

# Catalyst

Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation - International Workers' Association

MAY 2001 #4

THIS  
ISSUE:-

**STRIKES IN HACKNEY  
RMT - SULKING FOR LABOUR  
RAILWAYS - SIDELINING THE  
SLOGANS  
LOSE THE LEVY CAMPAIGN  
HOLIDAYS IN THE SUN?**

## HACKNEY SHOWDOWN



**Workers at the London Borough of Hackney went on strike on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> May over widespread attacks on pay and conditions. The action follows 24-hour stoppages in December and March, and a three-day stoppage in January.**

Meanwhile, all sections have been applying localised "withdrawal of goodwill" to fit the problems workers face in their own sections. This means going back to not covering for vacancies, working to grade and job description, not doing extra hours, etc. Not only does this link in with the corporate dispute, but it also gives workers a chance to take direct action over issues which immediately affect them, and to gain confidence from immediate results.

These local actions and the all-out strikes are feeding off each other, and are helping workers to build up grassroots organisation which can be used both to strengthen all-out action and to win in their own sections. There will be further battles to come whatever the outcome of the present dispute so proper organisation in the workplace – not just electing Stewards and leaving it up to them – is vital.

An example of how organisation has paid off in this way is in Libraries where the three-day strike was 90-95% solid, i.e. supported by all UNISON (and GMB) members and even some non-union members didn't go in. This is the result of Stewards concentrating on organisational work rather than getting sucked into dealing with management, and putting the emphasis on workplace meetings at individual libraries, where workers have to discuss issues and what they are going to do about them with the colleagues who face the problems and have to take the action.

This shop floor organisation has been boosted in turn by the confidence workers have gained from the strikes, and has led to longstanding problems in Libraries being tackled by workers. Closures of Sites and Sections for short periods have forced management to tackle the shortages of senior staff (caused by recruitment problems due to under-grading). Library workers are beginning to implement minimum staffing levels and no cover policies for the first time in ten years.

### LOWER PAY, LONGER HOURS

The dispute is about the determination of management, and the ruling Labour-Tory coalition, to abolish the Low Pay Supplement, all other Plus and Premium Payments, shift allowances, etc. Along with hundreds of redundancies, and cuts in services, there are also plans to increase the working week to 36 hours (from 35 in most cases); to cut Annual, Dependency and Carer Leave; to restrict flexi-leave, Car Allowances for essential users and other benefits. However, the underlying issues are Single Status and Privatisation.

Single Status is being used as a Trojan horse to bring in the wage cuts, which mostly affect Manual Workers in the short term, even though Single Status was sold to workers by UNISON as benefiting Manuals by bringing them into line with APT&C (White Collar) Workers. **Beware any agreement UNISON claims as a victory for workers!** It is also being used as the vehicle for the increase in hours and the reductions in various leave entitlements and allocations.

An example of how this has already been attempted locally is Hackney Passenger Transport Service, where attempts have been made to impose new contracts on workers where a split shift would result in them being paid for less

(cont'd on back page...)

### POLICE - OVERTIME BINGE ON OUR TAXES

*The London Metropolitan Police force led the way on Mayday - in taking every chance they could to screw overtime pay.*

*Following weeks of press and police harrassment, May day protests went ahead as planned. Niketown in Oxford Street didn't do a lot of business on May 1st. Meanwhile, doctors called a day of action over lack of resources and understaffing.*

*Elsewhere, demonstrations against capitalism and for workers were assaulted by massed ranks of police determined to clear the unwashed masses from the streets so that New Labour can keep the cash registers ringing all the way to the election.*

*Bad news for them - the New Labour honeymoon is long-over, and any feelgood factor is rapidly evaporating as the latest 'economic downturn' begins to establish itself in the London Stock Exchange.*

*Catalyst predicts an all-time record General Election - the most boring ever. Every major party is vying to be the best bosses puppet. Now, more than ever, we have no alternative but to take matters into our own hands. Capitalism has had its millenium - now this one's going to be ours.*



**To get active - contact  
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Manchester M15 5HW.  
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## **SULKING FOR LABOUR**

Strange goings on within the rail union RMT. The union leadership decided to close down the special annual conference on the grounds that they did not like the way delegates were voting.

To the shock and bemusement of delegates, the Assistant General Secretary, the President and a number of the National Executive members closed the recent RMT Conference and walked out. The move was well-orchestrated, and followed an overwhelming vote to remove the President from the chair of the conference. This grossly unconstitutional act is the latest move in a vindictive campaign against the perceived 'left' within the union. So far, it has included ballot rigging in order to get a preferred candidate on the national executive, and the suspension of union activists from holding office within the union.

Meanwhile, the RMT is in the middle of a dispute against privatisation of the London Underground. The recent planned strike was called off by RMT bosses at the last minute due to huge pressure from the government. Rather than concentrating on fighting management and the government, activists are now having to spend time and energy defending the union from the leadership.

Vernon Hince, now effectively in charge due to Jimmy Knapp being ill, is a long-standing member of New Labour's national executive and there is little doubt that the RMT witch-hunt is being orchestrated by the Labour leadership. New Labour is dead against tube and rail workers striking on issues of safety because it draws attention to their bankrupt transport policies. Nor are they pleased with the growing campaign to stop paying the political levy to New Labour – a campaign which Catalyst fully supports.

Despite the government's record of hostility towards workers, all the stops are being pulled out to ensure that RMT funds are handed over to Labour – including an instruction for all branches to give their funds to local Labour constituencies. The union leadership clearly sees getting Labour re-elected as far more important than lax safety and appalling pay and conditions endured by their own members.

# RAILROADING

**Since the Hatfield train crash, The call for re-nationalisation of Railtrack has become a stock demand on the left. It has to be said that this is not an unrealistic demand. But where would it lead us?**

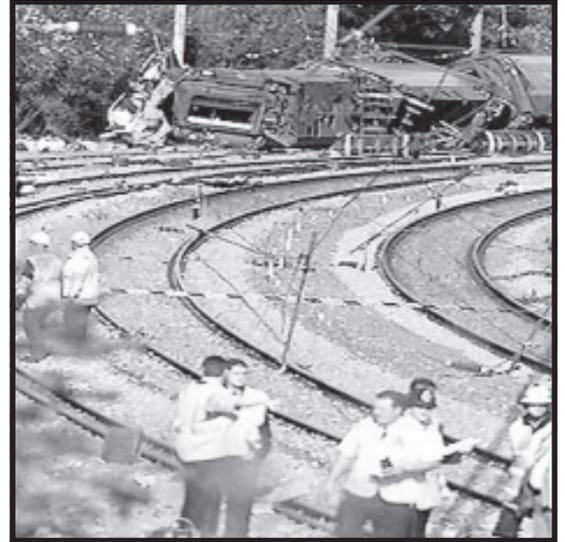
Should the current rail debacle continue, there is certainly a possibility that a future Labour government may be forced to take Railtrack back into state ownership. While this would make it easier for the government to pump state money into the network as a means of improving the service to passengers, it would do little to improve the plight of those working on the railway. For if Labour re-nationalises Railtrack, it will only do so on the basis of forming a state-run administering company, which would then subcontract the work out to private companies in the same way as Railtrack does at the moment. Furthermore, it would still leave the train operating companies in the private sector. They would no doubt be rubbing their hands with glee at the prospect of massive state subsidies being channelled to them directly through a new state-run company.

Some on the left go further, and demand that a future Labour government should take back the whole of the industry under state control. This is fantasy land. There is as much chance of Labour fully re-nationalising the railways as there is of Blair nationalising the banks. Under New Labour, old style nationalisation is a nonstarter. The old left routine of calling on Labour to take real action simply will no longer wash. We may as well call on the Tories to do it.

Rather than empty slogans, we need realistic solutions. The trauma that is rail workers' everyday working life stems from the casualisation of the workforce which followed privatisation. Not least, this caused the shattering of the national agreements which had previously ensured minimum conditions for everyone in the industry. These national agreements were underpinned by bargaining procedures. Over the years, the rail unions became so dependent on these bargaining procedures, they became a primary means through which the union organised.

## **KILLING PAYS**

**Corporate manslaughter is good for business! Balfour Beatty, who had key rail maintenance contracts which indicate responsibility for the Hatfield train crash, have been rewarded for their lax attitude towards safety by being handed a £125 million contract by Railtrack. This covers Wessex, Kent, Anglia and Great Eastern, and appears intended to make up for the £60m in contracts they have lost since Hatfield. Meanwhile, the manslaughter charges are pending...**



Following privatisation, the bargaining procedures and national agreements were swept away, leaving nothing for the unions and workers. Now, the starting point of the fight back must be to confront casualisation by seeking to establish minimum industry-wide agreements. Local, regional and ultimately national agreements will not happen through a consensus or partnership approach. The days when union strength was maintained by management's willingness to negotiate are long gone. The gangsters that now run much of the railways will only make concessions when they are pinned down and forced to. We must start setting our own agenda – one where industrial relations are based on class struggle and the fact that management and workers have nothing in common.

Modern industrial relations are based largely on management intimidation. Given this, no way will workers be convinced by the unions' strategy to reason with management to secure a better deal. Only by arguing for exposing management, and taking direct action against the casualisation onslaught, are unions going to get workers to begin to take notice. Class conflict, where the brutality of management is matched by the determination of the workers to defend themselves will lead to two crucial things. First, re-emergence of real, working unions, and second, more confidence among workers to go that step further.

Once direct action based workplace organisations are established, solidarity can be organised between and across the various rail sector companies. This will be the basis for building industry-wide agreements. However, class conflict cannot exist in a vacuum. Permanent confrontation with management has to be sustained by a long-term goal. That goal must be the permanent defeat of management by the establishment of an industry run by the workers themselves in self-managed society. Such a movement will not come about from empty slogans about Labour governments nationalising the railways – they start with the day-to-day struggle against management.

# PROBLEMS AT WORK No.3



## HOW CAN YOU SECURE YOUR RIGHT TO 4 WEEKS WORKING HOLIDAY?

Election time and Labour is on a spending spree, using our money in order to advertise the many benefits workers have won under Labour. The expensive gloss includes an advert advising us of our new rights to four weeks paid holiday. Before rushing into management to claim your new holiday entitlement, we would urge a note of caution. In deregulated Britain job insecurity is widespread, and still spreading wildly. In such times, claiming your rights may just end up with you taking a permanent holiday - sacked and on the dole.

Firstly, the facts under the new legislation.

All workers have the right to four weeks paid holiday per year, provided that their current contract is for three or more months. This four weeks includes bank holidays. If holidays have not been taken when employment ends, then there is nothing to stop the employer calculating days owed at 1/365<sup>th</sup> for every day not taken. In this way, workers lose out, so it's best to take leave before your contracts ends.

Unfortunately, under today's flexible employment law, there are a thousand ways for management to get rid of people demanding their "rights". A cautious approach is needed. If you are being robbed of your holiday entitlement, rather than rushing into the manager's office, it may be better to raise it first with other people you are working with. Unity is strength - if you can approach management collectively, then the possibility of victimisation is greatly reduced. Always put your request in writing, and keep copies. Keep notes of all meetings and communications with management, including dates things are said. If you continue to have trouble getting your holidays, then contact us on our help line for more advice.



"Since we are paying them poverty wages, they couldn't afford to go on holiday anyway."

**WRITE TO CATALYST FOR A FULL & FRANK ANSWER TO A PROBLEM AT WORK, OR CONTACT THE ANSAPHONE HELPLINE FOR ADVICE - 0161 232 7889**

**CATALYST, 5F, PO Box 29, SW PDO, MANCHESTER M15 5HW. [solfed@solfed.org.uk](mailto:solfed@solfed.org.uk)**

## LOSE THE LEVY

The idea of using Tory legislation might seem tasteless, but have you tasted Tony lately? This is a question of the lesser of two evils. Complete and send the form below to your Union HQ and copy it to your pay office for immediate relief.



### 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.

Signature.....

Name.....

Membership number..... Payroll No.....

Address.....

Date.....

Union and branch:.....

## KIDS SHOW DIRECT ACTION WORKS

Just days after the 1999 local election, Cheshire's Halton Borough Council announced the closure of several schools in Runcorn. The fact that no consultation or notice was given serves as a warning to anyone who might imagine 'open government' exists.

Predictably, the public rose to the challenge with a series of initiatives including leaflets, posters, petitions, letter writing campaigns. More direct forms of action included the ambushing of the mayor's car at local events by banner-waving children and parents and turning up at consultation meetings to confront the handful of councillors with enough brass neck to show up and face them. Eventually, the council was forced to back down in the majority of cases owing to the opposition shown by a determined public, and leave most schools untouched.

Unfortunately, two out of four secondary schools are to close and re-open under a new name on one existing site next academic year. Noticeably absent from the public meetings were Mike Hall, M.P. for Weaver Vale and Tony McDermott, leader of the council. Both are former teachers and Labour Party members. It was pointed out that two Labour councillors were sending their children to schools in more prosperous areas of Cheshire and both were members of the Education Committee. Indeed, one is a Governor and former teacher at one of the affected schools.

One set of pupils will now have to make a daily journey using Runcorn's privately run, expensive and unreliable bus service. Meanwhile, the Director of Education made the ludicrous statement that the decision has nothing to do with saving money but is to raise standards. Labour's last Election Manifesto, specifically stated on page 7 that "Labour will not close good schools". Both secondary schools in Runcorn New Town received very good Ofsted reports, so Blair's promise was not worth the paper it was printed on. Neither are any of the current ones this Election.

## EVENTS, ACTIONS, CAMPAIGNS...

### Health and Safety Course

The Solidarity Federation is running a workshop-based course on Health and safety this autumn. The aim is to provide people who want to exercise their rights at work with the ammunition they need. Whether it is hard information, tactics, confidence or support you want, feel free to drop in.

Make contact now for information on registration -  
Manchester SF, PO Box 29,  
SWPDO, Manchester M15 5HW.

### Anarchist TU Network

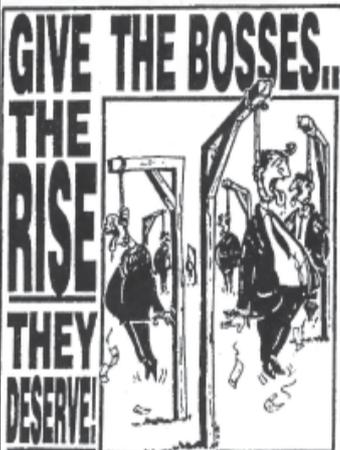
To subscribe and get a bimonthly newsletter, Bread and Roses, send six stamps with your name and address and any union affiliation details to: Box EMAB (ATU), 88 Abbey Street, Derby DE22 3SQ. [williamgodwin7@hotmail.com](mailto:williamgodwin7@hotmail.com)  
<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Parliament/2522>

### Loombreaker

Send a stamp for a copy- c/o Manchester EF, Dept 29, 22a Beswick St, Manchester M4 7HS. [loombreaker@nematode.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:loombreaker@nematode.freeserve.co.uk)  
Also, join the Riotous Assembly for action planning - 1st Tuesday of the month, 7.30pm, Yard theatre (opp. Junction Pub), 41 Old Birley St, Hulme, Manchester.

### Selfed Collective

For self-education - we develop and share ideas and skills for revolutionary activity. Following the success of our 99/00 course... we've gone online. 'A History of Anarcho-syndicalism'. 24 pamphlet-sized Units, plus the opportunity to participate in discussion meetings. Pamphlets are a quid each - or get them ALL FREE in FULL VERSIONS - easily downloadable from the new SelfEd website. Online FREE course 2001 - register now- [www.selfed.org.uk](http://www.selfed.org.uk). No Email? - contact SelfEd, PO Box 1095, Sheffield S2 4YR.



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# HACKNEY SHOWDOWN

(cont'd from front page...)

hours, but being required to be available for work between shifts - effectively at work for more hours than at present. Two occupations in a week forced management to back down, but these attempts show what's at stake for all workers if they win.

## PRIVATISATION

The Council claims that a longstanding financial crisis means that workers' pay and conditions, which they also claim are too expensive compared with equivalent local authorities (a lie), have to be reduced to bring us into line and to save money in the long term. In fact, the projected savings for the cuts are a paltry £1.5m, while the Council's budget deficit is around £76m.

To add insult to injury, in the last year Chief Executive Max Caller has been allowed to increase his salary to £150,000 (from a base rate of £75,000), other Directors now get between £80,000 and £100,000, and there is a proposed new tier of managers on £40,000 each in Social Services. By contrast, salary protection for workers who stand to lose money has been set at £15,600, after which pay will be frozen until the reduced pay rates catch up (in about five years or so).

Government is bailing the Council out of its immediate financial crisis, and the Borough recently made £86m on a land deal in the City, but management insist that cuts are necessary. The reason is that Government spending policies in Local Government are designed to force Councils to seek private finance in order to fulfil their statutory service obligations. £104m in Government grants have been clawed back from Hackney since 1994 (according to the Borough Treasurer).

This is clearly not about saving money; this is about making services attractive to private contractors (notwithstanding the £25m lost by privatising finance to ITNet, or rail privatisation for that matter!). What management are trying to push through is a general pre-agreement to a Single Status process which will seek to reduce the pay and conditions of all Council Workers to bring them in line with the Private Sector. Once workers' pay and conditions have been made more "reasonable", the Council will be able to find bidders to privatise their sections under Best Value.

## ORGANISE AGAINST CAPITALISM

All of which makes a mockery of demands from the left that the government give Hackney back the millions stolen from it. We suspect that attacking workers and forcing through privatisation is a condition attached to the short-term financial rescue by the government. Hackney still has a media image

of "loony left" chaos, and the assumption is that no one will care what happens here. For that reason it has been chosen as New Labour's laboratory for wholesale privatisation, aiming to reduce the Council to a collection of highly paid executives managing private contracts.

This is a political struggle, and although the unions have got the industrial side of the dispute right, they haven't adequately faced up to the political dimension. Local UNISON leaders demand government intervention as if this was not a significant part of the problem. They also seem to believe that the Council's prejudice towards private sector service management is irrational, rather than the ideological expression of economic imperatives.

In fact, the government investment necessary to provide decent Health, Education and local services would lead to significant economic growth. It would be unacceptable to financial institutions in the City of London - Britain's real rulers - if this growth did not fuel private profits. "The economy" needs investment in public services to generate private profits, and the government is determined that this will happen.

Workers have to tackle capitalism itself in order to improve our lot, both in terms of pay and conditions and in terms of public services. We can only do this by linking our struggle for control over the workplace with a struggle over control over our resources - housing, services and other assets the Council wants to sell off for private profit. We need to organise as tenants and residents as well as workers, and to break down the divide between our working lives and our local environment.

Anarcho-syndicalists seek to break down this division, institutionalised in the restriction of unions to economic issues which leaves wider social issues outside the workplace to political parties. Political parties, and alliances, can only substitute themselves for local working class people because they are not organised at the grassroots. The top-down structure of "tenant and resident participation" in Hackney has to be broken through proper organisation on the ground.

This needs to be built up almost from scratch, and workplace organisation, which is patchy, needs to be strengthened. Only then can we break down the division between political and economic organisation which leaves the working class at the mercy of capitalism. To some people this might seem unrealistic, but how realistic is it to expect electing a couple of socialists onto the Council to "put pressure" on the government, demanding "Give us the money, Gordon", to change how Capitalism works?

## BEWARE ANY AGREEMENT UNISON CLAIMS AS A VICTORY FOR WORKERS!

## A SUMMER 2001: FORTRESS CULTURE

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<http://www.direct-action.org.uk>

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