Catalyst

Industrial Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation · International Workers' Association

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Red Tuesday - The working class fight back

Tuesday 28th March 2006 witnessed over a million workers take part in the largest one-day strike in Britain since the General Strike of 1926. The Government is hoping to do away with council workers current deal that allows them to retire at 60 providing they have had at least 25 years service with the council. This assault on council workers rights is part of a wider global assault on the working class.

However these attacks have provoked waves of resistance around the globe and on Tuesday 28th March workers in both Britain and across the channel in France took to the streets and went on strike in order to defend their rights from the attacks of their respective governments. The reaction from business leaders and their friends in the tabloids was one of unanimous incredulity and disdain. Sir Digby Jones, director of the CBI, appointed "Voice of Business" and hideously bloated by his wealth declared the strike "a disgrace".

While we hope that Tuesday March 28th will mark the start of a new wave of working class resistance and fight we must understand, without illusions that a one-day strike is unlikely to unnerve the Government or its wealthy backers. Despite making a show of opposition to government attacks, Union Bosses have more often than not collaborated with government to impose these reforms by showing lip service to their members and asking for the attacks to be watered down in their severity. Thus we end up with government attacks being accepted with slight alterations in their wording or paltry concessions to the workers being made.. Such half measures only help the government in seeing through their business driven reforms and leave new workers open to attack. These submissions to government attacks have left the working class fighting a losing battle on a purely defensive footing.

The attack on pensions which is taking place in the private and public sector is an audacious effort by business to pass the costs of market and government failings onto workers in order to maintain and maximise existing profits. The Government hopes to tackle the pension's shortfall by extending the imposition of work meaning an increase in retirement age for the vast majority of workers. Telling people that because they are living longer they must work longer in today's age of material and technological affluence is a plain insult. Whilst company directors are able to take early retirement with million pound bonuses and lucrative pension schemes stolen from the proceeds of our own labour we are told by politicians that we must carry on working until we drop.



Demonstration in Edinburgh. The strike against pension reforms shut down schools, council offices and other public services across Britain with widespread support.

If March 28th gave us a fleeting indication of the potential power of the working class to disrupt and oppose the existing order and their attacks then we must build and develop this power in order that the government is unable to implement any more regressive reforms.

If we are to realise this potential the first step must be to ensure that attempts to divide us along lines of age or what sector we work in are overcome. The first step in realising our potential power as workers is to understand that we are at our strongest not only when we are united but when we act without restraint in our own interests, without the hindering intervention of divisive union leaders who would sell our interests in exchange for a friendly handshake from number ten.

We look forward to workers here in the UK and across the world resisting these sets of degrading reforms with every tactic in our artillery, withdrawing our labour, taking to the streets and bringing the country to a standstill by whatever means necessary to defend and strengthen our position and to take the fight to the employers.



Birmingham strikers' demonstration.

Media workers face redundancy

HUNDREDS of jobs are being cut across the newspaper industry as a downturn in advertising bites into profits. News International, Johnston Press, Newsquest and Archant are among the major groups who have recently frozen new employment across their holdings and ordered wholesale restructuring.

In December last year, Trinity Mirror, the largest regional newspaper group in the UK, went through a similar process, earning them the title of the 'company that cancelled Christmas', according to the National Union of Journalists.

The Daily Mail Group Trust, the toughest anti-union group in the country, had attempted to go one step further and get out of the regional newspaper business altogether, but failing to find a buyer for their Northcliffe subsidiary, have launched a vicious series of cuts instead.

The industry, which has seen a huge relative decline in wages since unions were kicked out of the newsrooms in the 90s, has been largely unable to defend itself against the measures, despite strong evidence that the cuts will do more harm than good in the long term.

In the journalistic community it has been acknowledged for years that cuts to reporter numbers pushes down newspaper quality and impacts on the media's ability to investigate controversial subject matter. This in turn impacts on reader confidence, leading to a spiral of declining revenues and standards.

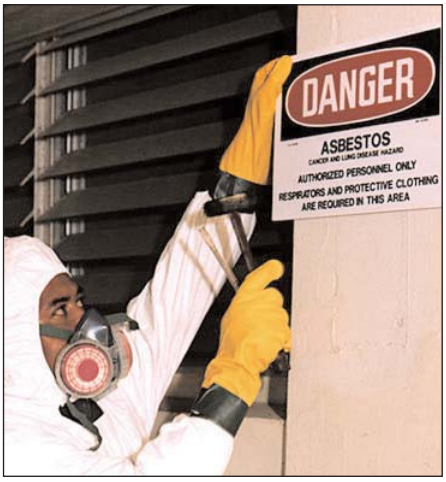
However, continued pressures from the stock market, coupled with a general decline in sales and the threat of online marketing, has prompted managers to increase investment in advertising while cutting it from editorial.

One SolFed member in the industry said: "These cuts should have been the basis for a resurgence in union activity, but the response has been weak. In most cases the NUJ has been worse than useless, but it's the only game in town at the moment. The old hands (working with poorly organised, mostly younger people because of the high turnover of staff) have been unable to turn things around, and their effectiveness is hamstrung by slow-moving bureaucracy.

"Every week there's a new story in the industry press of pickets on the gates of yet another paper, but the cuts are continuing regardless. The long-term decline in union power has left workers unable to respond effectively against today's assaults through the traditional system. This needs to change, and we need a tougher and faster method of organising to fight back properly."

Asbestos: The silent killer in schools

Some 15 teachers a year are dying of asbestos related cancer. The Health and Safety Executive released figures stating that between 1991 and 2000 147 teachers died from the untreatable cancer mesothelioma. When it took into account education assistants, nursery nurses and university lecturers the figures doubled. These figures could even be higher if other support staff, such as caretakers, maintenance staff and cleaners, are taken into account.



The history of asbestos is one of cover up and lies in the name of profit. The dangers of asbestos have been known about for over a hundred years. But the profits to be made from asbestos production ensured that the truth about the deadly nature of asbestos was withheld.

This has resulted in millions of workers dying from asbestos-related diseases round the world. In Britain alone over 5,000 people a year die as a result of inhaling asbestos, this figure is predicted to rise to 10,000 a year by 2010.

Shockingly even though the dangers of asbestos are now widely known asbestos is still mined in places such as Canada and still extensively used throughout the developing world. In Britain its use in construction began to be phased out in the late 1970s but according to the Health & Safety Executive asbestos containing materials (ACMs) was used in buildings constructed or refurbished before blue and brown asbestos was banned in 1985. In some cases ACMs, such as asbestos cement, were used up until 1999. It is estimated that some 13,000 schools in Britain are riddled with asbestos.

Workers should not simply rely on management to ensure that asbestos is handled properly. Current legislation allows asbestos to remain in place as long as it is not disturbed. This is largely due to cost; asbestos is so widespread in buildings throughout Britain the cost of removing it would be massive. Managers claim asbestos present in buildings is safe in order to avoid the cost of removing it.

All workplaces should have undertaken an asbestos survey and have in place an asbestos management plan. Manchester Solidarity Federation is encouraging all workers to raise the issue with their managers. Get them to check if asbestos is present where you work and that it is not likely to be disturbed. Management are legally obligated to consult workers regarding health and safety.

If you need advice contact Manchester Solidarity Federation who are involved in the justice for asbestos victims campaign.

Solidarity Federation Membership Application

I wish to join the Solidarity Federation. I have enclosed a cheque for £5.00 (made out to 'Solidarity Federation') to cover my initial 3 months of membership. I understand my details will be passed on to the nearest SolFed local who will contact me shortly.

Name:

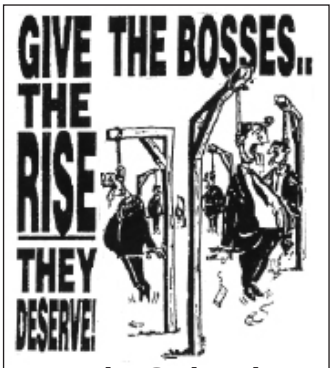
Address:

Post code:

Tel:

E-mail:

Occupation/Union (if any):



Join SolFed!
www.solfed.org.uk

Education Workers' Network (EWN), c/o Preston SF ewn@ewn.org.uk lists.riseup.net/www/info/ewn www.ewn.org.uk· Public Service Workers' Network (PSWN) c/o Solidarity Bristol· Birmingham & Northampton SF, c/o The Blackcurrent Centre, 24 St. Michael's Ave., Northampton NN1 4JQ brumsf@solfed.org.uk northamptonsf@solfed.org.uk· W Yorks SF, PO Box 75, Hebden Bridge, West Yorks HX7 8WB· Manchester SF, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW 07984675281 manchestersf@solfed.org.uk www.manchestersf.org.uk· Preston SF, PO Box 469, Preston PR1 8XF 07707256682 prestonsf@solfed.org.uk· Edinburgh SF, 17 West Montgomery Place, Edinburgh EH7 5HA 07896621313 edinburghsf@solfed.org.uk· N&E London SF, PO Box 1681, London N8 7LE 07984675281 nelsf@solfed.org.uk· South Herts SF, PO Box 493, St. Albans AL1 5TW· South London SF, PO Box 17773, London SE8 4WX southlondonsf@solfed.org.uk· Solidariy Bristol solidaritybristol@solfed.org.uk· South West Solidarity sws@solfed.org.uk

Safety on the railways?

Health and safety campaigners have welcomed the jailing of a rail boss, found guilty of killing four maintenance workers who died when a runaway wagon ploughed into them. Mark Connell, 44, had deliberately dismantled the brakes on two of his wagons in order to save money.

He received a nine year sentence for each of the four counts of manslaughter, to run concurrently. However the jailing of Connell, though welcome, is perhaps not quite the victory it first seems. As the construction giant Carillion plc, who subcontracted Connell to carry out the work, and as such should take some of the blame, was never prosecuted.

Connell's company, MAC Machinery Services, is typical of the countless number of sub-contractors carrying out work on British Railways. These dubious outfits care little about the safety of their largely self-employed labour force, they hire workers who often have little or no experience of working on the railways and even less heath & safety training. The large construction companies, contracted to carry out track maintenance since rail privatisation, are fully aware of the nature of these cowboy companies but use them because they come cheap and so boost profits. When accidents occur and workers pay with their lives, the directors of rich and powerful companies such as Carillian , Balfour Beatty and First Engineering simply walk away passing the blame for criminal safety.

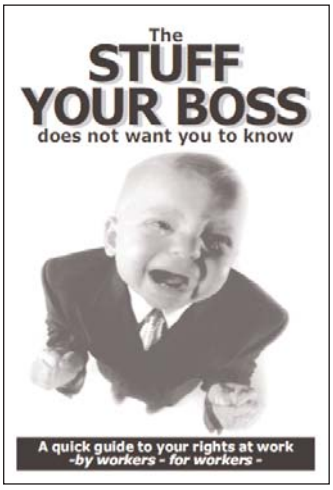
This culture of passing the buck has become the normal way of working on the railways and is used where companies employ workers directly. Here companies employ what at first sight appears to be vigorous heath and safety polices. Workers are sent on endless safety courses and have to sign off regular safety briefing. These polices are largely cosmetic and mask poor and unsafe working conditions, based on long hours and understaffing in which the pressure is constantly on workers to get work done in a short space of time. When rail workers cut safety corners simply to get the job done management are happy to turn a blind eye. Until that is an accident occurs, then the safety briefing and course attended are wheeled out as prove of the companies commitment to health and safety and blame is passed onto individual workers who are castigated for not following company safety procedures. To the extent that it is now routine for workers to be disciplined or sacked for breaches of health and safety, a practice virtually unheard of under nationalisation when safety procedures were seen as a means of preventing accidents rather a get out clause for managers.

Sadly this "blame it on the workers" culture now extends across most sectors of the British economy. Privatisation, increasing casualisation and ever longer hours has resulted in ever worsening working conditions that lead to poor health and safety standards. Which companies conceal by creating veneer of heath and safety respectability to disguise often appalling work place practices.



A whole industry of experts has been created that employers can call upon to instruct workers on heath and safety practices. Creating a "virtual" world of safety procedures that have little relation to the realities of what actually happens in the workplace which only function is to transfers all safety responsibility onto worker. When things go wrong management simply blame workers for not following guidelines.

In to many workplaces it is management that have the whip hand and when bosses have control the result will always be poor standards of heath and Safety. The long term solution to poor heath and safety is to rebuild workplace organisation that can challenge the power of management in order to improve working conditions. Good health and safety does not depend on presenting workers with certificates for attending some nonsense course they have been forced to attend. But rather workers having control over their working environment in order to challenge the power of managers who inevitably but cost before the heath and welfare of workers.



The Stuff Your Boss Anti-casualisation campaign

Initially in NW England, centered around workplace conditions, casual and temp work, homeworking, health and safety at work, workplace bullying, as well as issues around Job Seekers Allowance and Incapacity Benefit.

contact: <stuffyourboss@lists.riseup.net>

or http://lists.riseup.net/www/subscribe/stuffyourboss

or write to: SYB, c/o PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester, M15 5HW to be put in touch with activists in your area

Name:

Address:

Post code:

Tel:

E-mail:

Higher education staff strike for better pay

Lecturers, academics, researchers and support staff from AUT and NATFHE unions staged a one day strike on March 7th. This national day of action also marked the start of an indefinite "action short of a strike" including boycotts of assessments, appraisals and staff cover. The action had been supported by students from the NUS as well.

Universities and colleges across the country had lectures cancelled and many universities saw good levels of attendance among unionised members. The best turnout was reported in some of the Scottish universities where almost all lectures were cancelled and most students didn't cross the picket lines either.

The unions state that the dispute originates from unfulfilled pay and conditions promises. For years university staff salaries have lagged behind in fact dropping in real terms for about 40% in the past 20 years. As one remedy to this situation politicians and bosses introduced highly controversial student top-up fees.

Former Higher Education minister Alan Jonson said in the House of Commons in April 2004 that at least third of the money collected from top-up fees will be used for salaries. Perhaps they meant the salaries of the vice chancellors, who have seen their income soar by 30%, because the staff have only seen increases barely meeting inflation rates.

Bosses seem to have forgotten their earlier claims as well. Dr Geoffrey Copland, Chairman of the Universities and Colleges Employers Association said in May 2005 that "employers have repeatedly made clear that they want to see more money spent on staff, whenever funding allows." Now funding is there, but the will to pay the staff suddenly disappeared.

"Workers voted for the strike action for many reasons", said one striking comrade from Solidarity Federation's Education Workers Network (EWN) from University of Manchester. "The discontent runs much deeper than just pay issues. Universities are facing further commercialisation, privatisation, outsourcing and casualisation of staff. The whole direction of where education is going got over 65% of the staff to vote for strike action, and many more for the action short of a strike".

EWN do not only want to have a bigger slice of the stolen cake, but demand the end of top-up fees which they see as a way to block access to education for many working class students. EWN also argues for the workers to unite in their demands rather than dividing themselves into smaller unions based on craft rather than industry.

If you work in education or are a student, and are interested in Education Workers Network, please contact your nearest Solidarity Federation local.

Anarcho-syndicalism

The Solidarity Federation seeks to create a militant opposition to the bosses and the state, controlled by the workers themselves. Its strategy can apply equally to those in the official trade unions who wish to organise independently of the union bureaucracy and those who wish to set up other types of self-organisation.

Rank and File Control. Decisions should be made collectively. This means they are made by mass meetings, not by officials in union offices. These mass meetings include all those in the workplace, regardless of union membership. It will not, however, include scabs or managers. Anyone we elect to negotiate with management should have a mandate from the workforce that gives them clear guidance on what is and is not acceptable. Mass meetings of workers need to be able to recall all delegates.

Direct Action at work means strikes, go-slows, working-to-rule, occupations and boycotts. We are opposed to the alternative which is 'partnership' with bosses. Workers can only win serious concessions from management when industrial action is used or when bosses fear it might be.

Solidarity with other workers is the key to victory. Workers should support each others' disputes despite the anti-trade union laws. We need to approach other workers directly for their support. 'Don't Cross Picket Lines!'

Control of Funds. Strike funds need to be controlled by the workers themselves. Officials will refuse to fund unlawful solidarity action. Union bureaucrats use official backing and strike pay to turn action on and off like a tap. Unions use a large proportion of their political funds on sponsoring parliamentary candidates. Backing the Labour Party is not in the interests of workers. We should also not fall into the trap of backing so-called 'socialist' candidates. The Parliamentary system is about working class people giving up power and control, not exercising it.

Social Change. The interests of the working class lie in the destruction of capitalist society. The whole of the wealth of society is produced by the workers. However, a portion of this is converted into profits for those who own the means of production. When workers make wage demands, they are simply trying to win a bigger share of what is rightfully their own.

Our ultimate aim is a self-managed, stateless society based on the principle of from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs. It is a society where we are no longer just used as a means to an end by bosses wanting to make money from our labour.

We welcome comments and contributions, contact us at:
Catalyst, c/o The Blackcurrent Centre, 24 St. Michael's Ave., Northampton NN1 4JQ e-mail; catalyst@solfed.org.uk

Mercadona workers strike in Barcelona

The 22nd of April marked the end of the first month of an indefinite strike in Barcelona by workers at the Sant Sadorni d`Anoia logistics centre for the major Spanish Supermarket chain Mercadona.

The dispute began with the sacking of 3 members of the anarcho-syndicalist union CNT and the culmination of a campaign of threats by the company against workers unionising. Even before a strike was declared the company brought in scab workers, attempting to preempt the actions of their own employees. Immediately, the workforce went on strike, initially for 10 days, and has since developed into an indefinite strike.

The demands of the strikers are:

- *The reinstatement of the sacked workers.*
- *Payment for obligatory 30 minute breaks.*
- *Compliance with H&S regulations.*
- *An end to harassment of workers.*
- *Recognition of the CNT and its delegates.*
- *Guarantees of job security.*

There have been daily pickets outside the centre itself, as well as pickets of many Mercadona's 970 stores and other logistics centres such as the one in Valencia by other members of the CNT attempting to spread the strike and more than eleven demonstrations in the centre of Barcelona to raise public awareness of the strike.

Several times the pickets have been violently attacked by the police and Mercadona's private security.

The CNT is appealing for urgent financial help for the strikers, many of whom are migrant workers and as such are in an increasingly vulnerable situation.

Bank details for sending donations are:

· Europe IBAN: ES08 2100 (La Caixa)-1183-35-0100505773

· Rest of the world: BIC (Swift): CAIXESBBXXX 2100 (La Caixa)- 1183-35-0100505773

For more information on the strike see www.cnt.es/mercacoso & barcelona.cnt.es (in Spanish), also see www.iwa-ait.org



Lose the Labour levy

Many on the Left, including those who constantly advised us all to "vote Labour without Illusions", are now convinced that there is no difference between the Tories and the Labour Party, in this, they are wrong. One difference is that the unions still fund New Labour to the tune of millions of pounds.

There are, however, growing signs that trade unionists are growing increasingly angry at handing over their money to such an openly anti-working class party as Labour. In a number of unions, campaigns have been launched aimed at breaking the link with Labour.

If these campaigns prove successful, no doubt the various left wing parties will argue that union political funds should go to them. Such arguments should be ignored. Workers and their unions are quite capable of campaigning for their own political aims. The idea that economic and political struggle can somehow be artificially split is rooted In Intellectual snobbery and patronage. Workers are not stupid and should not be reliant on politicians to do their thinking and act on their behalf.

The working class has only ever made real gains through self-organisation and direct action. That is where our money should be directed, rather than handed over to political parties. The aim of all political parties is to obtain and then keep power. All else is secondary, including the interests of the workers they claim to represent.

Cut out and send to your union HQ

POLITICAL FUND EXEMPTION NOTICE

I hereby give notice that I object to contributing to the Political Fund of the union and am in consequence exempt, in the manner provided by Chapter 6 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (consolidation) Act 1992, from contributing to that fund.

Name:	
Address:	
Union:	Branch:
Membership No:	Payroll No:
Signature:	Date: