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Sheffield Library Workers' Strike

Anarchist Federation

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350 LIBRARY WORKERS went out on strike on 5 June for 8 weeks against their employer, the supposedly 'radical' City Council. Most of those involved were low-paid women workers. The Labour Council had threatened to cut higher rates of pay for weekend work, in effect cutting pay by 7%- £60 a month. An average full-time worker earns about £10,000 a year and as most of the workers are on part-time contracts, this would have meant a drastic pay cut.

This was followed by proposals to close 6 libraries which would result in redundancies. This second move clinched the walk-out. The closures would have meant that there would have been only 27 libraries open in a city with a population of 500,000. It should be noted that this was part of a package of budget cuts — cuts in services- planned by the Labour council of £4.5 million.

The strike was firmly under control of the union UNISON-more of this later- and as such was an official strike with a 4-1 vote in favour of strike action. During the strike the only library open was the Hillsborough site, where pregnant staff (who risked loss of

maternity pay if they had come out) kept open the office of Labour MP Helen Jackson, housed on the site.

The Labour council had already shown how they had meant to go on, when they had evicted workers from the public gallery at a council meeting to okay the cuts.

UNISON made an all-out effort to limit the strike purely to pay, to isolate the strike from other council workers, and workers in general in Sheffield. They refused to call for solidarity action from other council workers. The unions represented amongst Sheffield council's workforce, including UNISON, had agreed to a 3.25 % cut in pay in 1993. This, they argued, was horse-traded in return for the maintenance of 1,400 jobs. Surprise! Surprise! Cuts have continued, with school closures, the end of kitchen facilities in some schools, cuts in the budget of the Health Authority, and a pay freeze.

The action of local Labour councillors and MPs was to be expected. Helen Jackson organised a provocation at Hillsborough Library when she called for an open day "for families", inviting pensioners and children. She then launched into an attack, reported in the press, where she said that balloons had been burst by pickets, strikers' children had eaten the sandwiches for the invited children, and the strikers in general were intimidating. For his part David Blunkett insisted that the strike be ended, whilst various councillors wrote to the local paper, the Sheffield Star, continuing the intimidation allegations.

The strike was ended when the Council agreed to withdraw the pay-cuts. This was partly due to the threat of 80 workers from the leisure department coming out on strike. The council was particularly sensitive about the idea of six leisure centres being shut down as it has actively pushed Sheffield as the "UK city of sport" and the venue for the World Student Games. The strength of the strike, which closed all but one library in one of the largest public library services in Britain was also a deterring factor.

UNISON went out to make sure that the strike was only about pay cuts and not about the closures and that other workers did not strike. UNISON general secretary Rodney Bickerstaffe and TUC general secretary John Monks were mobilised to come to Sheffield.

At the local level it was the leftists in the UNISON branch who furthered the role of the union bureaucrats. The Socialist Workers Party has 2 members in leading positions. They welcomed the support of Bickerstaffe and Monks. They furthered the illusions in Labourism by criticising the Council only because it was “spineless” in kow-towing to national Tory plans. They of course failed to explain the role of the Council as the local State, the link in the chain of command that delivers austerity packages, and everything else the international capital, the national state and the capitalists intend to inflict on us. Labour and the Liberal Democrats in their role in the local State, the Councils, are as much implicated in this as the Conservatives. These frantic efforts to defend Labour were repeated when one of these SWP members condemned Helen Jackson for her action by saying: “We would expect a Labour MP to be on the side of working people...” As we have repeatedly pointed out the SWP is an external faction of Labourism, and is deeply entangled in electoral support for it, and in keeping alive the decaying trade unions.

In fact the strike was dominated by the bureaucrats, including the local ones (the SWP). For Socialist Worker the strike was a model for “rank and file involvement” because there were 2 strike meetings a week. At the daily strike committee meetings, workers were allowed to attend, but not to decide on how the strike went forward.

Keith Crawshaw, Sheffield’s library boss, may well try to question the time and a half payment again, and to put pressure on staff to “work weekends as part of a regular shift” without paying extra. He tried to justify the Council actions by claiming that library workers in Hereford and Worcester had accepted weekend work without overtime pay without striking. 2 weeks later, on 15

August libraries, social services and admin staff in Hereford and Worcester struck for a day and then again in September and October.