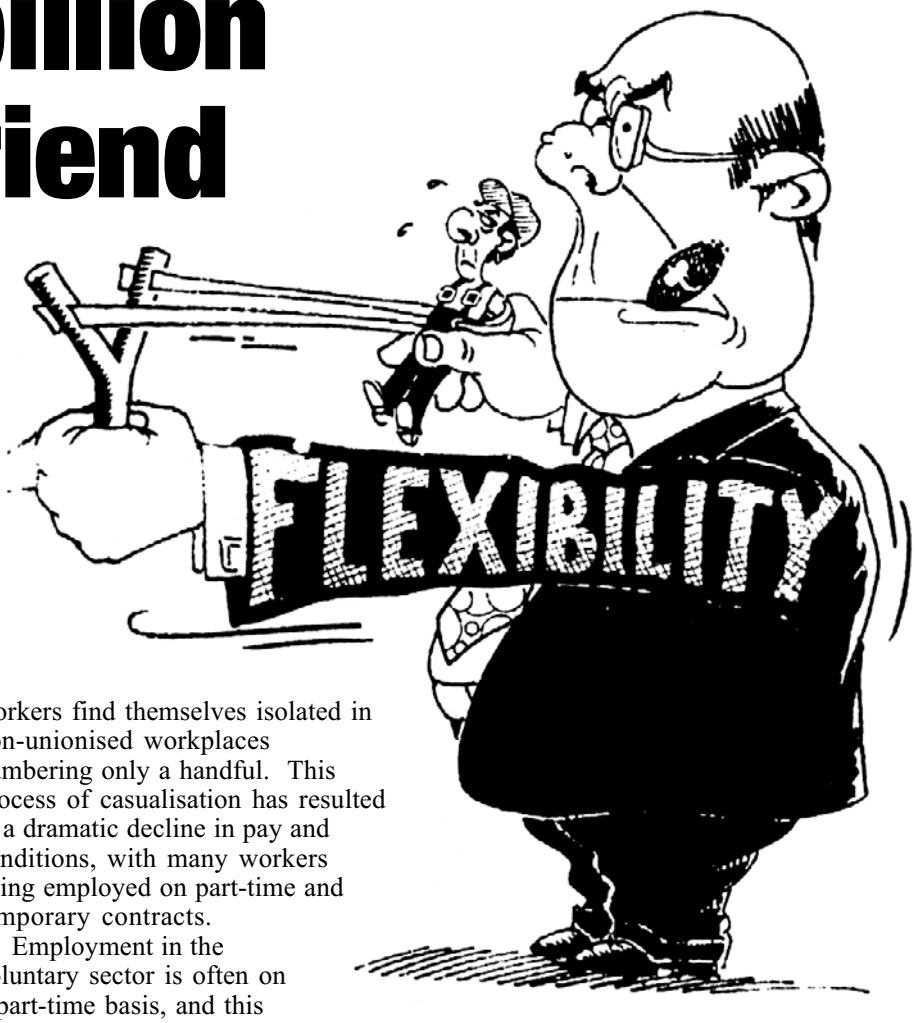
Catalyst
Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation - International Workers' Association
Spring 2004 #9

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The £23 billion flexible friend



The welfare state was introduced largely at the behest of capitalism to ensure a healthy and educated workforce. Its origins date back to the Boer War when the army recruits were in such poor health they were unfit to fight. Since then, things have changed. Large sections of the working class are now surplus to the needs of capitalism, so the capitalist state no longer cares so much about our health, education and welfare.

Consequently, the Government is now withdrawing from many areas of welfare provision and handing responsibility over to charities, religious groups and the voluntary sector. This brave new world is the US model, where those in well-paid jobs have private schooling and health provision, while the low-paid and unemployed are left to under-funded public sector provision and whatever handouts the voluntary sector provides. In some US cities, health provision has been handed over wholesale to right-wing fundamentalist Christian groups.

It is not only those who need services who suffer; there are also major implications for those who work in the public sector. As the government and local authorities retreat from welfare provision, many people who worked for local government have moved into the voluntary sector as their posts have disappeared. Those who would have found employment as council workers now find themselves employed by a charity run by a board of trustees.

Local government was one of the most widely unionised areas of work. Even if you worked in a small office or depot you were linked to hundreds of other workers in the same town and across the country. Now, by and large, workers find themselves isolated in non-unionised workplaces numbering only a handful. This process of casualisation has resulted in a dramatic decline in pay and conditions, with many workers being employed on part-time and temporary contracts.

Employment in the voluntary sector is often on a part-time basis, and this has led to a sharp decline in income, as workers no longer get enhanced rates and overtime payments for anti-social hours. This is usually replaced by time off in lieu (TOIL). Because the voluntary sector works on a shoestring with the minimum of staff, taking TOIL becomes a near impossible task, as hours are forgotten or unable to be taken due to the daily pressure of workload. This affects even larger organisations with lots of small offices dotted around the country. Furthermore, while voluntary sector bosses don't get fat profits they do draw enormous wages, which is just profit by another name.

Casualisation amongst welfare workers is reflected in a recent TUC survey that found British workers currently do £23 billion of unpaid overtime per year. This is money saved by the state by handing over welfare provision, which is instead borne by voluntary sector workers. The whole ethos of the sector is based on the idea that staff 'donate' their time to help out the less fortunate. This puts tremendous pressure on staff to not take hours owed or to take on extra unpaid work.

Workers in this sector need to organise. A good starting point is around Health & Safety. It is one of the few areas under British law that provides some protection. As a first step in redressing the power between workers and management we can begin to raise basic H&S issues as a means of initiating collective organising in the workplace. Joining a union can help in this, but we also need to network together with others who work for the same organisations as well as those working in similar work both nationally and locally.

Asbestos rip-off

The plight of those suffering from asbestos related diseases is going from bad to worse (see previous Catalysts). First, Turner & Newall (T&N), once one of the biggest global asbestos companies, went into voluntary liquidation to avoid paying out compensation to asbestos victims. Then Kroll, the firm administrating T&N, started charging over £460 per hour for their services (so far their bills is £23 million). Meanwhile, the US administrators have been charging $75 million a year.

Whilst this legalised robbery has been going on, the asbestos victims have got nothing. Last November, a protest took place outside the Manchester offices of Kroll, who were asked to make a donation to the victims out of their fat profits. After a long wait the Northern Victims Support Group (NVSG) received a letter saying they were not prepared to make a donation. Currently, 4,000 people per year are dying from asbestos-related diseases and this is set to rise to 10,000 a year. The longer the crooks keep creaming off the cash and delaying compensation, the more innocent victims die never having seen justice – for the living, the fight for compensation is urgent.

The Northern Victims Support Group can be contacted on 0161 953 4027



Storm in a teacup

Knowsley Housing Trust recently attempted to withdraw their workers' rights to a tea break. Workers were asked to leave the works canteen by the Assistant Depot Manager. When they refused, three of the men were made the subject of a disciplinary investigation. In a show of solidarity, all the workers (even those who had been out working) returned to the canteen in an organised mass tea break. The mass disobedience went ahead despite management threats that anyone taking a break would get disciplinary action. Faced with the united response management were forced to back down and reinstate the workers' right for a morning tea break. By the time the official union representatives arrived, the workers' imaginative direct action had already won the dispute.

Scab union scam

Lawyers are getting their hands on a large slice of the £2b of state funds set aside to compensate miners suffering from industrially related disease.

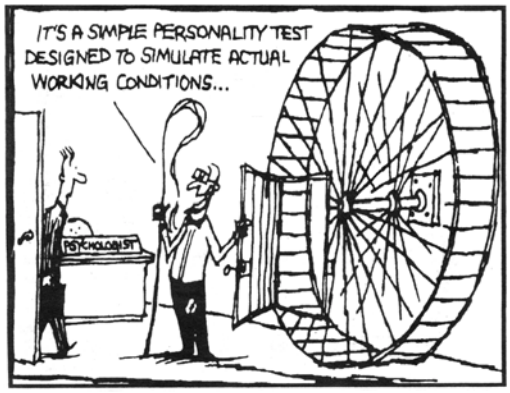
The payout to individual miners is already pitifully low but is seems that lawyers who already receive millions in "handling" payments from the government are still charging miners up to 20% of their settlement for administering the claims.

And it is not only lawyers who are robbing chronically ill workers. Leaders of the scab union, the UDM, have become the best-paid trade union bosses in Britain also by cheating miners out of their full compensation. The UDM have set up a front company called Vendside to handle the miners' claims. As a result, many miners do not even realise that their compensation claims have been processed by the despised UDM.

The extent that the UDM is ripping off miners can be gauged from the fact that the UDM's General Secretary Neil Greatrex, receives a massive wage of over £150,000 a year while compensation payments to miners can be as little as £1,800 and out of this measly amount a large cut goes to fund the lifestyle of the lawyers and UDM officials.

Unlike the larger mining unions, the NUM and Nacods, the UDM has been allowed by the DTI to pursue legal claims directly on behalf of former miners, through an exclusive handling agreement with the Government. Under the terms of the agreement, the union receives a lower payment for each claim that it processes than the solicitors of other claimants, but in return is allowed to charge up to £587.50 to successful claimants.

The Labour Government clearly has a soft spot for the scab union and has allowed the UDM to gain massive financial benefit from a compensation scheme meant for the miners. In 2001, Vendside's gross profit was just over £6m. Up to November 2003, the company had received £26.5m from the Government in legal fees as part of the miners' compensation schemes.



Missing the last train

If you want an example of how not to organise at work, look no further than ASLEF, the train drivers' union.

In *Cat8*, we reported on the election of Shaun Brady as leader – since then he has threatened to sack staff working at ASLEF head office and replace them with non-union labour. Why? Because they had voted to strike over bullying by none other than Brady himself. It is all part of the bitter ASLEF turf war between the "left" faction led by ex-leader Brian Rix and Brady's "right" faction (actually orchestrated by Adams).

Typically, the socialist left will urge the trade union movement to rally together to oust the odious Brady. However, a change of leadership will do little to stem ASLEF's steady decline and rightwards drift. During his supposed 'left' term, Rix pursued the usual sectional drivers' interests to the detriment of other railworkers and was quite happy cosy up to management. After all, he signed up to an EEPTU deal with Railfreight that at a stroke derecognised the majority of the non-driver RMT workforce. It took strike action by RMT members to win back union recognition.

The root cause of ASLEF's problems lies not in its "right-wing" leadership, but in its fundamental craft elitism that divorces it from the rest of the workforce. All workers must work together and present a united front against management. A campaign aimed at breaking down divisions between workers, with open meetings through which common aims and demands can be developed, would be far more constructive than wasting energy on "left" wing leaders who, once elected, quickly abandon their pretend principles. This openness must also extend to the casual contract labour that now represents a large minority of rail workers, who are invariably on low pay and poor conditions that potentially risk the health and safety of all rail workers.



Problems at work

No. 7: Women's work - next year's news



The government is set to introduce yet more measures aimed at "empowering" women – which actually means in this case, forcing them to take low paid jobs.

From October 2005, lone parents on income support with children over 14 years old will be forced to attend "work-focused" interviews every 3 months. This is a blatant attempt by Labour to intimidate single parents into pointless shitty jobs. Alongside this, the government also announced that lone parents will have to complete a "compulsory action plan", part of which will include applying for any jobs on offer. These draconian measures are designed in the longer term to force single parents to take on any "suitable job" or lose their benefit.

By forcing lone parents into work, the Government is allowing capitalism to continue to drive down wages to the point where workers would not do the work unless the Government forced them to. The result will be even more inequality within society – one of the most shameful blots on their record since 1997 is the ever-widening wealth gap, which exposes their anti-social credentials. In the case of lone parents, the overwhelming majority of which are women, it can only add to the appalling inequality we already experience. Not to mention that fact that it simply adds to the already enormous pressure placed on women trying to raise a family in difficult conditions on a low income.

The unions apparently don't care much about the growing number of people forced to get by on poverty wages. This speaks volumes about the detachment of the unions from a whole sector of the working class. Contrast this with the CNT (the anarcho-syndicalist union in Spain). Instead of having fancy offices staffed by overpaid union bureaucrats on big expense accounts, the CNT locates its offices in working class areas, and they are staffed by union activists on a voluntary basis. Through this means, the CNT is part of the working class community and a focal point for local campaigns against low pay. It also gives people the support and confidence to resist state intimidation aimed at forcing people into low paid jobs in the first place. It is this form of fighting union that we at *Catalyst* want to see established in Britain, as an alternative to the more dead-head unions we have to suffer at present.

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

Kasual Killing

Nothing demonstrates the both the inequity rife in Blair's Britain and the true blight of of "asylum" seekers than the death of a 47-year-old man in a basement rubbish room of the Café Royal in London. For two years, while the rich dined in opulent splendour upstairs he lived in the bowels of the hotel behind the bins.

When his naked and badly bruised body was discovered, police first thought he had been murdered, before it was established that he lived naked due to the heat generated by the basement boilers and a post-mortem found that his injuries were consistent with a fall. The man had been an immigrant worker employed by an agency – one of thousands without papers who are forced to work for a pittance in hotels across London.

A House of Lords report recently described such workers as a new "ethnic underclass". However, its findings will never be acted upon because the Government knows such workers undertake all the cheap, menial and dirty jobs, without which central London would grind to an expensive halt. Unregulated and hidden from view, these workers are forced to work in appallingly unsafe conditions for poverty pay. The sad lonely death of a man far from his home underlines the reality; market-driven casualisation continues to kill and always will – until we stand together for real change.

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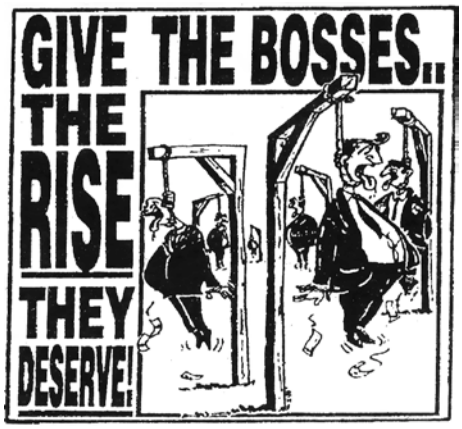
Norwich Union Job losses

It was recently announced that the UK's largest insurer Norwich Union (a member of the Aviva Group) is to offshore and centralise its operations, causing 2,500 job losses.

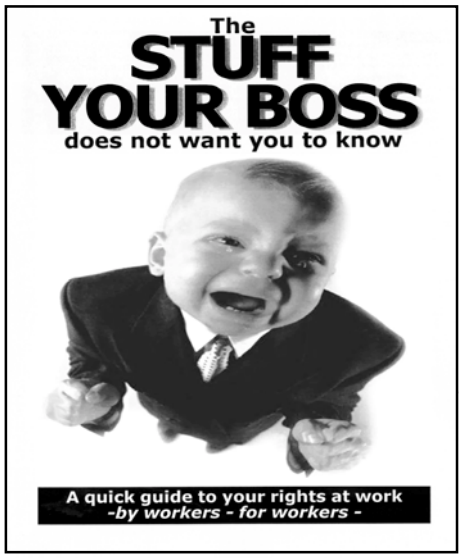
Norwich Union is just one of a number of companies making these changes - others include BT, British Airways and the HSBC bank. Abbey (formally Abbey National) has also announced a further 400 job losses in the UK. It has been predicted that up to 2 million financial sector jobs will be exported from the UK over the next 5 years.

Locally, the effects will be devastating. For example, of the 2,500 job losses, 350 will be lost at the Norwich Union call centre in Preston. This centre currently services insurance policies which include Age Concern, NUT, ATL and Shell. These job losses came as a great shock to the staff at Preston as just over a year ago Norwich Union spent in excess of £2 million refurbishing their offices. The business from the claims department is being moved to offices in India. 56% of the Preston staff have been employed for less than 2 years and, as a result, will not receive any form of redundancy payment. Also, they have been informed that they will have to remain in employment until the end of March to receive their annual bonus - any staff who leave before this date will not be entitled to anything.





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

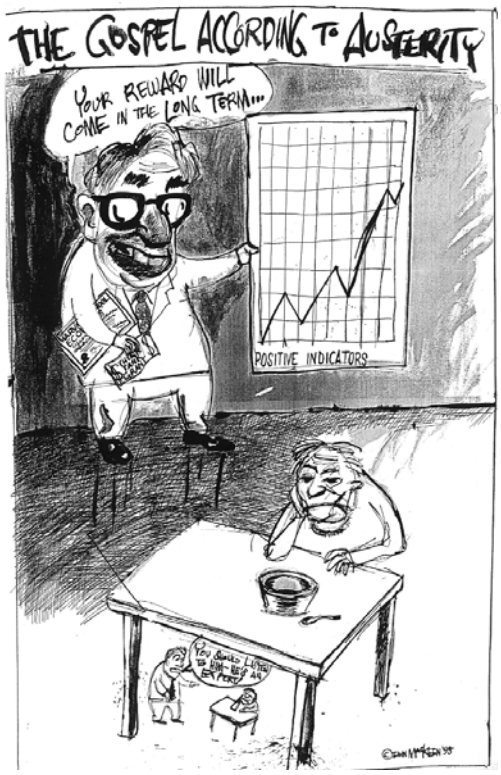


The newly updated "stuff your boss" leaflet on basic work rights - get free copies from:
SolFed, PO Box 1095, Sheffield S2 4YR.
solfed@solfed.org.uk

No more waiting for weighting

Local government workers in London are currently fighting for a much-needed increase in London weighting. What with crazy house prices and rents, we simply have to get decent pay.

So far, the dispute has been under union leadership control. It has been 100% lawful and official - hence we have not yet achieved victory. We need to increase the pressure on the employers and try to win, and win quickly. This means organising solidarity actions, even if this does not have the official approval of union leaders. The first step is GMB and TGWU members not crossing UNISON picket lines. By doing this we can show the management that we are a united, determined workforce. If solidarity action escalates, they will have to give ground on the pay claim. But if they see people crossing picket lines, they will think they have the green light to reduce our wages and conditions.



If we are going to win, we need to go further in future and organise our disputes entirely ourselves. Members of all three local government unions (GMB, TGWU and UNISON) will need to take unofficial action together. A good example of success with this type of approach occurred last November, when postal workers won an unofficial dispute against victimisation and attacks on working conditions.

Workers in unofficial disputes do not need to follow the trade union laws that prevent effective action being taken. When workers take official action the law says they have to give a lengthy period of notice. This means the bosses have time to organise scabbing and bullying the workers into not striking. Going on unofficial strike gives us the element of surprise and has a much bigger impact on management.

Unofficial disputes require organisation by the rank and file, which means setting up a union structure at workplace level that is independent from the union leadership. This is not about being 'anti-union' - because the workers are the union! We just want our organisation to be more effective. If you want more info about organising workplace assemblies contact *Catalyist*.

Anarcho-syndicalism - A workplace strategy

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 (other than managers and scabs).

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. These delegates should be recallable. In effect we should be electing **delegates** not representatives.

Direct Action

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

Solidarity

Solidarity with other workers is the key to victory. Workers should support each other's 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. Unions use 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. 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 to be used as a means to an end by bosses wanting to make money from our labour.