

Time to Organise for Workers' Rights

The aim of the National Shop Stewards Network is to build links between trades unionists. It intends to become "a grass-roots network capable of mobilising trade unionists to fight for workers' rights". These are laudable aims and anything which strengthens workplace organisation is to be welcomed and encouraged. We need

to be clear what is meant by "a grass-roots network", however. The network will be restricted to "bona fide rank and file TUC

affiliated trade union workplace representatives". While this is clearly meant to put stewards rather than "full time trade union officials" in control are stewards really the rank and file? Are the rank and file not the ordinary members in the workplace, rather than their representatives meeting with other reps outside the workplace?

SHOP STEWARDS NETWORK

FOUNDING CONFERENCE

11am - 5pm Saturday 7th July 2007

South Camden Community School
Charrington Street, LONDON, NW1

further information:

www.shopstewards.net

email: info@shopstewards.net

Workplace organisation not "rank and file" activism

Anarcho-syndicalists believe that organisation has to be based in the workplace and to involve the membership of all the unions in each workplace. "Justice in the workplace" will not be won by representation. "Workers rights" will only be won by direct action, or by negotiations backed up by the credible threat of direct action, regardless of legislation. Confusing workplace representatives with the rank and file only obscures the real task we face – that of building effective organisation in the workplace.

no alternative leadership

Without being based on real workplace organisation NSSN would be a top-down organisation in which activists gather together and come up with initiatives which they would at best expect union members to follow without any real input. At worst NSSN would be a forum for various left groups to make demands on the leaders of TUC-affiliated trades unions not in any realistic hope of gaining their agreement but to put themselves forward as an alternative leadership.

We advocate starting with the real rank and file

in the workplace. Just getting people to confront issues such as health and safety, arbitrary and bullying management and unpaid overtime is badly needed in the overwhelming majority of workplaces. This is what activists should be doing - getting ordinary workers to say "no" to management, to demand the right equipment to do a job safely and without ruining their health. Shop stewards, where they exist, can only do this for people if they are also prepared to do it for themselves.

workplace meetings

Organisation has to be based on basic solidarity between workers – supporting each other against the demands of management. Once that has been established through workers talking to each other about the issues and agreeing what to do about them, activists should organise workplace meetings to establish real collective decision-making. Stewards can be mandated as workplace delegates and can be held to account if they don't stick to their mandates. Negotiations can become effective because they are backed up by organisation and the real prospect of direct action in pursuit of the workers' objectives.

Revolutionary unionism not social democracy

Links also need to be made between different groups of workers, between different workplaces in the same industry and between unions. We welcome the offer of "support to existing workplace committees" which should include those which link workers in multiple-employer workplaces where there are agency workers and subcontractors, and which allow workers in different unions or who are unable to openly join a union to support, participate in and benefit from workplace organisation based on solidarity. Such committees can be either delegate-based or open to all workers in the workplace.

Although NSSF refers to political issues like anti-trades union laws (after ten years we can surely drop the "Tory")

and pensions it is silent on how to fight them. This partly reflects the unions' desire not to upset the Labour Party and partly the tradition of left-wing rank-and-fileism where activists put aside their politics and unite around solely economic issues. We think it is a mistake to leave our politics at the workplace door because what we confront in the workplace are political-economic issues.

challenge capitalism

The existing unions are social democratic, separating political issues from economic ones and leaving them to political parties. They do not challenge capitalism or the state and seek to secure a role for themselves and to negotiate better conditions for their members within the

existing social order. Even where they reject or are ambivalent about "social partnership" and take a trade-union rather than a joint approach to "industrial relations" capitalism is off limits.

The left has no quarrel with this separation because they only differ about which party to leave the politics to. Economic issues are products of capitalism. In confronting workplace issues we must also confront the capitalism from which they arise. We recognise that what we are engaged in when we organise in the workplace is the class struggle and that our interests cannot be reconciled with those of management.

As well as being explicit in our opposition to capitalism and the state how we organise

and fight is determined by that stance. Our methods are consistent with our goal of libertarian communism.

class solidarity

We believe that the liberation of the working class from capitalism and the state is the task of the workers ourselves, not of any political party claiming to represent us. We advocate delegation and direct action in place of representation. We advocate class solidarity and internationalism against class collaboration and nationalism. We reject centralised, hierarchical organisation in favour of federalism based on horizontal links. Our aim is a stateless society based on the principle from each according to their ability to each according to their needs.

P&P Manchester and North & East London groups, Solidarity Federation-International Workers' Association

PO Box 1681, LONDON, N8 7LE; nelsf@solfed.org.uk; 07856 522 231
PO Box 29, S.W. PDO, MANCHESTER, M15 5HW; manchestersf@solfed.org.uk;
07984 675 281

**For more information about the Solidarity Federation send this to:
National Secretary, SF-IWA, PO Box 29, S.W. PDO, MANCHESTER, M15 5HW
(Web: solfed.org.uk; email: nationalsecretary@solfed.org.uk)**

Name _____ **email:** _____

Address: _____

Town/City: _____ **Post code:** _____