WORK 'N' ALL THAT

9 years on

While scenes reminiscent of Wapping have been going down on the south coast, about 750 people marched on the News International plant again on January 21st, and stood in the rain listening to speeches. The march was called to demand union rights after a worker was sacked for organising a meeting, not even in work time or space. Other complaints included health & safety and the pollution of the area by the continued use of dangerous petro-chemical cleaners. In response to a critical report from the local council, the national union cleared a press release entitled "Tower Hamlets Report Clears News International". Contraflow says "Clear them out of Wapping".

So what has happened to what they call "workplace struggle"?

WHAT ABOUT THE WORKERS?

Where we work has always been a place of struggle, over how much they give us and how much they get out of us, against petty rules and discipline, and to get away with what we can, maybe even our dignity. Sometimes its a place where we feel strong, because we're brought together under the same crap conditions, and because we can't tell what we do together has some effect, especially when we stop doing it! But it doesn't seem that way at the moment. There are still strikes happening sometimes with strikers sticking it out for months despite attacks and self-outs, the cold and poverty. But what victories there are tend to be a mere reduction in proposed attacks, and strikes are certainly fewer and further between. Other forms of struggle are harder to gauge, but they also seem less apparent.

Glorious Defeats

The defeats of the last 20 years have had a lot to do with it. Steelworkers, miners, printworkers, were all beaten in high profile battles with management backed by the state; despite widespread support from much of the wider working class. Miners and printers at least were both powerful sections of our class, with strong trade union links and their bosses. But their strengths had already been well loosened by competition and alternative technologies, by the bonus scheme introduced by Tony Benn...!

Trade unions in the UK have always been very hierarchical, hide-bound, and especially in the 70s relied on their links with the Labour Government, to ensure their power and defend their interests. They enjoyed the benefits of a dealmaking-style of capitalism, with bosses and union leaders sitting down to work out compromises which would keep things running smoothly. This cozy relationship has largely ended - capitalism since the early 70s has had no time for unions to regulate and control workers' struggle. In this country the change dates not so much from the Tory victory in 1979 as from the Labour Government's 1978 deal with the IMF. The resulting austerity programme, pay freezes, attacks on working hours etc, led to workers forcing the unions to respond - the 'Winter of Discontent' etc. When the Conservatives, representatives of the city and big company bosses, got in, they carried this attack deep into our lives. Control of workers and keeping the industrial peace has long been part of unions' job. But with the Tory anti-union laws, union hierarchies have been paralysed with threats of sequestration of funds etc, for not playing by the state's rules. Even more then before, union bureaucracies have crushed local strikes (for instance at the Bursmills strike in Smethwick, where union officials closed down the strike over the protests of the strikers), prevented 'illega' secondary (ie solidarity) strike action in support of other workers, held back any initiatives and played it safe, gone in for deals and compromises that are effectively defeats for the workers. Without effective solidarity action strikes are unlikely to win; they need to spread to succeed.

Last year's signalworkers' dispute is a classic example. Small section of railworkers fighting on their own, holding one or two day stoppages, almost rivalised, no mass pickets, no hit squad actions, few attempts to spread the strike to other sections of the railways workforce, all under attack themselves. There was a lot of support for the dispute, among workers and rail users, but it was kept entirely passive. The RMT union bosses kept the dispute totally under their control, people trying to get involved to support it found it very difficult. A sectarianised, limited rigid strike, rigidly centralised, the issues dictated by the media, was bound to be in the negotiated defeat that it did, no matter how Jimmy Knapp might dress it up as victory. The future looks bleak on the railways; signalworkers jobs will go, and other groups of workers will be picked off separately.

But the main point is that the world we work in (and on) has changed radically. Money and production can be moved rapidly around the world, bypassing blockages, disinvesting when workers demand too much (directly as wages or indirectly thru taxation) and give too little. The national state has been left as a manager, an official receiver selling off the profitable bits and controlling thru dis-investment. The workplace has been fragmented into smaller, leaner, competing groups, with wages and jobs broken up by subcontracts, "self-employment", "training" schemes, productivity deals and "volunteers". But the workplace has also been generalised, as more of our lives have to be organised around work, getting the right qualifications, experience, attitude and looks, recovering and helping others recover, bearing and bringing up the right kind of kids....

I can hear readers saying, "So what?" At Contraflow, we realise that much of our readership is from a counterculture, alternative scene, fairly young, probably not in a permanent job, sceptical about class and about organisation. It's true that work is still mostly what defines our place in society, the place of exploitation, whether we are wage slaves or unwaged. In fact, the crisis goes deeper, not just at work, but throughout the working class in Britain there is a climate of defeat and disillusion of getting your head down, working for yourself, expecting little from politicians and parties, being opposed to cuts, housing shortages, shock at greedy rich bastards, but feeling there is nothing we can do. We are divided and confused, unsure of our power, more than ever before. Whatever the triumphalist Trotskyist left say, working people are on a losing streak. This makes the "left", anarchists, communists, who swim in the sea of class resistance, largely irrelevant.

Technology introduced to bypass our control, has massively increased the wealth that we all take part in producing, and see so little, and is increasingly integrated - the means of production, communication, play, of imagining and understanding the world are brought together in new ways, and so are we.

We need a new vision based on these new conditions, and on recognition of the fact that the system works by separating all...
of us from the means to produce, and so from our increasing abilities, imposes work by separating all of us from the massive wealth we create. Our struggles are diverse, against poverty, attack, job cuts, for space to live and party for control over our environment and bodies, over what we produce and how, but they are all workplace struggles - struggles over how much they give us and how much they get out of us. And no wage can ever make up for the theft of our lives and everything else we produce.

Contralow hasn't got easy answers, and all this has probably raised even more questions. But the answers aren't to be found in some grand theory (ideas are necessary, if only to break our illusions) - they are in our lives and struggles, in our refusal to work and our joy at discovering our strength, against bosses, cops, rapists and racists, the rip-off merchants in our midst. We want to spread this joy and strength, these ideas, as well as information about how they carry out their attacks. We want your news and ideas, examples of what can and must be done, from whatever part of the global workplace you're in, to help build and arm the movement that will take back the world we have produced, and enjoy it.

**NO PAY RISES!**

While the Labour Party is complaining about the massive pay rises of directors of privatised power companies, Camden council workers have been protesting about the Labour council proposing large increases for their own directors. On January 23rd a march and lobby of the Labour group was held. To be honest the march only attracted a grand total of 10 people, with another 20 or so picked up from offices on the way, and we missed the lobby cos we went round to see a mate, but it was a good idea. The council say they have to increase the top bosses wages to compete with other councils, and that attracting the best bosses can save lots of money, at our expense of course.

**HACKNEY SEVEN RESULTS**

The trials of the seven people nicked on the Hackney Town Hall demo are now complete. They were arrested during the June picket against attacks on squatters and tenants in the borough, and against the then impending Criminal Justice Bill. The bad news is one bind-over, one conditional discharge and one pleading guilty. The other 4 got off in exciting courtroom dramas. The cases against Ronnie and Mervyn ended, after a long and fairly positive week of disproving the cops' stories, when one of our barristers collapsed, and the prosecution decided they couldn't handle a retrial. In the other case Simon got off when the magistrate disagreed that the four punches shown on video were 'reasonable' restraint as PC Moore claimed, and the prosecution gave up over Jake after the other police witness couldn't explain his complete invisibility. Countercharges for assault, perjury and conspiracy are planned.

**COMPUTER CRIME**

Just before Xmas there was a break-in at the Colin Roach Centre in Hackney. Suspicions point to Special Branch or MI5 as the computer which the cops would have expected the database on naughty cops to be on, and a tape of an interview with a Sinn Fein councillor were among the things missing. There are also reports of the theft of the Freedom Network's hard-disc at about the same time, and attacks on the ECN (radical computer network) computers in Berlin and Bremen. Don't keep the important stuff on your hard disc.

**ATHENS NEW YEAR!**

The year's started well in Greece, with more school occupations covering all of Attica and most of the rest of the country. This is meant to be to demand better education, but it seems the students have realised that occupying is a better education. On 11th January the fourth anniversary of the killing of a leftist teacher and riots in which cops killed another 4 people brought 3000, mainly the occupying students, onto the streets for fights with the cops and burning barricades in the centre of Athens. The socialist government is now threatening to get rid of the asylum status of schools and poly's that allows them to keep out the cops. The previous, conservative government failed to achieve this.

Info from Athens ABC