know that if they stall and prevaricate, then the unions will back down and accept a compromise. And what is the point of having hundreds of sponsored MPs if all they do is follow the party line to keep the Labour Party in power?

Tony Woodley told the T&G executive: "This is a message of hope for every worker who needs strong trade unionism, and a warning to employers that we intend to match the power of capital with the power of united labour."

How will this happen exactly? This is not an industrial union in one sector, but a general union spread across several industries. As the unions no longer have strikes in support of other workers, this general format is practically meaningless.

It will not strengthen workers in their battles in the workplace. There will still be no grassroots control in the union. In fact, the membership will be even further isolated from the union bureaucracy than ever before.

None of the unions have seriously built up their membership and influence in the most important place; the workplace. In many places, branches are moribund and workplace meetings non-existent. Membership is declining, and the only way these unions can see to survive and maintain membership figures is to merge.

We have seen the same thing in the past, when UNISON emerged amidst similar rhetoric. Here is simply another false dawn. What we will end up with is mini-TUCs, each trying to attract members to them. This wouldn't be so bad if they at least had differing political perspectives and approaches, but they are all much the same. They are sold lock stock and barrel on the partnership between the unions, government and business. Yet, they are only in this 'partnership' for appearances sake. The only way they can seem to attract new members is to offer insurance or some other fringe benefit.

What we need is active unions with a clear agenda for change, controlled by their membership, and opposed to the bosses. Only then will workers have a real chance to join a union that reflects their political views and interests, instead of the current one-size-fits-all wishy-washy right wing unions welded to the crumbling remains of the Labour Party. That may be a long way off, but at least it is a more honest approach than the phoney rhetoric and lies pushed out by the union bureaucrats and their cronies.

Childline

After two ballots in favour, and under pressure to comply with EU legislation about worker consultation, management at the children's charity ChildLine have agreed to recognise a trade union. With twenty-odd redundancies at ChildLine's Nottingham base last year -- after a Mickey Mouse 'consultation exercise', and no pay-rise for two years, it's time for workers to get organised.

Like many charities, ChildLine relies heavily on volunteers -- especially as counsellors. There are also 'sessional' and 'contracted' workers (casual labour, to you and me), who have their hours changed or cut with little or no warning. At the moment, it looks like ChildLine workers will get Unison or Amicus as their union -- but volunteers and casuals wouldn't have the same rights of union representation. While it's a step forward, a TUC-style trade union would serve to divide rather than unite ChildLine workers -- paid and unpaid, permanent and casual.

ChildLine is run like an empire by fading TV personality, Esther Rantzen, backed up by a bunch of unelected, unaccountable trustees. Last year, workers were told in an e-mail that they weren't going to get a pay rise for the second year running. No negotiation, no consultation, no nothing. In the meantime, volunteers and casuals are used to fill the gaps left by a freeze on recruitment. Only a new kind of union, and a new kind of workplace organisation can deliver for ChildLine workers. Union and non-union members are already starting to meet informally to discuss the best way to make that happen.



Workers organising in the voluntary and community sector, i.e. getting blood out of stones.

Bullying + Big Business



Bullying can be expressed physically, but more often than not takes the form of psychological aggression, whether aggression, threats, abuse, or ridicule... Whichever form it takes, it is always vindictive, cruel, malicious and humiliating. The result is devastating for the victims, causing serious stress-related heath problems, such as severe fatigue, depression and immune system suppression.

While the dangers of bullying in the playground are now regularly highlighted, little attention is paid to the bullying that takes place in the workplace. Meanwhile, it has reached staggering levels. Research by the University of Manchester found that 50% of people had witnessed bullying at work and one in six had been bullied in the last six months, while one in four had been bullied in the last five years. A study of workplace bullying, 'Workplace Bullying in Britain', found that 18 million working days are lost per year due to sickness caused by bullying.

Why is so little being done? Because capitalism uses bullying to control the workforce and increase productivity. Historically, the extent of bosses power to hire and fire dictates the level of bullying and fear of the sack used to intimidate workers into accepting worsening conditions. The last twenty years has seen the virtual collapse of workplace organisation, which was the only real check on the power of managers. Hence, the growth of workplace intimidation, which has led to a sense of powerlessness, making it hard for workers to challenge the attitudes of even the most obnoxious of managers.

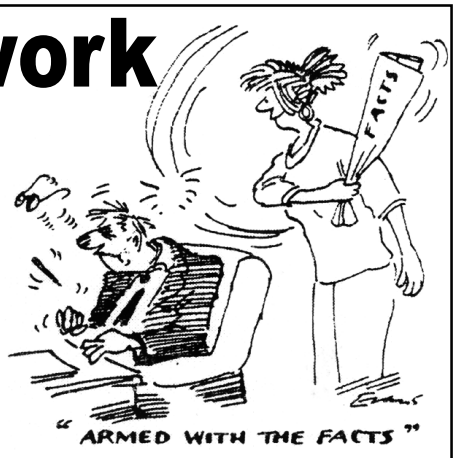
Managers now routinely exploit people's anxiety arising from an almost permanent state of job insecurity in order to force them to work harder for less. Amid this climate of fear, capitalism has sought to create a culture of conformity, routed in free market ideology, as a means of social control in the workplace. They have attempted to enforce this new doctrine of teamworking by getting rid of or marginalizing those workers unwilling to conform to the new mantra. This has enforced a nasty workplace culture in which bullying thrives. Workers who are not 'onside' are constantly undermined, passed over or sacked.

The aim is to marginalise unwanted workers both as a means of getting rid of them, as well as to send a clear message to other workers that they must conform or face the consequences. Amid this poisoned atmosphere, bullying becomes the norm, not just by mangers but also by workers eager to run down others as means of currying favour. In today's workplace environment, people who go sick, have family commitments, are different or even wish to take holidays, become susceptible to bullying. In countries such as the US and Japan, where the culture of management-inspired conformity has been most widespread, people work longer than at any time in the last 100 years. On average, they only take 10 days holidays each year.

We hear much about the caring nature of modern capitalism, but the old realties remain. Fear and intimidation are the main methods through which management control workers. Bullying will always be present under capitalism. Its extent will be determined by the ability of workers to organise in order to stand up to managements diktats. Workplace bullying in all its cruelty will ultimately only disappear in a democratically controlled workplace, where decisions are taken collectively.

Problems at work

No. 10: Unpaid overtime



As unpaid overtime 'tops £23bn mark', what can we do to tackle it?

Did you know that February 25th 2005 was the day the TUC said that people who do unpaid overtime will stop working for free and start to get paid? No? Well, that's because it didn't happen. On that day, dubbed "Work Your Proper Hours Day", the TUC urged people who do unpaid overtime to take a proper dinner break and arrive and leave work on time. They claimed that this would remind Britain's employers just how much they depend on the good will and voluntary extra work of their staff. Didn't work though, did it?

Despite an "intense PR campaign" no-one seems to have even heard about it, much less taken part. Apparently, it will be an annual event. As the TUC Head of Campaigns, Nigel Stanley said, "This is not a confrontational campaign". Of course not; we can't be antagonistic towards our bosses can we?

No doubt unpaid overtime needs tacking. It is an increasing problem as the continuing casualisation of the workplace, the hiving off of work to private firms and the voluntary sector, and the decline of workplace organisation allows bosses to introduce 'flexible working patterns'. That means we workers are expected to work until the job is finished regardless of whether or not that exceeds our paid hours.

Workers who did unpaid overtime in 2004 would have each earned £4,650 for their efforts if they had received a wage. This doesn't include those who work unsocial hours and yet are paid only a basic wage and not overtime payments. The TUC general secretary Brendan Barber said, "Most people do not mind putting in some extra time when there's a crisis or an unexpected rush" … trouble is - this has become the norm. We are not going to stop it with futile gestures like the Work Your Proper Hours Day. The only way is to get organised together with fellow workers and stop doing it.

So let's support each other and refuse to work for nothing. Whether for time in lieu that never arrives because there is always new work to do, cover for those off sick, or for un-filled vacancies. The bosses don't pay us enough as it is, let's not give them our labour for free.

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

Sicknote Britain?

There's a myth that British workers are somehow lazier than others and take time off and throw a 'sickie' at the drop of a hat. Now there is nothing wrong with getting some time back from the grasping bosses, but a recent report called 'Sicknote Britain?' has found that British workers are less likely to take short term time off sick than in any European country except Denmark. Furthermore, only Austria, Germany and Ireland lose less working time due to long term absence; public sector employees are off sick less than private sector workers; and the number of people on Incapacity Benefit is on the decrease.

On the contrary, the real problem is the high number of workers (75 per cent) who confess to struggling into work when they are actually too ill. Very admirable maybe, except that these workers often come in with an infectious illness and simply spread their misery around. Also, working when sick can actually lead to long-term sickness absence.

The report takes a pop at commentators who suggest that many people who are off work with stress are not really that ill. It notes that the Health and Safety Executive estimates that work-related stress costs employers £353 million and society £3.7 billion, and the symptoms suffered by stressed-out employees are serious, including mental health and chronic physical health problems.

This comes at a time when the government is trying to force those on Incapacity Benefit back into paid employment, and the report finds that the number of people actually getting Incapacity Benefit is falling, not rising as is assumed by the press and the media.

Far from having an easy life on IB, claimants receive just £84.28 a week, and to get it, they have to pass a test showing that they are incapable of work and be paid up with sufficient National Insurance contributions. This test is getting harder for those with stress-related illnesses because, as soon as the signs of recovery are seen, they are forced back prematurely into work, only to fall ill again a few months later.

Sick harassment

Have you noticed nowadays when you are off sick, you still get phone calls from work? They can be about trivial stuff like someone not being able to find a file, or more important questions that it seems only you know the answer to.

Workers are even asked about who could cover for them, like that's part of your job description. This can come from your boss or supervisor or from fellow workers left in the lurch by the mismanagement above them.

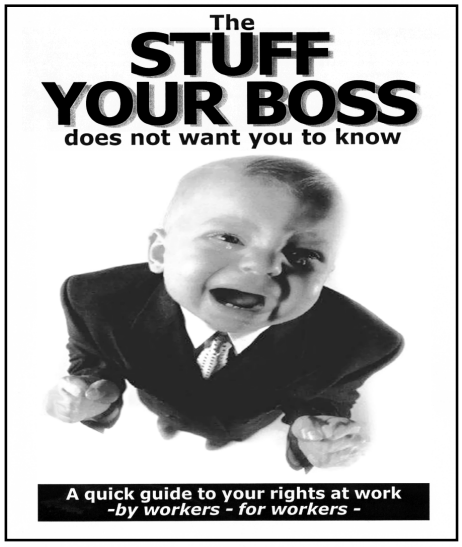
Increasingly, it seems to be alright to harass people at home who are sick. This only increases the anxiety felt by those off sick and sometimes can be used to pressure them to return to work before they should do.

With mobile phones and email it is even harder to escape from intrusive communications from work. Not long ago, you reported sick and sent a sick note. You were only expected to contact your employer to either to send in a renewed sick note or tell them when you'd be back. Nowadays, the employers seem to need daily updates and information that only you can provide.

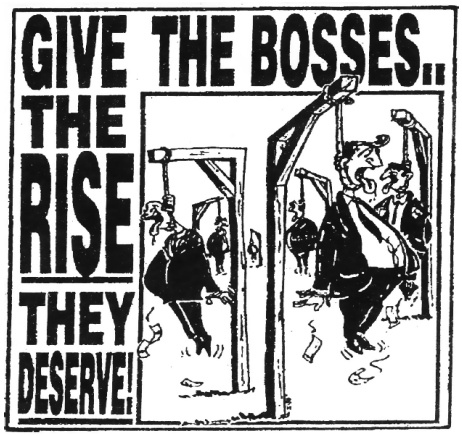
Sick harassment has spread like a disease spread from middle management who have already sold their soul to the company devil, and seem to expect everyone else to feel 'loyalty' from their sick bed.

There is no specific legalisation covering being contacted when off sick. If it gets really bad, you could go through a claim for harassment but realistically, how far do you think you would get? So, until the scourge passes, don't encourage them. When you're off sick, screen your calls, ignore the emails and don't be tempted to contact work unless you really have to. It's the only way to stay healthy when you're off sick.





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



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*

The killing goes on...

Despite the target, set by the government in February 2001, to cut deaths and major injuries in construction by 40 per cent by 2004/05 and by 66 per cent by 2009/10 the murdering of building workers is still going on unchecked.

Deaths on building sites are still running at about six a month - more or less the same each year since 1998/99. It is clear that other than set targets that are ignored by building bosses the government is going to do sod all about the slaughter of building workers. At a recent conference on construction safety the minister for work Jane Kennedy said the industry 'is falling short of the challenging targets it set itself in 2001.' She added: 'I want to see stakeholders to take ownership of the health and safety challenges, show leadership in taking action and forge new partnerships to accelerate health and safety improvements." Empty meaningless talk by people who do not give a toss about building workers, only through self organisation leading to the rebuilding of workplace organisations will stop the killings.

A London scaffolding firm Crowe Fabrications Ltd is facing fines and costs of £42,000 after a worker died and another was seriously injured. On 12 July 2002 one worker was killed and one seriously injured when the scaffold rig they were dismantling became unbalanced and fell 20 metres into the street. The court found that the work had not being properly planned with no site-specific method statement being drawn up which would have set out how the scaffold was to be kept stable and falls from height prevented. The company received fines totalling £30,000 and was ordered to pay costs of £12,000 - a reflection of the true value the British state places on building workers lives.

Council workers' strike

Workers ranging from refuse collectors and school dinner ladies to architects were due to walkout for 24 hours in protest at controversial Government plans to raise their pension age from 60 to 65. But just as the Council workers were set to strike, the unions called off the action, after the Government backed down on its plans to make changes to the local government pension schemes.

It shows how the threat of direct action can achieve desired results. The only problem on this occasion is it only forced the Government back to the negotiating table. Time will tell if this is simply a ploy to delay matters until after an election.

Council workers need to be ready to take further action if it is needed. And putting the unions in a position of strength means not letting the bureaucrats throw it all away.

Deaths at work highest in North West

Figures released by trade unions the TGWU and UCATT show that 104 people died at work in the North West of England in 2003-04, the highest of any region in England, Scotland or Wales. The number of major injuries at work during the same two-year period was 7,218, the second highest of any region. Not one single company director was prosecuted for these deaths or injuries.

In March 1996, when in opposition, Labour gave its support to a law for director liability when Michael Meacher MP said in Parliament, "Responsibility for health and safety must be vested at the highest level of each organisation. Companies should appoint an individual at board level with overall responsibility for health and safety."

Nearly a decade later, there are still loopholes in law big enough to drive a high speed train through. No surprise that, as Labour has done nothing, there have been a catalogue of unsuccessful prosecutions against large corporations and only 6 successful prosecutions for corporate manslaughter in the past 10 years (all involving small companies).

Want to check your chances?

League table of people killed at work:	***League table of major injuries at work:***
North West 104	*South East 7,538*
South East 63	*North West 7,218*
Scotland 61	*Yorkshire 6,344*
Eastern 61	*West Midlands 6,233*
London 59	*London 5,846*
Yorkshire 54	*Scotland 5,797*
West Midlands 53	*Eastern 5,215*
Wales 48	*South West 5,145*
East Midlands 47	*Wales 3,333*
South West 43	*East Midlands 4,752*
North East 27	*North East 2,756*