Catalyst

Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation - International Workers' Association

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It's time to stop paying for pain



Editorial

The "historic" decision by the RMT to allow Branches to financially support other parties has certainly upset the Labour party, which is dependent on union money for its survival. Given that it looks certain that Scottish RMT branches will vote to support the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) at the next election there is now every chance that the RMT - one of the founders of the Labour Party - will finally cut its links with Labour.

The decision has been welcomed by people across the union movement and will only fuel the groundswell of feeling amongst many unions to follow the RMT example. Here at *Catalyst*, we view unions paying funds to Labour as the equivalent to paying someone to beat you up. However, while we welcome moves to cut the link with Labour, we are concerned about where the union money will otherwise end up.

In the RMT, a lot of effort has gone into trying to stop union money going to Labour, but little thought has been given to what else to do with it. At the RMT conference, amid the uproar at dumping Labour union money, it was promised to just about anyone, from Ken Livingstone to George Galloway - just as long as they were not New Labour.

The danger is that the union money will simply end up funding yet another "left" party, such as the SWP or The Socialist Party (the militant tendency). The unions built the Labour Party as a means of helping workers, only to end up one hundred or so years later with the current cold shower in the form of the Blair government.

Do we really want to repeat the same mistakes again? For years, the Socialist Party (then Militant) argued that we should change Labour from within; now they are saying that the unions can no longer use their affiliation to influence Labour Governments. In fact, even a cursory look at past Labour governments demonstrates that, once in power, Labour always acts in its own interests and not the unions or the working class. This is not because the odd Labour Party leadership sold out the workers; it is because of the very nature of political parties.

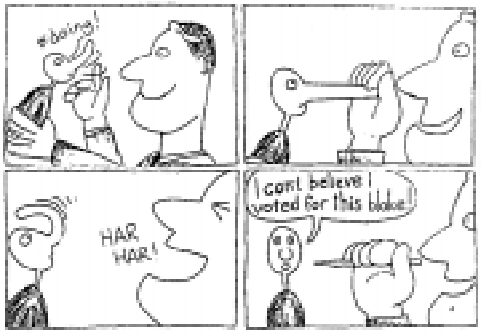
Political parties exist outside of the economic day-to-day struggle of the working class. They are elite organisations that claim unions should limit themselves to economic struggles such as pay and conditions, and leave the politics to the more sophisticated politicians. This is deeply insulting to the rest of us, but that isn't the worst of it. Time and again, from the Bolsheviks in Russia to the Labour Party here, we have seen that, once in power, politicians of any ilk start acting in their own interests, primarily by ignoring the interests of the working class and pandering to anything which might help them get re-elected or, better still, promoted.

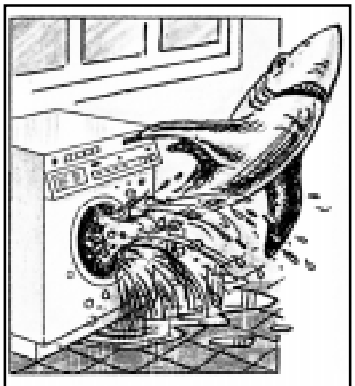
Why do we need politicians?

We don't. In fact, they are the last thing we need. The failure of the union movement in Britain is that they have left politics to politicians instead of constantly fighting for political alternatives as well as economic gains. They got by in the boom years of the 1960s, but when capitalism goes into slump, real political alternatives are needed. Without them, the unions are left stranded or, worse still, helping to impose bosses cuts in order to keep companies afloat.

The millions of pounds of members' money should not go to the politicians. It should be used to help organise resistance to capitalism. Why is it that union members taking strike action have to rely on donations when the unions are awash with money? This is just one use - there is a desperate need for money to help workers in all sorts of ways to take action against the bosses. Support, solidarity, literature, organising, direct actions – all are easier and more effective if funds are made available.

The crucial reason why the unions have no imagination about using the political funds themselves is that they have yet to come to terms with the fact that the day-to-day struggle is part of the wider struggle for a better world. Workers' organisations have to be overtly political - the struggle for a better future is the task of the workers ourselves, and cannot be left to any politicians, however 'socialist' they sound.





Poverty gap widens under Labour

Remember the Tories looking after the rich at the expense of the poor? Remember the jubilation when the Labour Government was finally elected in 1997? Remember all the promises? Well, the latest research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies says the total poverty gap - the total income by which families fall short of the poverty line - has increased under Labour.

The report concludes that children who live in the poorest UK households have less of a chance of escaping poverty than when Labour came to power. Yet, child poverty is one of Labour's key targets, and has been at the heart of the political agenda since 1999.

Although some poor families have benefited, it is the rich who have benefited more. According to government surveys, 1.1 million children live in households with less than 40% of the national average income. Four out of 10 of these children live in households that do not receive any of the main means-tested benefits - even though they may be entitled to claim.

More and more people are being forced in to minimum wage jobs that are casual, temporary and often part-time. It is these in low-paid minimum wage jobs that are stuck in the poverty trap between benefits and a decent wage.

So, for all their talk, this government has failed abysmally to tackle poverty. Their policies benefit the rich at the expense of the poor - and they are set to continue to do so.

Direct action gets the goods

Who says the wildcat strike is dead? When British Airways check-in staff promptly walked out in July, after management sought to impose a swipe card-based clocking-on system, they proved the power of the unofficial action.

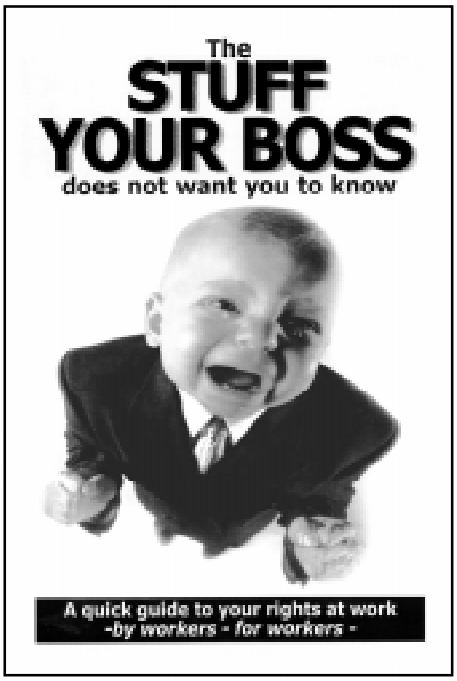
The workers were, of course, right to be sceptical about the bosses' motives. The new "big brother" system would be used to monitor working hours, so bosses could even start sending people home during quiet periods, without pay. This would particularly affect the mainly women workers' ability to manage family commitments around working hours. Already, many are forced to do 'tarmac transfers', passing children between partners at shift changes. This is only possible if people know their shift patterns 3 months in advance, as at present. Check-in workers only earn £200-240 per week, so paying for child care is not really an option.

The mainstream media gave their usual sympathetic opinion that the action was not only illegal, but counter-productive. Little mention was made of BA's £1.8 billion of reserves and £136 million profit in the last financial year, all from exploiting BA workers.

The unofficial action demonstrated the power and bravery of the check-out workers. It led to 360 flights being cancelled, and about 80,000 passengers delayed, not to mention tens of millions of pounds in costs for BA. The strike ended when the unions and BA agreed that the swipe card introduction would be delayed until September, following further consultation.

The role of the trade union leaders during the strike was, of course, appalling. However, the workers are talking of further action, if negotiations do not go according to plan. Having got their fingers burnt this time, maybe BA will be more circumspect when it comes to future negotiations. Or maybe the profits to be made through the new clocking-on system will outweigh their fear of further strike action.

Only direct action by the workers themselves will ensure success; it was the so-called 'illegal' worker-controlled walk-out which worked last time – and it will be a similar worker-controlled action which will work next time.



The newly updated "stuff your boss" leaflet on basic work rights - get free copies from:
SolFed, PO Box 1095, Sheffield S2 4YR.
solfed@solfed.org.uk

Sparks of anger

Since May, there have been daily pickets outside the prestigious Piccadilly Gardens development in Manchester. The action began when four electricians were sacked by the contractor DAF Electrical for forming a branch of the TGWU/EPIU and insisting on their right to direct employment. There were seven further dismissals as other electricians took unofficial strike action in solidarity.

DAF have used the terms of the JIB (Joint Industry Board for the Electrical Contracting Industry) to justify the sackings. This body represents Britain's longest running 'sweetheart deal', under which the employers pay workers' dues direct to the union (originally the EETPU, but now, through a series of mergers, Amicus). As such, no other unions are recognised.

Meanwhile, the sacked electricians' work is being handled by unskilled labourers, which itself is a breach of JIB regulations. So too are the pay (£5/hour v. £7.10 JIB rate) and out of town allowances (£5/day plus sleeping bag v. the £28 JIB rate for B&B) that DAF is paying their scabs. As usual, employers break agreements with impunity while union officials look the other way. In a similar vein, it was the sacked men, not Amicus officials, who forced a reluctant Health and Safety Executive into investigating DAF's unsafe working practices. The use of low paid unskilled workers to do electrical and other such potentially hazardous work is an increasingly widespread feature in the construction industry, and partly explains the currently rocketing death and accident toll.

The T&G eventually gave this dispute official backing in early July and is representing the workers through the industrial tribunal process. To contribute to the fighting fund, send cheques, payable to 'A. Jones', to: Mr S. Acheson, 13 Thompson Close, Danebank, Denton M34 2PQ. Tel. 07813 456831. For further details on the strike and on the JIB sweetheart deal, see the next issue of *Direct Action*, due out in September.

Problems at work

No.6: Legal update



In August, new European regulations came into force to clarify and strengthen the Working Time Regulations (WTR). These introduced limits on working hours for the first time in the UK.

The WTR gave most UK workers seven basic rights, including rights to paid holidays and a ceiling on the maximum average working week. But the initial legislation allowed some temporary exemptions where employers in certain sectors argued that they needed time to comply with the law. It has also left an opt-out clause that gives workers the 'choice' to work longer hours.

The basic rights and protections that the Regulations provide are:

- a limit to 48 hours a week which a worker can be required to work (though workers can choose to work more if they want to).
- a limit of an average of 8 hours work in 24 which nightworkers can be required to work.
- a right for night workers to receive free health assessments.
- a right to 11 hours rest a day.
- a right to a day off each week.
- a right to an in-work rest break if the working day is longer than six hours.
- a right to four weeks paid leave per year.

Although this is good news for some workers who have had no protection from excessive working days, it's unfortunate that junior doctors, workers in the North Sea, and transport staff have had to wait five years longer than most for these rights.

Now, this seems all very good, but the problem is that there is also no guarantee that workers will see the benefits of the new protections. Under the UK opt-out to the working time rules, it is far too easy for employers to pressure staff to work more than 48 hours a week.

Britain has the dubious honour of topping the league in Europe with the longest average working week, 43.6 hours compared with an EU average of 40.3 hours. Most European countries have set their working time limits below 48 hours, and the UK is the only EU country still with an opt-out.

The European Commission will debate this later in the year, but already the bosses have been pushing the government for employees to be allowed to work more than 48 hours in a week. They fear that removing employees' right to opt out of the European Working Time Directive could be 'catastrophic' for business, or, in other words, for their profit margins.

The CBI Director general, Digby Jones has claimed the opt-out was needed for a "flexible labour market" (workers doing more for less) and that workers "don't want unions and politicians telling them when they can work or for how long" (but apparently the bosses can).

Given the unequal relationship between the employers and the workforce this is nonsense. The government's own statistics suggest that many employees want to spend less time at the office, even if fewer hours mean less money. Many workers simply don't get a choice whether or not to work long hours and bosses seem obsessed with making workers accept long hours in many industries.

Pressure is exerted in many ways and a lot of workers feel bullied into staying late. For others, the workplace culture means that leaving on time is seen as "letting the team down." What we do know is that working long hours can lead to unnecessary stress, and people with excessive days are more likely to have accidents at work.

The bosses are adept at picking people off one by one so the only way to bring to an end the culture of more hours for less pay is by sticking together and resisting collectively. Don't be pressured into working longer hours; it benefits no-one but the bosses.

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

Healthy outcomes

Health workers in Bolton and London have won important victories against the private hospitals group, ISS Mediclean.

After a series of strikes in London, workers at Whipps Cross Hospital forced a climb-down by the multinational's management over the imposition of pay and a two-tier work system (where those joining from the NHS had better contracts than those joining after privatisation).

Meanwhile, in Bolton, workers at Royal Bolton Hospital forced yet another back-down by ISS. After 12 days of strikes spread across four weeks, management were forced to increase pay to £5.33 per hour, with night shift workers getting time and a third, and sickness benefit to be paid from day one instead of after three days. This is a major setback to private sector healthcare companies, who have sought to capitalise on casualisation in order to turn a healthy profit from undermining basic workers rights.

It just goes to show that even the most hard-nosed companies, when faced with indomitable strike action, can be forced into humiliation. They are delighted with endless negotiations, teamworking and lobbying, because they can manage them, but they can't manage a load of people getting themselves together and walking off the job in protest. As always, direct action gets the goods! Meanwhile, the health sector trade unions are so institutionalised that they refuse to support any such real action for health workers.

Tomorrow's killers

The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulationscome into force on 21 May 2004, but it is already too late for the estimated 10,000 Britons per year who are expected to die from asbestos-related diseases within the next 25 years. Already, insurance firms are setting aside funds in anticipation of claims. Equitas, set up to reinsure Lloyds of London, has set aside £3.2 billion, while Royal Sun Alliance is reported to have asbestos reserves of £800 million.

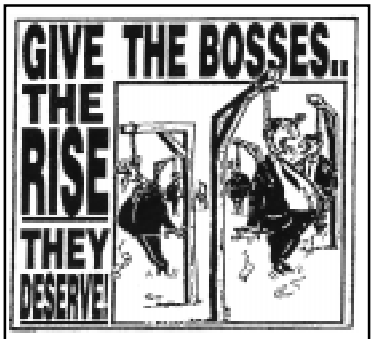
While money cannot bring people back or end suffering, companies must be made to pay for the mass slaughter they have knowingly been complicit in causing. If you have worked where you could have been exposed to asbestos, or you know someone in this position, for further information and advice, you can contact the Greater Manchester Asbestos Victims Support Group, c/o GMHC, 23 Mount St, Manchester M4 4BE. asbestos.gmavsg@virgin.net

New Labour bitter?

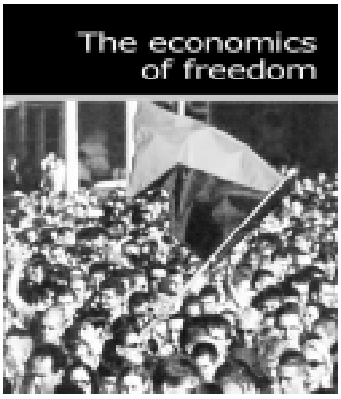
A German Tory politician has upset the elderly, saying that they should not be a burden on the German health service by getting hip replacements. Philipp Missfelder of the CDU said: "In the past, people used to walk on crutches, so why can't they do the same now? Obviously, the Germans have learned something from the British NHS, where thousands of elderly people are forced to wait in queues on their crutches for years, waiting for hips.

Rent boys

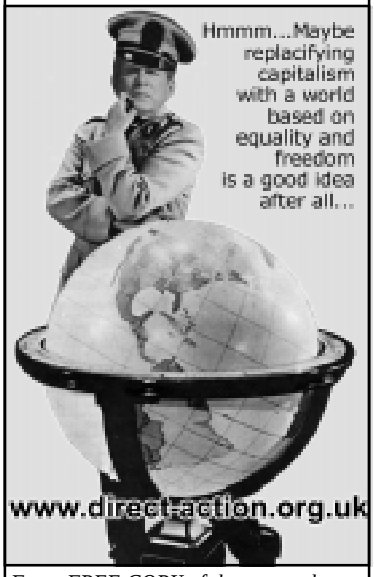
The world famous architect Daniel Lipeskind (designer of the imperial War Museum in Manchester) has won the competition for the new building to replace New York's twin towers. Unfortunately, his victory is already rather hollow. Incorporated into the design was a sunken memorial to those who were killed in the 9/11 tragedy. However, the property magnate who owns the lease to the site has opposed the memorial on the grounds that it will reduce the office space available in the building, and so reduce his rental income.



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



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Democracy from the bottom up - no party politicians, corporate managers or union leaders. What might a future, decent economy look like? Here's how it could work. £2.50 (payable to Solidarity Federation) from SolFed, PO Box 1095, Sheffield S2 4YR.



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Boil-in-the-bag drivers

The recent train drivers union (ASLEF) leadership election was a shock to many rail union activists.

It had been thought that the current leader, Mick Rix would walk it, so he hardly bothered to campaign. Shaun Brady was seen as a right-wing Neanderthal no-hoper who had only managed to gain the support of a handful of branches compared with Rix, who had the backing of over 80 branches. While Rix sat on his backside, Brady got out and about with his populist arguments, ranging from anti-political-correctness to opposition to asylum seekers.

To many, the real shock was not that Rix got defeated, but that so many drivers ignored their branches and voted for the likes of Brady. This can be partly explained by the fact that, like many unions, ASLEF is moribund and isolated from the workplace, even at branch level. Also, there is the fact of the nature of ASLEF as a craft union, which means it has always sought to preserve and further the sectarian interests of drivers, often with little regard for other rail workers. This elitism within ASLEF is merely a reflection of those drivers who see themselves as a skilled group, above other rail workers.

The hierarchical mindset means some drivers are willing to take action to defend and preserve their own immediate interests, while showing little interest in the problems and struggles of other rail workers. As new technology has effectively de-skilled the craft status of drivers, this conservatism has become even more entrenched, as they have sought to preserve their status in a changing world. Hence, we have the situation where many drivers have opposed the idea that guards can become drivers, on the grounds that they had only had to undergo a short training course. Not only did they pour cold water on these so-called "boil-in-the-bag drivers" (ready in twenty minutes), they were also openly hostile to the idea of women becoming drivers. It is precisely this conservatism that Brady's campaign of putting drivers' economic interests first and ridding the union of "trendy" lefty politics, appealed to.


"See? Keep the light in their eyes and you can bag them without any trouble at all"

Here at *Catalyst*, we have argued that reactionary ideas should be challenged and defeated. It was the failure of Rix to challenge and overcome such reactionism that led to his downfall. ASLEF's sectionalism stands in the way of building a workplace organisation aimed at uniting all workers in opposition to the attacks of a boss class currently in full cry. Craft unionism and the elitism that underpins it has been a thorn in trade unionism's side for centuries; it is high time it was pulled out and discarded, and ASLEF along with it.

How anarchists are different

What anarchists say:	NO to:	YES to:
	Party politics	Workers and community direct democracy
	Governments and rulers	Mutual aid and equality for all
	Leaders	Co-operation not competition
	Exploiters	
	Inequality	

What everyone else says:	NO to:	YES to:
	Workers and community direct democracy	Party politics
	Mutual aid and equality for all	Governments and rulers
	Co-operation not competition	Leaders
		Exploiters
		Inequality