Catalyst

Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation - International Workers' Association

MAY 2003 #7

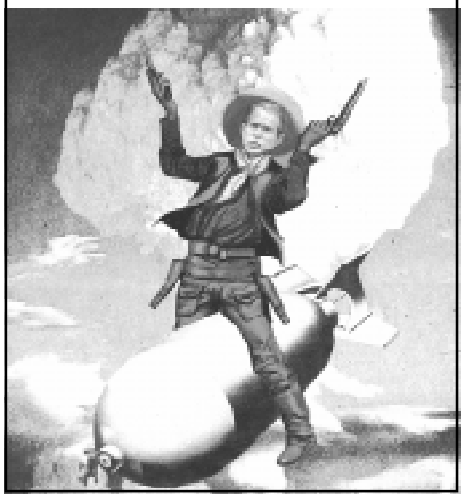
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No more war

Imperialism is back with a vengeance. Before the brutal war against Iraq was even over, the US began issuing threats against Syria - clearly, the US government will not rest until the whole of the Gulf region along with its oil is under American control.

US and British firms are already fighting over the spoils of war. No sooner had Umm Qasr fallen than a bitter dispute broke out between P&O Ferries and US giant Stevedoring Services over who would get the $4.8 million contract for running the port. The contract went to the US firm. So much for the idea of a war of liberation, after which the Iraqi people will be allowed to run their own affairs. It is clear that the US is intent on building an empire in which US military might will make the world safe for US based capitalism. The US will extend its borders across the globe, bringing with it freedom and justice - the same freedom and justice which allows Nike to generate that much profit it was able to pay Michael Jordan $20 billion merely for endorsing its shoes - more than the annual salary of the whole of the Indonesian workforce. The US state plans to bomb its way across the planet - and it must be resisted. However, the campaign against war must be extended to a general fight against capitalism. As we enter the 21st century, imperialist war is set to be the primary means of extending capitalist exploitation. The link between war and the ever growing inequality between rich and poor (both locally and globally) is clear: War is merely a symptom of capitalism . As such, it is only when capitalism is overcome that the brutality that is war will end.



Private pay cuts



The announcement that the Government is to outlaw pay-cuts by private companies when they win public service contracts was greeted with wild enthusiasm by union leaders. John Edmunds cooed, "this agreement shows what can be achieved for British workers when trade unions work together". No doubt the deal will be held up by union leaders as one of the reasons why the union movement should carry on bailing out the Labour Party in the run up to the next election.

Behind all the spin ,the deal is hardly earth shattering. For a start, it only covers local authority employers, it does not cover the National Health Service or Education - the two sectors clearly ear-marked by Labour for privatisation. Also, all it will do is ensure that those employed after a service is transferred will get the same pay and conditions as those workers transferred from the public sector. This will not stop companies eroding the pay and conditions of all workers in the long term.

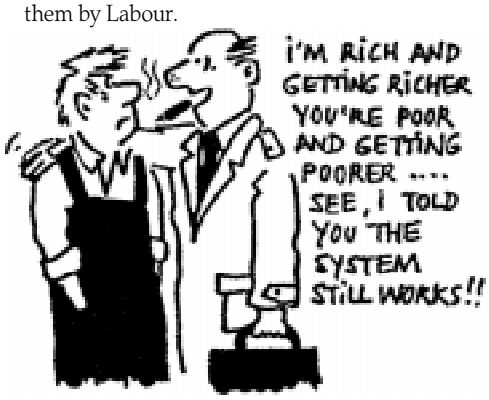
The truth is that the deal represents a massive climb-down by union leaders, who had started by opposing Labour's privatisation plans outright. In return for the deal, they have now accepted further privatisation. As "lefty" Unison leader Dave Prentice said; " we have worked closely with Labour …to ensure that private companies will be prevented from wining contracts by cutting the pay of staff". What happened to outright union opposition to any further privatisation?

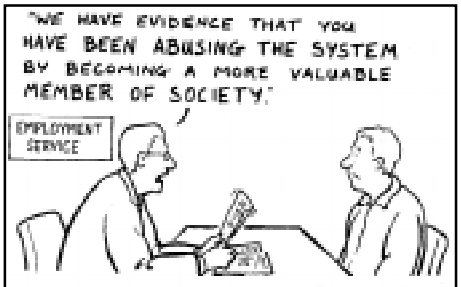
Here is yet another demonstration of the failure of today's unions. Instead of putting themselves at the head of a popular campaign against Labour's privatisation plans, they have settled for this crummy deal, which will do little to ensure decent pay and conditions for workers. Those private companies who take over the running of Foundation hospitals and schools will be allowed to set their own pay and conditions for workers. In short, Governments and union leaders are not to be trusted. Clearly, the end to poverty pay and slavery conditions will only come about through workplace organisation and action. The only people we can trust is ourselves and our fellow workers.

Minimum Wage?

In the war frenzy, and anxious to give the Labour troops some reason for staying in the party, the Government has announced that the minimum wage will rise to a massive £4.50 in October. The fact that this legalised wage slavery was portrayed as "good" news tells us much about effectiveness of the Labour government in bringing about a more equal Britain. There is bags of proof if proof were needed that Government's action against poverty is merely pretence.

In fact, since 1997, the gap between rich and poor accelerated faster than under the Tories. Under Labour, there are now some 1.8 million people earning less than £4.50 an hour. Even more telling is the fact that 1.5 million of these are women - so much for Labour's proud boasts about empowering women. No doubt many people's lives will be dramatically enhanced by promises of a few pence extra handed down to them by Labour.





Voluntary exploitation

Over the past few years, as councils have hived off their duties to the private sector, there has been a substantial growth in the voluntary, charity and community sector. These groups can cover a range of jobs from housing to care, urban regeneration to environmental concerns.

Often, employment depends on the acquisition of grants from various funds. This means that jobs are offered on short-term contracts rarely going beyond three years. It also means that many jobs are part-time. Often, part of the job description is to seek further funding for your own employment. The catch is that, if you do succeed, you may well have to re-apply again as it may have a slightly different job description. This puts all the power in the hands of any management committee you have to work under.

If you try to improve your conditions, they always have the threat of not employing you beyond the end of your contract. It also leads to one of the other major problems, working unpaid extra hours. Workers in this sector rarely get overtime payments. Even though many of the extra hours are worked at unsociable times, evenings and weekends, we are expected to take 'time off in lieu'. The problem is, in small organisations, this proves unfeasible, and the extra hours worked build up to a point where it is impossible to reclaim all the hours owing. Pressure is then applied to the worker who is prevailed upon to donate the extra hours because it is for a good cause. If that doesn't work, then the threat of not being re-employed when your contract ends is used.

It is rare for workers in this sector to be unionised. If so, they are usually the sole person in the organisation who is. Often alone and based in very small workplaces, they can belong to several different unions, the T&G, GMB, UNISON, AMICUS ,etc. What we need is for workers in this sector to get together, across and beyond union organisation, to ensure that basic conditions are met and eventually improved. If anybody wants to get involved in this, contact Catalyst, and we can look towards producing a leaflet especially for workers in this sector and start to connect across workplaces and unions to discuss the best ways of improving our working conditions.

Globalisation on your doorstep:

Slavery Calling

Workers at 34 BT call centres staged protests on Thursday 20th March over the company's plans to axe 2,200 jobs and transfer work to India. The battle goes to the heart of debates over capitalist globalisation. Companies are increasingly turning toward 'outsourcing' many jobs to countries with lower labour costs. Call centres have become an initial flashpoint for workers' anger over the issue.

The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) has rejected the argument that opposing BT's plans will hit Indian workers. It said, "The CWU has no issue with India or Indian workers. Our issue is with BT". BT plans to cut jobs involved with running the '192' directory enquiries service. It wants to transfer work to two call centres in Delhi and Bangalore. Behind the move is a scramble to cut costs and boost profits at the expense of workers everywhere.

The whole idea is driven by the logic of a "race to the bottom" built into the process of capitalist globalisation. As the CWU says; "BT's reasons for wanting to move work to India are almost entirely cost based. The pay of a call centre worker in India is approximately £3,000 per annum."

BT is a hugely profitable company. Its latest figures, for the three months to December 2002, show a £521 million profit, up 37 percent on the previous three months. That's £66 a second. Like every corporation, BT is driven to cut costs in the face of competition, even when it is making obscene record profits.

US corporation The Number has a service based at a Cardiff call centre, while Irish corporation Conduit operates from centres based in Swansea and Cardiff. These firms will undercut BT by making workers work harder for less money, and in some cases, by attacking or refusing union rights. BT's response to such threats is to look for even cheaper labour and move work to India.

It is a myth that most companies can simply switch operations around the globe easily. But in some industries, most obviously those like telecoms, companies can move operations much more easily. The only requirements are stable communications links, and skilled, and in BT's case, English-speaking, workers.

BT does not give a damn for any Indian workers it will employ. They will be told to work often unsociable and long hours at miserable pay. And no matter how hard they work, the instant BT finds it can move to another Indian city or another country where wages are even lower, it will do so. Accepting the logic of BT's plan means workers everywhere buying into a race to the bottom.

The kinds of pressures this leads to are already being felt in British call centres. Hundreds of call centre workers in Thornaby and on Tyneside in north east England have just accepted wage cuts of between 12 and 25 percent to keep their jobs.

Their employer Npower said the alternative was the jobs moving elsewhere. Unfortunately, the workers' Amicus union responded pathetically. "It was two hard choices really," said Amicus official Dave Harrison. "One was lose your job, the other was have a reduction in wages."

But there is another choice. This is to reject the bosses' logic, and instead stand up to the corporations, which are more vulnerable to workers' action than they pretend. The CWU has done this, call centre workers need to ensure that the pressure is kept up.

BT has plenty of money and can be forced to abandon its plans. The threat of seeing its £66 per second profits plummet as workers struck would concentrate the minds of BT's board members wonderfully. Workers can fight for levelling up. Capitalist globalisation faces workers and their unions with a stark choice. Either unite to fight the corporations on this basis or be sacrificed in a race to the bottom.



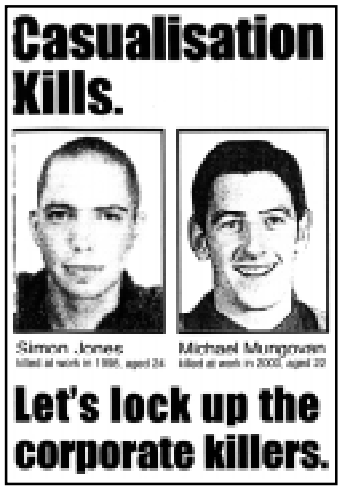


Safety, casualisation and profits:

Off the Rails

Fresh from slaughtering in Iraq, the Labour Party can return once again to the enemy within - namely, the organised working class.

It is only a matter of time before we will see troops on the streets of Britain again - most likely over the firefighters strike. While the Government cannot employ troops against the guards strike on the railways, they are still doing all they can to defeat them. The guards are taking action as a result of rail bosses attempts to undermine their role by taking away the safety aspects of their jobs. The Government, through the strategic rail authority, have responded by guaranteeing to make up any losses the rail companies incur due to the strikes.



The guards strike is important not just because it affects the safety of passengers. The primary role of the guard has historically been to ensure the safe running of the train - a crucial role should a potential accident occur. By taking away the guards' safety role, the bosses hope to be able to do away with the guards altogether in the long run. Currently, the majority of trains cannot move without a guard on board, for safety reasons, but, by transferring the safety aspects of the job to the driver, the guards will be reduced to little more than roving ticket inspectors.

This is the next step in the casualisation of the railways - a process which has seen safety of the railways and rail workers' jobs undermined in order that they can be replaced by untrained contract and agency workers.

This dispute has hardly been helped by the union leaders. When the rail bosses imposed the changes to the guards role, a ballot was held of all guards, which predictably resulted in a massive 5 to 1 majority for strike action. However, union leaders, fearful of falling foul of anti-trade union laws, consulted their solicitors, who argued that the strike may be deemed illegal.

Scared of losing money, the union leaders called the strike off and entered talks with management. The talks dragged on for years, during which time, rail companies have done all they can to undermine the guards' role. It is a reflection of the strength of feeling of the guards that, despite the best efforts of union leaders and management, they are still confident enough to take action.

Let us hope that the guards' fight will be the start of a wider campaign against casualisation. If it is to succeed, such a campaign must involve all those employed on the railways, including contract and agency workers. The aim must be the return of national pay and conditions for all those working on the railways.

Global anti-war actions

Anarcho-syndicalists around the world took part in actions and strikes against the war in Iraq co-ordinated by sections of the International Workers' Association (IWA). While small sections such as the Solidarity Federation could only take part in demonstrations around the country, the larger sections of the IWA could be at the forefront of actions, including the calling of general strikes.



In Italy, the anarcho-syndicalist union USI, along with other rank and file organisations, called a general strike on Thursday 20th March. It was estimated that over one million workers took part in the strike joining marches, demonstrations and blockades that brought many parts of Italy to a standstill.

In Spain, the CNT helped to co-ordinate a general strike on Thursday April 10th bringing many cities to a standstill. In Barcelona, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in a day of protest against the killing in Iraq and the permanent war. Many businesses were closed. Actions were continuing until the late evening.



On the Tube:

From grass roots unionism to workers' control

On 13th February , at a meeting of the Workmates Collective, *a Tube Workers body at a west London Depot, a proposal was carried unanimously by the 150 or so attending to set up a council consisting of a delegate from each gang. Up until then, the collective had been organised by a handful of RMT workplace reps; now, organisation has passed to the newly formed Workmates Council of recallable gang delegates, moving toward a libertarian formation (anarcho-syndicalism) instead.*

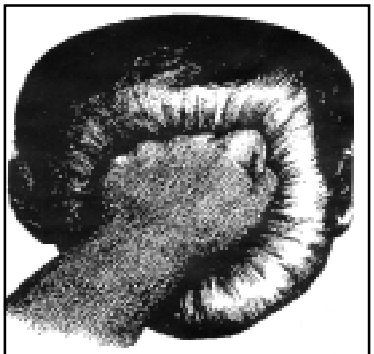
Workmates history

Coming from various engineering departments on the Underground (including track installers, track welders, crossing makers, carpenters, ultrasonic rail testers, track vent cleaning gangs, and lorry drivers), many people work alongside large numbers of barely unionised subcontracted labour.

The collective of 250 plus workers was formed and initially centred around the fight against the prevarication of London Underground (PPP) over the last 5 years, with the agency workers showing their LUL workmates the utmost loyalty during various strikes. The pace was set early on with agency track installers/welders, some of whom had been Yorkshire and Kent miners, and has been maintained ever since. Solidarity was also extended in dealing with health & safety issues affecting staff and agency workers alike, often resulting in mass "refusals to work on the grounds of health & safety" when necessary.

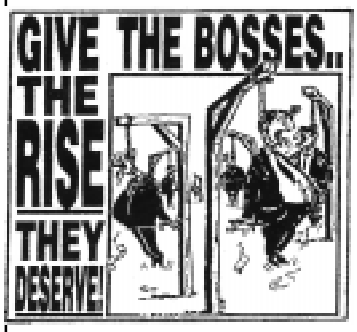
At the time of writing, the various gangs are going through the process of nominating their delegates, with initial delegates meetings to form the council. A number of gangs have already nominated a delegate, and everything is said to look on "track"*(!).*

We at Catalyst extend fraternal greetings and solidarity to the Workmates Collective.



Bullyboys

Bullying at work is no joke; it can lead to stress, anxiety, depression, even suicide. In short, it makes people's lives hell. It is all the more disgusting then that within the GMB the bullying of union employees is apparently rife. Over the last 6 years, the GMB has spent £4m on 61 tribunal cases involving allegations of bullying and intimidation. Many of the cases have been bought against the union's powerful regional secretaries, including two candidates for top dog John Edmund's job. The mentality of the morons who run the union are summed up by the decision of Yorkshire leader J Nelson, who dropped the union logo because it was not 'hard' enough, and replaced it with a badge with eagles wings on each side of it. In response, the union is proposing better management training. A better idea would be to get rid of these obnoxious bureaucrats and replace them with a workplace-based organisation. A democratic union based on recallable delegates does not need bloated, overpaid officialdom.



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

Politicians attack striking workers



They talk about democracy in Iraq whilst doing their best to stifle it at home.

Politicians from both the main parties attacked the Fire Brigades Union when scheduled industrial action seemed likely to coincide with final preparations for war. The Labour Government revealed it is considering legislation that would make strikes by fire fighters illegal, whilst the Tories denounced the union as friends of Saddam Hussein. In reality, criticising the FBU was an attempt to damage the union's widespread public support. Such language betrays the contempt in which organised workers are held by the ruling elite. The hate screamed by the state and the press at any group of workers daring to hold its own political views may seem vicious, but it is justified by the logic of war. In war you are either a patriot or a traitor.

An organised body of workers poses not only an immediate economic threat, but also carries the potential to seriously disrupt 'order'. Capitalism demands that everybody meekly do what they are told in the interests of the rich. At a time of war, this means risking your life for the state. Anyone who believes that the war is about freeing the Iraqi people is hopelessly mistaken - it is a war for oil, profit and power, simply to keep the rich rich.

Capitalism is a fragile economic system, and so, capitalists take threats to its stability seriously. Throughout modern industrial history, workers have used direct action to secure great advances for themselves, their families and their communities. During the First World War, Glasgow workers threatened a general strike on the Clyde when the local Sheriff was asked by landlords to arrest the wages of rent-striking shipyard workers. The powerful landlords in the city had colluded to raise rents to profit from the influx of people seeking work in the munitions factories. The state was so scared of an industrial strike during wartime that it introduced controls restricting rents to affordable levels, a policy which was to last right up until 1989, when it was abolished by Thatcher. The Clydeside workers would doubtless have been condemned as traitors in their day, but their action brought about a great improvement in the lives of millions.

Direct action for political ends swiftly exposes poorly concealed divisions between the nation's political leadership and ordinary working people. To shy away from such confrontation is to accept the agenda of the state and capitalism and to defer to the structure in which us workers invariably lose out. By creating time and space where we can meet, plan and co-ordinate our struggles, we can intensify our offensive on the system that causes us, our families and our communities perpetual misery.

The friends of Saddam are not the workers who organise to improve their families lives, but the companies that armed him and the states that supported him. The real enemies of democracy aren't just in Baghdad, they are also in London.

Bristol Anti-Casualisation Campaign

Casual Times - casualisation freesheet available from BACC, Box 43, 82 Colston St, Bristol BS1 5BB.

SolFed: FREE info - solidarity - support

Are you having trouble at work? Problem boss? Friendly, no-hassle advice and support from; SF, PO Box 469, Preston PR1 8XF - we will put you in touch with someone locally and/or in the same kind of work who can help.

Translators needed

As part of our ongoing anti-casualisation campaign, Solidarity Federation is looking for willing multi-linguists to help translate anti-casualisation leaflets and advice into various languages, to help reach more racial minority sectors across Britain. If you can help, please contact SF, SW PDO, PO Box 29, Manchester M15 5HW. Tel. 07984 675281. Email sf@manchestersf.org.uk

DA SUMMER 2003: EVIL EMPIRES

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