

Three Strikes And You're Out!

Anarchist Communist Federation

1998

The following is an interview with a member of Edinburgh Claimants, Jim, about attempted police repression of the Three Strikes (anti-Job Seekers Allowance) campaign; on the 21st of January a claimant was found guilty of Breach of the Peace and sentenced to 150 hours of community service.¹ His offence (sic) had been to deliver a 3 strikes warning letter to a Benefits Office Official at High Riggs Unemployment benefit office in Edinburgh. The Sheriff (judge) called it 'a sinister offence' and said that he was considering a jail sentence; in his summing up he called the campaign a 'premeditated and illegal attempt to undermine the welfare benefits system'.

ORGANISE!/: Can you tell us about the context of the Three Strikes campaign?

JIM: There has been a continuous independent claimants presence in Edinburgh since the early to mid 1980's around the Edinburgh Unemployed Workers Centre and Lothian Claimants Union. The Centre successfully occupied by claimants opposing its closure, and claimants established a presence, particularly at unemployed benefits offices (UBO's).

Tens of thousands of leaflets were distributed, consisting of practical information for claimants, for example about how to resist Restart – Snooper Harassment and Actively Seeking Work measures. Although the numbers of activists involved have been small, they have gained the respect of many claimants and have had a big influence. The idea that people should be accompanied at interviews, for example. The Three Strikes campaign began in early 1996, and has struck a chord with unemployed people, though it has been unpopular with Union and Labour party bureaucrats because it gives claimants power. The underlying idea is that this should be part of building a claimants' counter power in all areas of social life, to counter oppression and exploitation (see previous recent issues of Organise!, and issue 19 of Subversion). The first warning letters were given out in 1996. The information received from claimants showed the same names of bullying Benefit Office officials kept recurring, e.g. Alistair Mathieson, client adviser at Torphichen Street UBO in Edinburgh. This slimebag forced claimants onto Jobplan and Restart courses, showed political bias during a restart interview (quoting Michael Portillo), emotionally abusing claimants, sometimes reducing them to tears. Following 2 warnings there was a 3 Strike demonstration against him. Fifteen people took over the Benefit Office, went to his desk and photographed

¹ LEGAL NOTE – In court the claimant pled guilty to the charge as above; the prosecution dropped the part of the original charge that he made "abusive, offensive and threatening remarks". He stated that although he had delivered the letter, he was not a member of Edinburgh Claimants nor had he been involved in any other 3 strikes related activity. Please bear this in mind in anything written.

him. Mathieson responded by running away. The demonstrators left the office before the police arrived. Mathieson's photo was flyposted throughout the city with a list of his sins, the posters urged people to refuse to be interviewed by him. The campaign has received quite a lot of coverage in the local press over the years. It has not been sympathetic, but claimants can read between the lines, and contact addresses and phone numbers have been quoted at times. The campaign has been important, but it is only one direct action tactic to build claimants power; complementary would be a phone tree consisting of 30-50 people. They would be 'dole-busters' who were available at 24 hours notice to actively support claimants facing harassment. I believe such a phone tree has been developed in Brighton.

ORGANISE! What has the reaction of the authorities to Three Strikes been?

JIM: The benefit office authorities have been very worried by it. Edinburgh claimants have been very involved in supporting the Liverpool Dockers struggle locally. The PTC (a civil service union which is mostly for managers) have consistently written to the support group urging them to get rid of us from the group. The author of the letters is Bernie Jaster, a benefit office manager and real nasty. The police have been showing an interest for some time; they have contacted people who they think are involved, going to their houses and trying to interview them. In Nottingham of course they have actually carried out raids on people's houses. There have been questions raised in the Houses of Parliament about 3 strikes; the answer maintained that Groundswell made anonymous and illegal threats against those carrying out JSA sanctions. Police advice and support has been exemplary it says, and appears to have helped deter Groundswell from implementing their threat to harm staff. The 3 strikes policy against Mathieson was described disapprovingly from the platform at the CPSA (Civil and Public Servants Association) trade union conference.

ORGANISE! What have relationships generally with Benefits Office staff been like?

JIM: We have continuously striven to maintain contacts with UBO workers. The best of them seem to have left now; up to half of those left are on temporary contracts. Most of them now seem to have little idea about claimants situation or the possible effects of what they are asked to do. They are raised on the idea that claimants are the enemy.

ORGANISE! How do you react to the outcome of the court case this week ? (February 11th 1998)

JIM: Four hours after the verdict, 20 claimants and supporters carried out a 3rd strike action against Marianne MacDonald, a Project Work interviewer at High Riggs, and her manager Mr Laird. The demonstrators, all wearing masks of MacDonald's face, stormed into the benefit office in central Edinburgh. They carried posters of her with the slogan NO ONE LIKES A BULLY. Protesters gave out leaflets bearing her photo, detailing how she had consistently harassed claimants and tried to cut their benefits on 8 documented occasions. The leaflets denounced Labour's New Deal as compulsory slave labour and condemned the cuts in single parent's benefits. Police arrived, but were too late to stop the action, there were no arrests. We won't be intimidated by the police and courts. The 3 strikes resistance continues.

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