

Direct Action Solidarity #1

Newsletter of the Solidarity Federation - Brighton Local



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"Here we come to the general cultural significance of the labour struggle. The economic alliance of the producers not only affords them a weapon for the enforcement of better living conditions, it becomes for them a practical school, a university of experience, from which they draw instruction and enlightenment in richest measure." - Rudolf Rocker

Standing up for ourselves

Since mid-2011 the Brighton Local of the Solidarity Federation has been running a stall in locations around the city and more recently in Bognor. Rather than the usual political stall about the big issues of government cuts and policy decisions we decided to use it to talk directly to people about their issues at work, with their landlords or at the Jobcentre. The aim has been to encourage the idea that these problems we face aren't just something we are having difficulty with as individuals, but rather that they are part of a whole range of wider issues faced by the working class (those who rely on wages and/or benefits to make a living).

By having conversations with people, we have been able to see some common problems arising. Here are a couple below.

Bullying at work

Something we hear about time and again is the issue of bullying and harassment at work. We were contacted by a trainee accountant in a large firm in a local town, who was being treated in an appalling manner. He had to endure homophobic bullying

and generally degrading treatment by managers who encouraged the same behaviour among his co-workers. Not only this, but the firm neglected to make reasonable adjustments for his dyslexia, despite this being a legal requirement. Faced with such a strong bullying culture, he decided to cut his losses and leave after the management agreed to give him time off to look for another job.

The same culture has taken hold in other workplaces according to people we have talked to, from office staff in East Sussex County Council to CityClean workers being continually pushed to do more by managers claiming to be just doing their job.

Although the worker who contacted us didn't feel he could take action about this, bullying at work is something that we can organise around. If you are having problems like this, the first step is to talk to your fellow workers who are in the same position. Often it is a particular manager who is the issue and by joining together it is possible to put pressure on the company to deal with them. The Solidarity Federation runs a one-day training course on organising in the workplace, which gives workers a toolbox of strategies to organise together to improve their situation at work. The next workshop is on 4th February. Email us if you are interested.

Wage theft

A problem that is occurring more and more often is not being paid for work done. This could be the agency you work for only paying for one day instead of the three you worked because of lack of the 'correct paperwork', or your boss in the pub or restaurant not paying you for weeks because of 'cash flow problems.' We were contacted

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ABOVE: Picketing Subway for an unfairly sacked pregnant worker

BELOW: delivering a letter of protest to Zara for sacked Peruvian unionists as part of an international day of action.



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by a woman who was owed £700 for temporary work she had done during a busy period that her pub landlord employer simply refused to pay. Not only that, but when she went in to demand it she was barred.

Because of the threat of intimidation this worker decided not to take it further. The Solidarity Federation's South London Local helped support a woman in the same situation after not being paid for 6 weeks. In these times of recession employers are resorting to this more often, but why? It's our legal right to be paid for work done, so why are they not paying up?

Why does it happen?

What we have noticed is that this is mainly happening in small firms. Because the banks are more reluctant to lend money a lot of these businesses are finding it hard to get loans to cover them in the short term when cash is needed to pay bills. So when they don't pay wages, it is effectively an interest free loan from their workers, those who can least afford to lend it.

As long as they can keep stringing their employees along they can keep the money in the bank to cover their costs. From a boss' point of view it is a win-win situation because most workers will give up and walk away from the hassle of trying to get what they are owed.

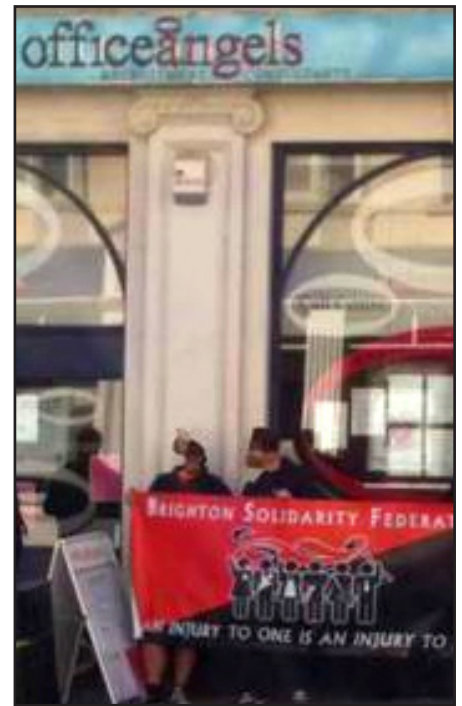
This means that they can just keep the money. For every employee that goes to an industrial tribunal or small claims court for their money back (plus costs), many more don't have the resources to pursue it. So it makes perfect sense for an employer.

However understandable this is, it amounts to criminal behaviour - the theft of wages, sometimes amounting to hundreds of pounds. And if we think the law is going to deal with this, then we just need to look at the different ways it deals with bosses and working class people.

If an employer steals money in this way, the most that will happen to them is that they will have to pay it back and cover some court costs. Compare this to the treatment of a man who stole a bottle of water during last summer's riots. He got six months and a criminal record. Steal our livelihoods and you get a slap on the wrist; steal a few pounds worth of stock from a business and you get a criminal record which will affect your chances of a livelihood for years to come.

Direct action

This explains why we see direct action as the only sure way of getting fair and decent treatment, rather than using the law. Laws have never been designed to protect us - only by acting together can



we directly improve our lives. The Solidarity Federation has supported one of our members against Office Angels, as well as the woman who was owed six weeks pay. In both of these situations the bosses paid up in full after a short but escalating campaign. If you are facing a similar situation, get in touch.

direct action tactics explained:

THE BOYCOTT

This tactic is well known through big campaigns against Apartheid in South Africa and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. However, it developed as a way of forcing employers to deal fairly with their workers, and it is most effective in dealing with smaller businesses serving the general public (such as restaurants, cafes, pubs), as opposed to whole countries!

For example, in a wage-theft dispute the Solidarity Federation might call a boycott of the business, accompanied by leafleting and a picket to help turn away customers. It would start with a short picket at a busy time, but the pickets would increase in frequency if there was no progress. The boycott could be extended nationally where appropriate, and even internationally through the International Workers Association (which SF is part of).

Boycotts are most effective when they can put a lot of financial pressure on a business in a short time, and are less effective when the target has deep pockets or when their customers are other businesses.

Coming up in further newsletters:

- What happens when your landlord steals your deposit?
- University courses forcing students to pay for expensive study packs
- Action against companies using the unemployed as free labour
- More direct action tactics explained

