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The Struggle on Merseyside

Anarchist Communist Federation

1995

Across Merseyside a mounting wave of industrial action and militancy may rekindle radical politics in the city after the long, post-Militant hibernation. Three growing strikes by dockworkers, social services residential workers and the firefighters threaten to develop into mass action as public services, autoworkers, manufacturing, health and education workers all threaten action over wage claims and cuts. Are we ready to meet the needs of workers? And why is there a new willingness to resist attacks on pay and conditions by the bosses?

The first reason must be that exploitation of workers is now intensifying and forcing its way into previously 'safe' areas like public services. Changes to the balance of power between workers and bosses and to the balance of opinion between public bodies and the wider community have created a situation where bosses can selfishly apply the iron logic of Profit and Efficiency without having to worry too much what either their employees or the public think. Workers are facing more frequent and vicious attacks on their living standards. At the same time, perhaps in desperation, workers are saying, "enough is enough". Even as we are being attacked more

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frequently we are also linking up with other workers under attack. A culture of resistance is growing .

The second reason is increasing awareness of the fundamental shift in power between local communities and the State. This new relationship has been engineered by the Tories as the means to go on taking wealth from the workers and the social economy that they depend on and awarding it, as tax cuts, to the already-wealthy and the private sector they control, use or profit from. Previously the Tories attacked on a political front: powerful Labour councils, well organised Trade Unions, the political power of workers like the Miners, 'uncontrollable' elements like ravers and travellers, all were used to persuade people to accept changes to the equation of political power. These political attacks (15 years of them !) were a preparation for a wholesale assault on the economic position of the working class. Not only wages but the share of the wealth doled out to ordinary people has declined disastrously compared to that being spent on the well-off. This too is creating a culture of resentment and resistance.

In all ways, a better-off private society has profited at the expense of working people and the social economy. Road-building programs and tax breaks for car users have absorbed money at the expense of public transport.

Fundholding practices in the health sector have brand new clinics but refuse to purchase necessary treatments from hospitals who then cut back staff and close wards.

Classroom sizes grow inexorably in the state sector while grants given to the middle class to send their children to public schools are increased. Even so, this massive shift of wealth from the local to the State and from the social economy to the private sector, is not enough for the bosses, who continue to see workers as units of labour to be squeezed and exploited.

This exploitation is aided and abetted both by traditional enemies of the working class AND so called democratic politicians. They refuse to resist short term attacks like closures, ca-

sualisation or cuts in pay or services and actively participate in the long term shift of resources into the municipal, private and quango sectors. They believe that managing these changes will keep them in a job for life, whatever the consequences. Can this bureaucratic sleight of hand go on forever ?

The ACF has a definite opinion about this and we are clear that resistance will keep on growing. The economy is not productive enough to replace wealth stolen from one pocket and put in someone else's. Nor is this wealth an inexhaustible well the rich can go on dipping into. Already people are dying as hospitals refuse to treat sick people. People realise that public spending on things like transport schemes will not benefit them.

And they are fighting back ON PRINCIPLE. Resistance to exploitation and the arrogance of the rich and powerful is becoming general. A culture of resistance is growing and spreading. Our task is first to join with any and all resisting groups both physically (on the demos, in the anti road camps, in occupations and on the picket lines) and in spirit by making donations, publicising their struggle, fighting to stop anyone taking control and stifling action. Secondly, we need to build effective solidarity in local communities so that isolated workers will be defended by community based pickets and consumer boycotts. Finally if resistance is to develop and unite then WE must get organised, putting aside particular political differences in favour of unity, solidarity and mutual aid for all workers in struggle.

Lastest News

The lock out of 500 dockworkers on Merseyside continues. Initially 16 workers were told to accept casual contracts or be sacked. 80 workers backed them and were themselves sacked. This brought 500 workers out; they were immediately dismissed. Traditionally a determined and strong group of workers, new Tory laws and restrictions on union help, threw them into despair but the strikers have come back fighting.

Fortnightly mass marches are growing steadily, backed by firefighters, residential workers and other dock workers. They are building international links with other workers and adopting the direct action tactics of animal rights, road and street campaigns. Already a highly successful blockade of the docks has been organised and more mass action and boycotts are being planned. Links between revolutionary groups with our militant history and determined workers with their backs to the wall are building a new front against capitalism.

At the same time residential workers on strike have been stabbed in the back by a Labour Council using Tory laws against the workers as leaders of UNISON ingratiate themselves by sabotaging the strike. The union has co operated with the bosses to split strikers and bring in scabs .The Council now have enough workers to provide a skeleton service. People in care support the struggle to keep a properly funded and staffed service. Residents rely on committed staff but the Council plans to use unqualified casuals. Local people have been shafted by Labour yet again. They cry crocodile tears about casualisation on the docks while fighting tooth and nail to introduce casual working into residential care.

The third main focus for industrial militancy is the Firefighters, striking over cuts that will endanger lives. Their argument has been proved by the fact that the military tenders brought in can't cope and people are starting to die. The Firefighters struggle is critical. Once again we see the power of the bureaucratic State reaching down to reduce a vital service simply because administrators and bureaucrats are too concerned with themselves and their pay packets to worry about the consequences of cuts for others: the rest of us can burn, starve or kill ourselves from despair! Merseyside ACF calls for the sacking of all fire chiefs and organisation of the fire service under the control of the Firefighters and this should be the position of all groups opposing cuts.

These acts of treachery confirms the ACF's analysis : most struggles are isolated and side tracked by Labour and the unions.. And if New Labour wins power, will anything change? Unions will only be allowed to exist as long as they have no power. We need an INDEPENDENT workers movement to fight ALL capitalist institutions including the Labour Party and the unions. Only then can we start to have any real power over our own lives.