

Workplace organising

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Organising at work: introduction

Almost everyone in this society is underpaid and over-worked. Many temps, contract and casual workers have very few rights, and permanent workers are still always under the threat of redundancy. Many people are massively exploited and ill-treated, and in Britain over 20,000 people are killed at or by their work each year*. Millions more suffer stress, depression, anxiety and are injured.

The indignity of working for a living is well-known to anyone who ever has. Democracy, the great principle on which our society is supposedly founded, is thrown out the window as soon as we punch the time clock at work. With no say over what we produce, or how that production is organised, and with only a small portion of that product's value finding its way into our wages, we have every right to be pissed off at our bosses.

At work in a capitalist society, we are forced to labour in return for a wage. Employers hire workers, and pay us less than the value of work we do. The surplus amount is taken from us and turned into capital - profit for shareholders and corporate expansion. Thus all workers are exploited. Consequently, we all have a shared interest in getting a bigger share of the fruits of our labour, as well as in winning better working conditions and shorter working hours.

We can do this by organising at work. Workplace organising on libcom.org is a resource to assist all workers in improving our jobs in the here and now, and we also believe that by organising to fight, we build the seeds of a new world - not based on capitalist exploitation but on co-operation between workplace collectives where production is democratically decided by worker/consumer councils and working hours are slashed. Harmful or useless industries, such as arms manufacturing, or the banking and insurance industries, could be eliminated.

The real essentials, like food, shelter, and clothing, could be produced by everyone working just a few hours each week. Environmentally destructive industries purely concerned with profit, such as fossil fuel power plants could be converted to use clean, renewable energy sources.

Building this better world, and counteracting the day to day drudgery of contemporary wage-slavery we think can best be done using direct action in the workplace. Direct action is any form of action that cripples the boss's ability to make a profit and makes them cave in to the workers' demands. Different ways of taking action are outlined here.

All of the tactics discussed on this site depend for their success on solidarity, on the coordinated actions of a large number of workers. Individual acts of sabotage offer little more than a fleeting sense of revenge, which may admittedly be all that keeps you sane on a bad day at work. But for a real feeling of collective empowerment, there's nothing quite like direct action by a large number of disgruntled workers to make your day.

Organising your workplace: getting started

Nowadays many workplaces have no active workers' organisation. Depending on whereabouts you are in the world and what sector you work in there may or may not be much of a trade union presence. And even if there is it may just be a skeleton organisation which only represents workers with individual problems, and is unable to win demands of management. Or worse, it could be actively in cahoots with management against the workers.

Hardly, surprisingly, therefore that one of the most frequently asked questions by workers is - "What can be done at my workplace to improve things? It seems impossible, the bosses are too strong."

We would suggest that the following should be considered:

Ask questions and listen to the answers

Where do you begin? Some people when they first feel that they have been treated unfairly fly into a rage or start loudly crusading against the boss. This can be dangerous. Management jealously guards its authority in the workplace, and when you begin to question authority, you become a threat. In most workplaces, from the moment you begin to question authority, you become a troublemaker in management's eyes. If you have never before made any waves where you work, you may be shocked, hurt or angered by how quickly management turns against you. This is a good reason to be discrete when you begin to talk to others.

Talk to your fellow workers

Ask them what they think about what's happening at work. What do they think about the problems you're concerned about? Listen to what others have to say. Get their views and opinions. Most people think of an organiser as an agitator and rabble-rouser (and there are times when an organiser must be those things), but a good organiser is first of all one who asks good questions and listens well to others. Having listened well, you should be able to express not only your own views and feelings, but also those of your colleagues. The main concerns could be pay, but this isn't always the case. Sometimes, their concerns can be reactionary, such as keeping immigrant workers out, so you will need to be aware that not all concerns are necessarily progressive.

Take note

Keep a record of workers' concerns, and any significant incidents at your workplace such as an accident, a disciplinary or even threatening behaviour by a manager.

Learn about the past

Try and find out what other attempts, if any, have been made to organise the workers. It may be that there was once a union but it has collapsed.

Do some general reading around organising in the workplace and the lessons people have learned. Our workplace activity tag has dozens of accounts of organising. If any issues come up as part of your organising, you should also feel free to ask for any assistance in our organise forum.

Try to find allies

Almost inevitably there will be some people who are more concerned about the problems we face than others, and a few of those people will want to do something about it. Those few people

now form the initial core of your "organisation". You might ask the two most interested people to have coffee or lunch with you, introduce them to each other, and then ask, "What do you think about this?" If they are indeed ready to do something and not just complain, then you are almost ready to begin organising.

Map your workplace

Knowledge is power. Or at least it is the beginning of power. You will want to know everything you can about your workplace and your employer. This will be a long term, on-going process of education.

Try and find out as much as you can about the company you're working for. Does it have more than one factory or shop? Is it a public company, how many people work for it, who owns it? Companies have to do publish the accounts, so getting hold of these from the relevant agency (such as Companies House in the UK) can be extremely useful. Try and build up a picture of the firm and people who work for it - for example, an increasing problem is that workers are 'off the cards' and not working legally. Some workers may have problems with their immigration status.

You should begin your research with your department. Management has long understood the value of identifying informal work groups, their natural organisers, and their weak links. In fact, one of the main thrusts of management training is to develop strategies to alter the psychology of the workplace.

For example, the multi-national United Parcel Service has developed its psychological manipulation techniques into a fine art. The UPS managers' training manual, entitled *Charting Spheres of Influence*, shows how to map the workplace to identify the informal work groups, isolate natural organisers or instigators in these groups, exploit the weak links, and in the end, break up the groups if they can't be used to management's advantage.

While most companies have not developed their techniques into the fine Orwellian art that UPS has, many do use some of the same methods. Have outspoken workers, instigators or organisers been transferred, promoted into management or singled out for discipline? Are work groups broken up and rearranged periodically? Has the layout of the workplace been arranged to make communication between workers difficult? 1

Do you get to walk around on your job? Who does? Who doesn't? Are certain people picked on or disciplined by management in public? How does this affect the rest of the workforce? Do you feel you are always under surveillance? You get the point. All of the above can be used to break up unity and communication between workers in your workplace. Incidentally, this training does not make our employers invincible, or make our efforts any less worthwhile (despite all the training their management had received, UPS workers won a mass strike in August 1997).

Let's say that you have an important message to communicate, but you don't have the time or resources to reach every one of your fellow workers. If you can reach the natural organisers in the informal work groups and get them on your side, you can bet that the word will get around to everyone. Once organisers have been identified and agree to co-operate, it is possible to develop a network which can exert considerable power and influence.

Informal work groups also have the advantage of creating certain loyalties among their members. You can draw on this loyalty to figure out unified strategies for problems, and take advantage of people's natural tendency to stick up for those who are close to them.

Besides working with the group organisers, it is important to draw in the loners too. More than likely, their apathy, isolation, or maybe anti-union ideas stem from personal feelings of powerlessness and fear. If collective action can be pulled off successfully and a sense of security established through the group's action, fear and feelings of impotence can be reduced.

If you have got a particularly tough character in your workplace who seriously threatens unity, don't be afraid to use the social pressures that work groups can bring to bear to get that person back in line. This applies to supervisory personnel too, especially the supervisor who likes to think he or she is everyone's pal.

The balance of power

The bottom line for this type of workplace organisation is to tilt the balance of power in the workers' favour. It can win grievances for example. If grievances remain individual problems or become the responsibility of union officials, the natural organisation and loyalty that exist among work groups is lost. Chances are that the grievance is lost too.

However, if the work groups can be used to make a show of unity, the threat that the work process could be disrupted can be enough to force management into a settlement. Grievances can only be won when management understand that a grievance is no longer the concern of an individual, but instead has become the concern of all, and that problems lie ahead unless it is resolved.

Starting organising

Meet

When the time is right hold a meeting of those you have identified as being interested in getting organised. Do not be surprised if some workers do not turn up, don't get disappointed. The meeting should be as open as possible and discuss all issues which concern workers. The most obvious concern will be how to get the mass of workers involved. Every person who attends the meeting should be expected to see if there are other workers who can be got involved. Stress the importance of ensuring that management doesn't get to know about what's happening.

Unions

You and colleagues may decide that you want to try to join an official trade union and get recognition with your employer. You should think hard about this form of action, as it may or may not be appropriate depending on your place of work. Workplaces with high staff turnover and lots of agency workers, for example, will be unlikely to be able to maintain a functional union organisation. Similarly, a union will only be able to win from management what you and your colleagues are able to obtain by your actions. So ultimately what counts is what action you are prepared to take collectively, rather than the union. And joining in official union will tie you into official procedures and labour laws which may be highly restrictive in terms of what action they permit you to take.

Publicity

At some point a leaflet will need to be produced and either distributed secretly at work or by friends when the workers are leaving the workplace. These actions will undoubtedly bring to management's attention that some workers are involved in trying to organise.

Demand

When it is felt appropriate (which could be a period of a few weeks to many months) another larger meeting of all interested workers will need to be organised. Use the meeting to draw up a list of grievances and demands. The meeting will need to elect spokespersons to approach management.

Support

If you are going to embark on some form of campaign, you may want to try to get support, especially practical support from outside your workplace. There may be local community groups, church groups, political organisations, anarchist groups etc which may be able to assist with practical initiatives such as leaflet production, a place to meet, people to help picket, etc.

Accountability

Don't allow negotiations with bosses take place behind closed doors. Keep all meetings transparent.

It won't be easy

Be sure that the workers know that their actions may lead to the threat of dismissal and/or dismissal. Never con workers into believing it will be easy. Discuss what this would mean if all or some workers are dismissed as this will require a decision to either strike and/or occupy the workplace. The situation in countries where unions are outlawed is different and it will be impossible for workers to approach management. In such circumstances, sabotage of production may be appropriate.

Read more about taking different kinds of action at work...

Write history

Keep a record of you attempts at organising - workers struggles are so rarely recorded that valuable experience is being lost and workers have to go through the same problems. Many of them could be avoided. Feel free to post your account to our workplace activity tag .

Organising at work: some basic principles

Question Authority

Organising begins when people question authority. Someone asks, "What are they doing to us? Why are they doing it? Is it right?" Encourage people to ask, "Who is making the decisions, who is being forced to live with the decisions, and why should that be so?" People should not accept a rule or an answer simply because it comes from the authorities, whether that authority be the government, the boss, the union - or you. An effective organiser encourages their fellow workers to think for themselves.

Talk One-to-One

Almost every experienced activist agrees that "The most important thing about organising is personal one-to-one discussion." Leaflets are necessary, meetings are important, rallies are wonderful, but none of them will ever take the place of one-on-one discussion. Frequently, when you have simply listened to one of your fellow workers and heard what is on his or her mind, you have won them over because you are the only one who will listen. When you talk to Linda at the next desk and overcome her fears, answer her questions, lift her morale, invite her to the meeting or take her to the rally - that is what organising is all about.

Find the Natural Organisers

Every workplace has its social groupings of colleagues and friends. Each group has its opinion makers, its natural organisers, its instigators. They are not always the loudest or most talkative, but they are the ones the others listen to and respect. You will have gone a long way if you win over these natural organisers.

Get People Involved in Activity

Life is not a school room and people do not learn simply by going to meetings or reading leaflets. Most people learn, change, and grow in the process of action. Will you take this leaflet? Will you pass it on to your friend? Will you sign this petition? If you want to develop new organisers, get your colleagues involved in the organising.

We Are the Union!

The point of organising is not only to get individuals involved, but to join them together in a solidarity conscious group. We want to create a group which sees itself as a whole: Will you come to the meeting? Can we get the whole department to visit the boss together? Can we count on all of you on the picket line?

Activities Should Escalate Over Time

Ask people to become involved in activities of increasing commitment and difficulty. Are you willing to wear a union badge? Will you vote for a strike? Are you prepared to stand on a picket line? Are you willing to be arrested? Some union campaigns have included hundreds of people willing to go to jail for something they believed in. For many of them it started with that first question, "Will you take this leaflet?"

Confront Management

Organising is about changing power relationships, the balance of forces between management and workers. Confrontation with the employer has to be built into the escalating activities. If people are not willing to risk upsetting the boss, they won't win.

Win Small Victories

Most movements, from a small group in one workplace to massive social protests grow on the basis of small victories. The victories give us confidence that we can do more. They win us new supporters who now realise that "you can beat the boss". With each victory the group becomes more confident and therefore, more capable of winning larger victories.

Be Prepared For Setbacks

Nothing runs smoothly in life, and organising is no exception. If it doesn't succeed at first, be patient. Circumstances always change with time, new people come and go. Perhaps in a few months time your fellow workers will be more interested than they are at present. Sooner or later your employer will do something which will help that process.

Don't Forget The Outside World

Conflicts between workers and their employers have a large influence on the confidence of other workers to stand up for themselves. It is in our interests to build links and networks of support with workers employed in other companies and industries, for through standing together we will greatly increase our ability to win more control over our lives.

Produce Your Own Publicity

This is the best way of getting your message across, but don't forget to let your fellow workers get involved in its production.

Read some tips on publicity and media...

Have A Sense of Humour

Don't be deadly serious in everything that you do: organising can and should be fun. Use cartoons, songs, jokes and stories. Try and relate your publicity not just to the harshness of reality but also to your aspirations and desires.

Organising is Everything

Organisation need not be overly formal or structurally top heavy, but it must be there. A telephone tree and a mailing list may be all the organisation that you need, but if those are what you need then you must have them. Make sure your organisation is directly democratic, and any specialised positions you have, such as secretary, are instantly recallable. The last twenty years have supplied many examples of reform movements which fought hard, made some gains and then disappeared, simply because they didn't stay organised. As one union organiser, Bill Slater, says, "Only the organised survive."

Don't Organise Alone

Contact the Industrial Workers of the World, or other radical workers and join up with other working people who will be more than willing to help you. The IWW, or other libertarian groups can also provide resources which will be of vital importance in any organising drive, no matter how small. Together we can do the things that we cannot do alone.

Dealing with bullying at work guide

Cuts in staffing and resources, increasing workloads, performance related pay: all have made work more pressurised. The University of Manchester says bullying accounts for up to half of all employment stress. The few studies done show the majority of incidents are by bosses, but it's still important to support people being bullied by work 'mates'. Call it what you will: harassment, aggression, coercive management, intimidation, or things seen as 'just a joke' - all are common labels for what is really bullying. Racial or sexual harassment, or that based on sexuality or disability, may also take the form of bullying. Bullying is any long-standing aggression, physical or psychological, by an individual or group directed against someone who is unable to defend themselves. It is rarely confined to insulting remarks or open aggression, but can be subtle, devious, often taking place when there are no witnesses, and be difficult to confront for those whose confidence and self esteem have been worn down. It is a myth that only quiet or 'weak' people will be victimised since a bully will also pick on the popular or successful if they're perceived as a threat. Widespread bullying by bosses is hardly surprising in world which is structured hierarchically - the rich living off the working class, men dominating women, adults abusing children... Work is similarly organised, to control the behaviour of workers with management positions providing the perfect situation for bullying.

Bullies tend to surround themselves with supporters, spies and 'court jesters' while cultivating allies in senior management. The bully will create rivalries in the workforce, as people anxiously fight to stay in their favour, creating a divisive culture which brings out the worst in people. To be 'in' with a bully can seem the best way to survive, and cover any feelings of inadequacy by displacing these on to others, through siding with the bully's aggression. But as long as a bully feels that they can get away with it they will continue.

A living nightmare

Being bullied makes people feel vulnerable, isolated and frustrated, and may lead to stress related illnesses like constant headaches, loss of weight, ulcers or kidney problems. It affects relationships with family and friends:

"Bill gradually became quiet and withdrawn. I knew that it had something to do with work, but whenever I tried to make him talk about it, he became very irritable. He lost weight, too, and lost interest in everything. He would sleep for hours on end... for three years there was no laughter in our house."

Those being bullied often feel ashamed and that they must have done something to deserve it, which opens them to more bullying.

Spotting bullying

Spotting what's going on early puts you in a much stronger position. Problems often arise when a person is new or recently promoted. The earliest sign is that a relationship at work doesn't feel right: is your boss responding to you in a different way; do you feel put down by belittling remarks or continual criticisms of your work, even though the standard hasn't changed; are you beginning to feel that supposed mistakes are all your fault? Other signs are constant assessment, useless errands, false complaints, persistent humiliation in front of others, and a boss's inability to admit they could be wrong.

A bully will try to get rid of someone they perceive as a threat; not promoting able people, taking credit for others' ideas or work, or alternatively not giving enough work or responsibility and then claiming laziness or lack of initiative.

Surviving

In dealing with bullying it is important not to be undermined and try to remain positive, though this is easier said than done. Try to take responsibility for your feelings and behaviour, keep things in perspective and don't let it dominate your life. However deflated you feel, make time to do stuff you enjoy. Talk things over with friends, many of them will have had a similar experience. You could try self-defence or assertiveness training, as this may help you cope better.

Initial tactics: stand firm against verbal attacks - tell the bully you won't tolerate personal remarks. Keep calm and say what has to be said quietly and coherently, and if they try to shout you down, just repeat yourself and keep doing so until they listen (or more likely walk off). If instructions are unclear, ask for written clarification, suggesting this will improve your performance; this can be useful as evidence. Remain confident in your own judgement and ability. Avoid being alone with the bully if you can.

The law

There's no specific legislation dealing with bullying at work. Employers have a legal duty to protect employees' health and consult safety reps about health and safety matters, which includes bullying as it's a workplace stress. Safety reps have legal rights: to inspect the workplace and to take up health and safety complaints, with paid time off for their functions. Bullying involving a sexual racial or disability aspect may be challenged under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, Race Relations Act 1976, or Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Unions should have policies to deal with bullying, making clear that it will not be tolerated. The complaints procedure should set out on what basis the bully may be suspended pending the results of an investigation. Independent counselling should also be available. Bullying is not just some deviant behaviour which can be eliminated by having the correct policies, but such procedures can form the basis around which to organise (see the excellent Solidarity Federation pamphlet: 'Health and Safety at Work' on overcoming the pitfalls and problems of relying on legislation and the unions – email solfed.org.uk for more information).

Fighting back

Check your job description isn't being abused. Keep a detailed diary, including dates, times and locations, of every verbal attack, contrary or arbitrary instruction, or where your competence was questioned. Write to the bully after incidents, challenging them, and keep copies of relevant correspondence and memos. When making a complaint stick to the facts and avoid character assassination. It's probably a good idea to send copies of your complaint to senior management. Wherever possible, insist on a witness, either a friend or union rep, being present at meetings. Tell your doctor what's happening as they will usually give you a sick note giving you time to recover and plan your next move. It's important to state the cause, and name the bully on the sick note as it can be a very important piece of evidence.

Making a complaint may make things worse and lead to increased vindictiveness and being labelled a trouble-maker. Confrontation can be unsafe when it's done alone. Bullying usually affects several members of staff, and the more people experiencing it the stronger your case and potential allies. The staff of one school responded to problems with their headmaster by avoiding further argument, keeping silent, and not reacting. The head's self-satisfied smirk was replaced with a puzzled 'what are they up to now?' expression:

"Although this did nothing to alter the practical problems, we felt better because it was no longer the headmaster calling the tune."

Quietly build solidarity with your colleagues, being careful who you talk to, and when you have enough information use it. Be creative: paste a caricature of them on noticeboards, PCs etc.

If desperate deface their notes, property, car etc. with suitably, poignant life questions, but be careful, remember CCTV and don't get caught. If you need assistance you can contact SolFed: using an outside group can be very effective, assuring anonymity, but it's no replacement for solidarity at work.

Last resort

As a last resort you can always resign and try to prove to an industrial tribunal that you were forced to leave due to intolerable conditions. You must be employed for two years and will need a detailed log of the abuse to be able to claim 'constructive dismissal'. Tribunals will examine particular recorded incidents of abuse but their main interest is in whether the correct procedures were followed. A request for an acceptable reference can be built into a winning claim. Compensation varies. In an out-of-court settlement won by Unison, a social worker in Scotland in 1996 received £66,000 after being forced to retire through ill health, caused by bullying by her superior. A health visitor was awarded £5,000 damages in 1997 from North East Thames Community Care NHS Trust, after persistent undermining by a nursing manager.

Organising against bullying can have a knock-on effect and help build wider confidence and solidarity in the workplace as Bob, a postal worker, explains:

"Management are constantly trying to get information out of us so they can make cuts and increase profits but we do everything we can to sabotage their efficiency drives. It's our knowledge and experience which one day will be used to transform our working lives for the benefit of all. In the meantime, we have an ongoing guerrilla campaign on our hands... and that includes against union bureaucrats along with the bosses. Sure, we are not as solid as we would all like, but the basic uncooperative attitude is always there."

Guide to taking strike action

Our labour is the ultimate weapon that workers possess. Without workers bosses cannot make a profit. Strike action can be very powerful, but at the same time it, at the very least, reduces take home pay. More worryingly it may also lead to dismissal. Hardly, surprising therefore, that strike action is usually last resort taken of workers.

Now, in the much of the west nowadays, the vast majority of workers have very little experience of organising or being on strike. Here are some tips if you are forced to take such action and/or you are locked out by management.

While striking is sometimes necessary, on-the-job action, such as good work strikes, go-slows, or working-to-rule can be more effective.

Involving everyone

It is vital that all those on strike are directly involved in activities either in the form of picket duty, collecting cash, speaking or touring around, making contacts, speaking at meetings etc. These activities should not be confined to strike committees or more experienced members - by involving everyone this can help prevent boredom and stop isolation and demoralisation. Every striker should be encouraged to take part as it gives a purpose to the strike and helps make strikers class conscious. The most effective and inspirational way to involve all strikers is to regularly hold mass pickets.

Direct democracy

All strikers should be involved in the democratic running of the dispute through being on a daily basis. If tasks are rotated this should ensure that each striker builds up his/her organising experiences. As many decisions as possible should be made (and be seen to be made) when all strikers are present. If a list of peoples' specific skills are drawn up at the beginning of the dispute it can give strikers a start to organise from.

Here are some suggestions of skills and tasks to get things working for you - they may not all apply to your situation but all the issues in this list need to be considered:

- Picketing
- Visiting workplaces, community centres and trade union meetings to speak and raise money
- Preparing resolutions for other union branch meetings
- Organising petitions and financial collection groups for outside supermarkets, workplaces etc
- Treasurer/s to oversee all monies coming in and being spent
- Producing posters and leaflets and other publicity
- A research team to investigate the company's finances, draw up a list of political contacts in other union branches, other unions, workplaces etc
- A press co-ordinator to issue statements to the press (including left-wing press)
- A welfare officer to attend to any striker's personal difficulties and to suggest forms of assistance - financial particularly but also legal assistance when someone is arrested and/or charged
- Entertainments group - to organise fund-raising social nights. These can help draw in other workers, and demonstrate to strikers' families and friends they are also seen as part of the struggle.
- Newsletter editors - a regular strike bulletin (daily if possible) is needed to let people know what is happening. This helps prevent rumours and can hold the strike together. The bulletin should encourage contributions from as many strikers as possible. This can be written and produced very quickly using Desk Top Publishing equipment if it is available.
- Legal officer - especially when people have been arrested and are awaiting trial, such a person can assist solicitors in getting statements. S/he may also wish to try and get legal observers at the pickets - these can help put some pressure on the police to behave properly.

- The most effective way to ensure direct democratic control of any dispute/strike action by those workers directly involved in it is to hold weekly (or more often) mass meetings. These should be used to discuss and democratically decide the conduct of the dispute and to elect people to run it on the striker's behalf between strike/dispute meetings.
- A strike committee (or action group, or whatever name is decided) should be elected by a mass meeting and thereafter accountable to, and anyone replaceable by, another mass meeting, if the strikers decide this is necessary. This group will co-ordinate the day to day work created by the decisions at the mass meetings. Any posts or committees should also be democratically elected in this way - there should be no appointments. The strike committee should include a secretary (takes minutes and co-ordinates on going work), treasurer and a chair (for meetings).

Cash

If a strike is to last then finance should be sorted out as quickly as possible - those on strike are going to run out of money very quickly without any wages coming in. Official unions often set up fighting funds but if controlled by union officials, the money obviously can't be controlled by the strikers.

In 'official' disputes small amounts of strike pay can usually be arranged by the union but not in 'unofficial' disputes.

Part of the strike committee should be given the responsibility for raising funds. All monies must be controlled by the strikers themselves - if it is controlled by the union bureaucracy then disagreements over the strike or tactics can lead union officials to threaten the strike by withdrawing the funds.

Factory/workplace collections are the usual source of money. Appeals should also be made to unions and community organisations. The biggest collections are usually made when a striker has had the opportunity to speak to other workers. There is nothing as inspiring to other groups of workers as hearing from people on strike.

Every penny should be accounted for. Any distribution of the funds should be made in a way agreed at a mass meeting. This will often cause problems but it must be done and be seen to be done. A treasurer should be accountable to the strike committee in between mass meetings.

Media

This usually involves strikers' bulletins, leaflets for the general public, translation of materials and articles in newspapers. This should include the left-wing press, anarchist and socialist, which will be supportive. The most important communication, however, is direct - from worker to worker. Public meetings, including street meetings, can also be used to gather support. Leaflets need to be printed in all relevant languages.

Official or unofficial

Even today most strikes are unofficial, and it is almost certain that any strike for union recognition will be 'unofficial.' In brief the terms are used to define strikes which are covered by trade union legislation (which will differ in different countries) and those that are not. Trade unions can have their assets sequestrated if they support a strike not covered by trade union legislation.

We would argue that it is not that important whether a strike is official or not, if a group of workers are forced to take strike action then they should be supported, full stop. If the union officials don't support this then tell them to get lost.

Full-time officials

There is a very long history of trade union officials initially giving support to a strike, offering help and assistance and then leaving the strikers to their own devices. It is essential that every strike committee should prepare their fellow members and strikers for this eventuality, financially, physically and psychologically.

This means that the strikers should organise independently of the union bureaucrats from the start and must seek to be self-supporting. Strikers need to be able to rely for aid and solidarity outside of the officials and bureaucracy.

The full-time official (usually appointed by other bureaucrats rather than elected by the workers) is supposed to represent and be under the control of the strikers. In reality, this rarely happens. The official's decisions will often (usually?) be what the union solicitor says is the best strategy, which in practice means anything is possible as long as it is within the anti-strike laws, or their interpretation of it.

Union officials will wish to avoid, at all costs any threat to the funds of the union. If union officials do attend strike meetings it should be made clear that s/he is a paid official and should therefore be expected to do as the members want - not the other way round. Beware: union officials sell out.

'Revolutionary' groups

These are not well supported at the moment. If they come and offer support demands should be placed on them and their members. They should be expected to respect strikers' wishes. Those that do respect strikers' wishes usually find a better hearing for their ideas in times of discussions, particularly during difficult periods in the strike.

A strike must not be subordinated to boost the potential of a revolutionary group over the needs of the people on strike. Collection sheets and materials should be headed with the strikers' logo/slogan and not that of the revolutionary organisation. This makes good sense anyway - many people are reluctant to give to such groups, and are more willing to give to a group of strikers.

Direct action/solidarity/flying pickets and anti-union laws

It is essential to put a daily picket on the workplace(s) which is the source of the strike.

However, unless it is a very large workplace (involving hundreds of workers) then very few strikes are ever won by keeping the action confined to the workplace(s) at the core of the dispute - strikers will quickly become isolated and eventually defeated.

If it is obvious that the bosses are not budging within a couple of weeks, then this may mean having to dig in and prepare for a lengthy battle. Solidarity action is the key to winning such a struggle. This means involving workers in other workplaces, usually with the same employers and sometimes unions. But not always, as other workers in and out of unions, often with different employers, are used to produce goods or do work to offset the loss of production at the source of the strike.

By far the best and most effective way to win solidarity action is to picket the workplaces of the workers you want (and need) to involve. These are called flying pickets by militant trade unionists but secondary pickets by the bosses, who are shit-scared of them and wish to outlaw such solidarity action by the use of anti-union laws.

All full-time, repeat all full-time union officials, fall into line with the bosses and the State's laws when they are used or even threatened. In most cases the threat of action will usually result in the full-time official distancing him/herself from any strikers organising flying pickets.

If these laws are threatened or used then a strike can only be won if the striking workers and their supporters are prepared to defy the law, the bosses who use it and the trade union officials who will not break it.

'Break the law, not the strike, not the workers' movement - no state interference in the democratic running of a trade union or workers struggles.'

As picketing is so vital, then so is the control of workers on a picket line. Stewards should be elected by a mass meeting to control the conduct of all workers and their supporters on the picket line. If other workers are brought in to assist in picketing, then these people should be clearly identified by the strike committee on this basis and subject to the control of the same committee.

The strike committee must always retain the right to remove anyone from the picket line who they decide is acting contrary to the interests of the workers on strike and placing a dispute in jeopardy by their conduct. Drinking of alcohol should be banned on picket lines.

Contact should be established with sympathetic lawyers when a strike and picketing takes place, as action in the course of a strike could lead to harassment and arrest. Legal support is very important in such circumstances.

The building of permanent links between workers is vital during a strike - this is especially the case with workers in the same firm and/or industry - this will help in defeating future attacks on all workers.

Regular direct contact between workers, before, during and after a strike, can go a long way to breaking isolation and encouraging rank and file resistance.

Unemployed people and scabbing

To guard against scabs it is essential to work amongst unemployed people - alongside Claimants' Unions or groups - and, if possible, to organise them, so that unity of action can be established to fight threats to end their meagre benefits if they do not accept scab jobs.

Leafleting or picketing of dole or employment agency offices, especially when strikers' jobs are being advertised, is vital. Unemployed people should be encouraged to get involved in the strike. In the SITA bin workers strike of 2001, supporters leafleted employment agencies and blockaded coaches filled with replacement staff.

Discussion meetings

Discussion meetings between workers on issues relevant to a strike should be organised during and after the strike. This will encourage discussion and aid in the development of new ideas and tactics to use during the strike.

At the end of the strike the experiences of the workers should be written down. Successes and failures should be analysed and then they can be used in future strikes. Strikers may not win their particular struggle, but they can help others to learn from their experiences and win the next time.

Occupations

The most effective means of preventing the employer/company from resuming production during a strike, or of disposing of the premises and assets, is by occupying the plant or office. Unless the numbers on strike are very large then it is likely that 'outside' support will be needed, including from amongst the unemployed. Details, methods and planning can only be decided on the site and according to the circumstances prevailing. Occupations and work-ins were a major part of the struggles by trade unionists in Britain during the 60s and 70s.

Strike support groups

It is important that as soon as possible that an independent Strike Support Group is set up. The purpose of this is for strikers and supporters to decide how best to co-ordinate support for the strike. This Group must be accountable to the strikers and no actions which are not supported by the strikers should be initiated.

In conclusion

These are just some (very brief) suggestions and basic guidelines for the conduct (and hopefully success) of an industrial dispute or strike.

The essence of taking and winning strike action is to keep this completely under the direct control of the strikers themselves and independent of the trade union and political bureaucracies - large or small.

The real message is: to win a strike strikers have to be prepared to fight the full time union officials as well as all the other forces ranged against them. All full time officials will settle for something which is infinitely more in line with what the bosses want than what the workers have been or are struggling for.

Wildcat or official strike action?

The best-known form of direct action is the strike, in which workers simply walk off their jobs and refuse to produce profits for the boss until they get what they want. This is the preferred tactic of bureaucratic unions but is one of the least effective ways of confronting the boss.

The bosses, with their large financial reserves, are better able to withstand a long drawn-out strike than the workers. In many cases, court orders will freeze or confiscate the union's strike funds. And worst of all, a long walk-out only gives the boss a chance to replace striking workers with a replacement, or "scab", workforce.

Workers are far more effective when they take direct action while still on the job. By deliberately reducing the boss's profits while continuing to collect wages, you can cripple the boss without giving some scab the opportunity to take your job.

Unofficial, or wildcat, action - that is, organised with other workers independent of union officials bypasses anti-union laws meaning there are no union funds to sequester and there is no obligation to provide the bosses with advance warning - giving them the opportunity to arrange scabs.

Direct action, by definition, means those tactics workers can undertake themselves, without the help of government agencies, union bureaucrats, or high-priced lawyers. Running to an Industrial Tribunal (or outside the UK the relevant arbitration board in your country) for help may be appropriate in some cases, but it is **not** a form of direct action, and they too are generally weighted in the bosses' favour, taking up a great deal of time and money.

Listed here are some of the most popular forms of direct action that workers have used to get what they wanted. Yet nearly every one of these tactics is, technically speaking, illegal. Every major victory won by labour over the years was achieved with militant direct actions that were, in their time, illegal and subject to police repression. After all, for much of history the laws surrounding trade unions were simple - there were none. Strikers were routinely beaten and killed by police and soldiers and imprisoned with extremely harsh sentences.

After years of relentless struggle, the legal right of workers to organise is now officially recognised, yet so many restrictions exist that effective action is as difficult as ever. For this reason, any worker contemplating direct action on the job - bypassing the legal system and hitting the boss where they are weakest - should be fully aware of labour law, how it is applied, and how it may be used against labour activists. At the same time, workers must realise that the struggle between the bosses and the workers is not a badminton match - it is war. Under these circumstances, workers must use what works, whether the bosses (and their courts) like it or not. Listed in this section, then, are the most useful forms of direct action.

It is worth bearing in mind that the best weapon is, of course, organisation. If one worker stands up and protests, the bosses will squash him or her like a bug. Squashed bugs are obviously of little use to their families, friends, and social movements in general. But if all the workers stand up together, the boss will have no choice but to take you seriously. They can fire any individual worker who makes a fuss, but they might find it difficult to fire their entire workforce.

Solidarity is strength!

Dual power at work

Rather than wait for the boss to give in to our demands and institute long-sought change, workers often have the power to institute those changes on our own, without the boss's say-so.

Some practical examples:

Pay

The owner of a San Francisco coffeehouse was a poor money manager, and one week the wage packets didn't arrive. The manager kept assuring the workers that the cheques would be coming soon, but eventually the workers took things into their own hands. They began to pay themselves on a day-to-day basis straight out of the cash register, leaving receipts for the amounts advanced so that everything was on the up-and-up. An uproar ensued, but the cheques always arrived on time after that.

Conditions

In a small printing shop in San Francisco's financial district, an old decrepit offset press was finally removed from service and pushed to the side of the press room. It was replaced with a brand new machine, and the manager stated his intention to use the old press "for envelopes only." It began to be cannibalised for spare parts by the press operators, though, just to keep some of the other presses running. Soon enough, it was obvious to everyone but the manager that this press would never see service again.

The printers asked the manager to move it upstairs to the storage room, since by now it merely took up valuable space in an already crowded press room. He hummed and hawed and never seemed to get around to it. Finally, one afternoon after the printers had punched out for the day, they got a moving dolly and wrestled the press onto the elevator to take it upstairs. The manager found them just as they got it into the elevator, and though he turned livid at this blatant usurpation of his authority, he never mentioned the incident to them. The space where the press had been was converted to an "employee lounge," with several chairs and a magazine rack.

Breaks

Workers in one London office thought it unfair that only smokers were allowed to take 5-10-minute breaks whenever they pleased, so decided that all workers should be entitled to these breaks. Without asking management or HR, staff decided to just start taking them, and inform new members of staff of this "rule".

There are thousands of similar examples - why not think about what changed you can make in your workplace? Often systems and rules de facto implemented by workers can be difficult for managers to challenge afterwards for fear of rocking the boat or damaging a "co-operative" atmosphere.

Go-slow guide

By deliberately slowing the rate of work, all together, the bosses' profits are hit, without workers losing wages. If everyone sticks together in solidarity victimisation of individuals can also be prevented.

The go-slow, or slowdown, has a long and honorable history. In 1899, the organised dock workers of Glasgow, Scotland, demanded a 10% increase in wages, but met with refusal by the bosses and went on strike. Strike-breakers were brought in from among the agricultural workers, and the dockers had to acknowledge defeat and return to work under the old wages. But before they went back to work, they heard this from the secretary of their union:

"You are going back to work at the old wage. The employers have repeated time and again that they were delighted with the work of the agricultural labourers who have taken our place for several weeks during the strike. But we have seen them at work. We have seen that they could not even walk a vessel and that they dropped half the merchandise they carried; in short, that two of them could hardly do the work of one of us. Nevertheless, the employers have declared themselves enchanted with the work of these fellows. Well, then, there is nothing for us to do but the same. Work as the agricultural labourers worked."

This suggestion was obeyed to the letter. After a few days the contractors sent for the union secretary and begged him to tell the dockworkers to work as before, and that they were willing to grant the 10% pay increase.

At the turn of the century, a gang of section men working on a railroad in Indiana were notified of a cut in their wages. The workers immediately took their shovels to the blacksmith shop and cut two inches from the scoops. Returning to work they told the boss "short pay, short shovels."

Good work strike

Instead of a conventional strike, workers with demands that the bosses are unwilling to meet can collectively decide to have a good work strike.

One of the biggest problems for service industry workers is that many forms of direct action, such as go-slows, end up hurting the consumer (mostly fellow workers) more than the boss. One way around this is to provide better or cheaper service - at the boss's expense, of course.

Workers at Mercy Hospital in France, who were afraid that patients would go untreated if they went on strike, instead refused to file the billing slips for drugs, lab tests, treatments, and therapy. As a result, the patients got better care (since time was being spent caring for them instead of doing paperwork), for free. The hospital's income was cut in half, and panic-stricken administrators gave in to all of the workers' demands after three days.

In 1968, Lisbon bus and train workers gave free rides to all passengers to protest a denial of wage increases. Conductors and drivers arrived for work as usual, but the conductors did not pick up their money satchels. Needless to say, public support was solidly behind these take-no-fare strikers. Tram workers in Australia did likewise in 1990.

In New York City, USA, Industrial Workers of the World restaurant workers, after losing a strike, won some of their demands by heeding the advice of IWW organisers to "pile up the plates, give 'em double helpings, and figure the checks (bills) on the low side."

Guide to sick-outs

The idea is to cripple your workplace by having all or most of the workers call in sick on the same day or days. Unlike the formal walkout, it can be used effectively by single departments and work areas, and can often be successfully used even without a formal union organisation.

It is the traditional method of direct action for public employee unions in the United States, which are legally prevented from striking.

At a New England mental hospital, just the thought of a sick-in got results. A shop steward, talking to a supervisor about a fired union member, casually mentioned that there was a lot of flu going around, and wouldn't it be too bad if there weren't enough healthy people to staff the wards.

At the same time - completely by coincidence, of course - dozens of people were calling the personnel office to see how much sick time they had left. The supervisor got the message, and the union member was rehired.

In Denmark in 2006, 100 pilots went on sick-in in solidarity with striking pilots, and in 1969, thousands of American air traffic controllers went on sick-out for better conditions and wages.

Selective strikes

Unpredictability is a great weapon in the hands of the workers. In the US, Pennsylvania teachers used the Selective Strike to great effect in 1991, when they walked a picket line on Monday and Tuesday, reported for work on Wednesday, struck again on Thursday, and reported for work on Friday and Monday.

This on-again, off-again tactic not only prevented the administrators from hiring scabs to replace the teachers, but also forced administrators who hadn't been in a classroom for years to staff the schools while the teachers were out. The tactic was so effective that the Pennsylvania legislature promptly introduced bills that would outlaw selective strikes.

Firefighters have also struck just at certain times, just a couple of hours a day, losing the minimum pay but causing maximum disruption to management and potential strike-breakers.

Sitdown strike or occupation guide

A strike doesn't have to be long to be effective. Timed and executed right, a strike can be won in minutes. Such strikes are "sitdowns" or "occupations" when everyone just stops work and sits tight, or "mass grievances" when everybody leaves work to go to the boss's office to discuss some matter of importance. This can have many advantages over a conventional strike.

The Detroit Industrial Workers of the World employed the Sitdown to good effect at the Hudson Motor Car Company between 1932 and 1934. "Sit down and watch your pay go up" was the message that rolled down the assembly line on strikers that had been fastened to pieces of work. The steady practice of the sitdown raised wages 100% (from \$.75 an hour to \$1.50) in the middle of a depression.

IWW theatre extras, facing a 50% pay cut, waited for the right time to strike. The play had 150 extras dressed as Roman soldiers to carry the Queen on and off the stage. When the cue for the Queen's entrance came, the extras surrounded the Queen and refused to budge until the pay was not only restored, but tripled.

Sitdown occupations are still powerful weapons. In 1980, the KKR Corporation announced that it was going to close its Houdaille plant in Ontario and move it to South Carolina. The workers responded by occupying the plant for two weeks. KKR was forced to negotiate fair terms for the plant closing, including full pensions, severance pay, and payment towards health insurance premiums.

Whistle-blowing guide

Consumer industries like restaurants and packing plants are the most vulnerable. And again, as in the case of the good work strike, you'll be gaining the support of the public, whose patronage can make or break a business.

Whistle blowing can be as simple as a face-to-face conversation with a customer, or it can be as dramatic as the P.G.&E. engineer who revealed that the blueprints to the Diablo Canyon nuclear reactor had been reversed. Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* blew the lid off the scandalous health standards and working conditions of the meatpacking industry when it was published earlier this century.

Waiters can tell their restaurant clients about the various shortcuts and substitutions that go into creating the faux-haute cuisine being served to them. When their complaints about poor hygiene were ignored, IWW Starbucks union members in New York took photographs of rats and cockroaches in the coffee shop outlets and showed them to customers on picket lines.

On a related line - almost all businesses are very scared of a tax audit...

Just as working to rule puts an end to the usual relaxation of standards, whistle-blowing reveals it for all to know.

Whistle-blowers should be warned, however, that this carries a high risk of getting the sack - particularly in a small organisation - so be careful!

Work-to-rule: a guide

Instead of striking, workers with demands that the bosses are unwilling to meet can collectively decide to start a "work-to-rule".

Almost every job is covered by a maze of rules, regulations, standing orders, and so on, many of them completely unworkable and generally ignored. Workers often violate orders, resort to their own techniques of doing things, and disregard lines of authority simply to meet the goals of the company. There is often a tacit understanding, even by the managers whose job it is to enforce the rules, that these shortcuts must be taken in order to meet targets on time.

But what would happen if each of these rules and regulations were followed to the letter? Confusion would result - productivity and morale would plummet. And best of all, the workers can't get in trouble with the tactic because they are, after all, "just following the rules."

Under nationalisation, French railway strikes were forbidden. Nonetheless, rail workers found other ways of expressing their grievances. One French law requires the engineer to assure the safety of any bridge over which the train must pass. If after a personal examination they are still doubtful, then they must consult other members of the train crew. Of course, every bridge was so inspected, every crew was so consulted, and none of the trains ran on time.

In order to gain certain demands without losing their jobs, the Austrian postal workers strictly observed the rule that all mail must be weighed to see if the proper postage was affixed. Formerly they had passed without weighing all those letters and parcels which were clearly underweight, thus living up to the spirit of the regulation but not to its exact wording. By taking each separate piece of mail to the scales, carefully weighing it, and then returning it to its proper place, the postal workers had the office congested with unweighed mail on the second day.

Or imagine this: In the United States, BART train operators are allowed to ask for "10-501s" (toilet breaks) anywhere along the mainline, and Central Control cannot deny them. In reality, this rarely happens. But what would management do if suddenly every train operator began taking extended 10-501s on each trip they made across the Bay? Working to rule offers many possibilities for action, and if workers stick together they can win without losing any pay.

Making the most of spontaneous rebellions at work

It would be nice if we always had tested and trusted structures in place able to respond to unexpected situations at work. Unfortunately this doesn't describe many workplaces where structures tend to be weak and disorganised or slow and bureaucratic. The situations that upset us the most are likely to be unanticipated. Sudden rebellion is most likely to develop as a response to unexpected decisions or circumstances i.e. unfair sackings, shift changes etc, and our actions need often be rapid and ad hoc. What follows is a few tips on how to make the most of these spontaneous rebellions at work:

1. **Act quickly.** In our experience the response to such things needs to be very quick. If we wait to ask people to go to a meeting a few days later then the incident will no longer be at the forefront of people's minds, the decision may have gained reluctant acceptance just by having been applied for some time, the initial fury will have passed, and so probably will the time to act.

2. **Think carefully.** Although we'll need to be acting quickly we have to think carefully and responsibly, which can obviously be hard when we are likely to be really angry. Is what we're doing going to lead to improvements or just lead to more job losses? Never is it more important to think as workers rather than political activists. Also, inform people as best you can, be honest about what the likely consequences of an action are and avoid giving people false hope.

3. **Get everyone away from work.** The next most important thing is to get everyone away from work, to stop doing the things we are supposed to be doing. Serving customers, answering phones, backing off coaches, stacking shelves, these things become ingrained responses and to get everyone to stop doing what they are supposed to be doing is a massive step that opens the door to various possibilities. As soon as we get away from work we are effectively on strike. Then they have to get us to go back and the longer we can stay away the harder that is likely to be. Also, don't be put off if you work somewhere with fewer staff. Small places can sometimes mean you have more chance of success. If two of you make up 2/3 of the workforce, management are going to be a bit stuffed if you start refusing to work. However, this might depend on how easy it is for them to bring in new workers at short notice.

4. **Don't talk to management.** It is never a good idea in these early stages to enter into dialogue with management. It seems a very sensible thing to do but in doing so we inevitably get drawn back into the discourse of the company. It moves debate onto where they're strong; our strength is in our collective ability to stop working. Going to management makes us argue with them on their terms, not ours. In ten minutes of respectful dialogue you'll go from refusing a decision with collective power to asking management if they could change their mind (please), and inevitably to submission. Also, don't assume that going to a 'good manager' will bring you any more success. Even the 'good manager' can only act out company policy. Entering into negotiations with any set of bosses or bureaucrats stalls momentum and so is a bad move. Your best bet is to collectively refuse whatever decision has sparked off the rebellion.

5. **Spread the struggle.** Try to spread the strike through the company and the geographical area you work in, across industry. Go to different parts of your workplace telling them what's going on and try to get them out as well (or at least taking some sort of on-the-job action). This might seem an absurdly utopian suggestion but workers in a coffee shop in a bus station (for example) are inevitably going to be pissed off about something themselves and might join a spontaneous bus workers' strike, bringing their own demands to it. Regardless, a failed attempt to involve them might make them go away and think about the idea of getting involved should the situation arise again (whether at their current job or somewhere else). It's important to attempt to create a culture in which workers joining together in such a manner isn't seen as unusual.

Even when they aren't totally successful, these sorts of revolts can make management back off quite a bit, or at least take a more soft line, which opens up a certain amount of space for workers. To put it bluntly, unless they're thick as shit management won't be causing trouble for a while. And this will be a direct result of your actions.

Sabotage in the workplace

The term "sabotage" derives from French factory workers throwing their wooden shoes ("*sabots*") into machinery to jam them and stop production. Sabotage refers to all activities which workers can undertake to reduce production or rate of work.

These can be minor activities such as making personal phone calls on work time to major destruction of property or information.

While most severe monkey-wrenching tactics are non-violent, most of them are major social no-nos. They should be used only in the most heated of battles, where it is open wholesale class warfare between the workers and the bosses. Listed below are some examples of more major sabotage.

Disrupting magnetically-stored information (such as cassette tapes, floppy discs and poorly-shielded hard drives) can be done by exposing them to a strong magnetic field. Of course, it would be just as simple to "misplace" the discs and tapes that contain such vital information. Restaurant workers can buy a bunch of live crickets or mice at the local pet shop, and liberate them in a convenient place. For bigger laughs, give the Board of Health an anonymous tip.

One thing that always haunts a strike call is the question of scabs and strike breakers. In a railway strike in 1886, the scab problem was solved by strikers who took "souvenirs" from work home with them. Oddly enough, the trains wouldn't run without these small, crucial pieces, and the scabs found themselves with nothing to do.

Of course, nowadays, it may be safer for workers to simply hide these pieces in a secure place at the jobsite, rather than trying to smuggle them out of the plant. In a more modern setting, some IT engineers can make sure software they write only works with their consent.

Use the boss's letterhead to order a ton of unwanted office supplies and have it delivered to the office. If your company has a toll-free number, have all your friends jam the phone lines with angry calls about the current situation, or a Freepost address can be bombarded with heavy mail. Be creative with your use of superglue. The possibilities are endless.

Solidarity against sexism on the shop floor

If there is anything that I have learned from working in the restaurant and retail industry for over 14 years, it is that sexual harassment and sexism in the workplace is an issue that has not gone away. Perhaps you have become more tolerant of being sexually objectified. Maybe you are afraid that being uncomfortable with sexual advances or comments means that you are a prude or hopelessly outdated. The reality is that sexual harassment and sexism are all about power. We feel uncomfortable about standing up for ourselves in these situations because to do so questions power relations; not only in the workplace, but in society in general.

Is it sexual harassment or sexism in the workplace?

- A district manager asks you and your 40-year old female coworker, “Will you girls make us some coffee for our meeting?”
- Your manager makes all the women in the workplace wear tight baby doll t-shirts which are intentionally a size too small that say, “For a Good Time Call ...” while the men are told to wear plain black polo shirts that do not have to be form-fitting.
- During your training at a retail clothing store, you are told to flirt with potential customers to make sales. You feel uncomfortable with this and despite your efforts to be proactive about sales in a professional way, you are pulled aside later for not being “friendly enough.”
- A conventionally-attractive regular customer often sits at the bar and stares at you throughout your shift and has made several comments about your appearance that make you uncomfortable. When you tell him to stop, he says that you should be flattered. Your boss fails to act and your other coworkers, who appreciate his attention, tell you that you are strange for not liking it.

The answer: If any of these policies, attitudes or behavior makes you feel uncomfortable, then you should not have to deal with it. Everyone’s comfort level is different. Some of your coworkers might not mind being called “girl” or “sweetie,” while others may take offense to being referred to as a “woman” or by any gender-specific pronoun. Different expectations for employee uniforms that force coworkers into stereotyped gender roles are sexist practices that create a potentially hostile workplace. Flirting with customers should never be a given, but a choice. Some people may find that they like the attention and get better tips by flaunting their appearance and flirting, but not everyone should have to interact in a similar fashion. Berating others for what makes them uncomfortable promotes an environment of harassment.

So you feel like a policy or an individual at work is creating a hostile work environment? Going the legal route is not always the best or solitary option. Collectively standing up together with your coworkers against sexist practices, policies or individuals can often be the safest and most powerful way to fight. Though it is technically illegal, it is easier for companies to retaliate against an individual than a group of workers. In addition, sexual harassment cases often result in companies dragging women through the mud and can prove to be very traumatic for the victim. Legal processes can take a long time to resolve, but taking direct action in your workplace is immediate. When workers come together to fight sexual harassment and sexism, we are empowered by taking back the workplace and at the same time, form closer bonds with our coworkers by building mutual trust and respect for one another.

How do I fight sexism and harassment in my workplace?

- Form a coalition with coworkers who share and/or are sympathetic to your concerns. Sexual harassment affects union and non-union members alike, so do not exclude any possible allies.
- Ban customers and clients who are repeat offenders from the store and make sure that the ban is being enforced by the rest of your coworkers.

- Confront your boss as a group about sexual harassment issues (perhaps even a definition) and make it known that you take it very seriously and so should they.
- Confront workers who refuse to support their fellow workers when they feel harassed, violated, or uncomfortable. Have one-on-one conversations about the impact of their actions (not respecting boundaries) and words (“it’s not a big deal”), and express your feelings in a genuine, but professional manner.
- Any policy, dress code, or expectations that fellow workers find to be sexist should be addressed, regardless of whether or not you’ve reached consensus. If you are required by your job to wear a tight baby doll t-shirt, but men can wear polos, you should also be able to wear polo, if you do not want to wear the t-shirt.

UK specific guides

Employers who fail to pay employee tax and National Insurance

Here's a real case of fraud that the government does nothing to stop meaning that rip-off bosses keep getting away with it.

Many people are unaware of a problem until they become unemployed or sick and need to claim contributory-based benefits. They will be refused these benefits and cannot win their appeal if no National Insurance has been paid.

No one has to accept this situation. Employers should be warned, in writing, that the Inland Revenue could be called in to check their books and that this could result in a jail sentence for avoiding tax. This is normally enough to make them pay up. The best way to avoid this situation occurring in the first place is to get a P60 when you start work, insist on regular pay slips, both of which you have a right to.

If you work in a more lawless trade such as the building industry legal avenues may not be as easily accessible, in which case there is always direct action. As the saying goes, if you are knocked, knock it down! It'll make them think twice before ripping the next poor bugger off.

Health and safety - the basics

Every year in the UK, over 20,000 workers are killed by their work. 246,000 workplace accidents are reported each year, and 1.2 million people believe they are suffering from a work-related illness. 1

All employers should:

- ☒ Provide safe and healthy working conditions;
- ☒ Provide proper information and training for everyone in all types of workplaces;
- ☒ Draw up and circulate procedures for dealing with risks at work;
- ☒ Inform all workers of Health and Safety agreements, policies and practices before we start work.

Health and safety in the workplace costs money and time and hits profits, so bosses inevitably try to avoid their legal responsibilities. By law, they have to provide health and safety for all workers in their employment.

Remember, you have a legal right to walk off the job if you feel in imminent danger.

Casualisation Kills

Almost two million of us are now employed on a temporary basis. Hundreds of us die through work each year and many more are seriously injured. The vast majority of cases are easily preventable. Millions suffer crippling back pain, repetitive strain injuries and many other long-term injuries and illnesses simply because employers put profits first.

All workplaces are potentially dangerous and all work can kill - and the most vulnerable are temporary and agency workers.

The majority of temporary and agency workers are not self-employed but employees, with similar rights to other workers. However, our rights to basic Health and Safety are often neglected or totally ignored.

After only two hours on the job, Simon Jones, an agency worker in Brighton, was beheaded by a crane on Shoreham Docks. He had been sent to his death with no training or care for his life. This is just one shocking example among countless.

Recently, the courts fined a company just £6,000 for breaches of safety laws that led to a worker's death - so, £6,000 is the price of life at work in the UK today.

On average in the UK, 85 construction workers lose their lives in what the government say are mostly predictable and preventable incidents caused by some failure of management by employers (Tony O'Brien, Construction Safety Campaign).

For example: UK construction workers killed in 6 weeks in April/May 2003: 1 death each in Herefordshire, Bedford, Salisbury, Hillingdon, Staffordshire, Leicestershire & Leeds. 2 deaths each in Essex & Durham. 3 deaths in Wales. The youngest victim was aged just 17.

These are not just statistics, these are real people who met tragic and generally violent deaths, leaving families and friends going through the horror of bereavement.

Only by standing together can we prevent bosses from intimidating and victimising us. We cannot leave it to the Government, the bosses, political parties, or the established trade unions.

The most effective way of defending our rights is by organising ourselves and taking collective direct action. By forming our own groups where everyone is equal, we can resist exploitation and enforce our rights at work effectively.

Defending our rights is just the start. Once we achieve this, we can start to take the initiative.

An injury to one is an injury to all!

Key employment rights

Regardless of work status (temporary or permanent, agency, full or part-time) or our contracts of employment, most of us have certain basic rights. These include:

1. The right to be told in writing how much and when we are to be paid.

Minimum pay is £4.50 per hour from October 2003 (up from £4.20). For 18-21 year olds it is £3.80 (up from £3.60). For agency workers, wages must be paid on the agreed day even if the hiring company has not paid the agency.

2. The right to at least 4 weeks paid leave per year.

Any employment contract should set out leave entitlements. If it doesn't, then 4 weeks must be given (which can include public holidays). All workers, agency workers, homeworkers, trainees, so-called casuals and most freelancers are included in this. Holiday entitlement starts immediately, e.g. on day 1, we get 2 days leave, and, after 6 months, we get 10 days (for part-time workers it is less and it applies to jobs started since October 2001). NB many workplaces now sidestep this by allegedly factoring in holiday pay to your wages, thereby meaning you will lose money by taking the time off owed to you.

3. The right to breaks of at least 20 minutes during each 6 hours of work.

We are entitled to at least 11 hours rest in each 24 hours and a minimum of a day a week off. Rest breaks for under 18s are minimum 30 minutes every 4 1/2 hours.

4. The right to refuse to work any more than 48 hours each week.

We cannot be forced to work over 48 hours per week unless we have agreed to it in writing (note that this is averaged over any 17 week period, so we can be forced to do more in any one week).

5. The right to sick pay when we are ill.

We are entitled to statutory sick pay if we normally earn over £77 per week and we have been working for over 3 months (or are deemed to have been in continuous employment for 13 weeks).

6. The right to maternity/paternity leave when we have children.

From April 2003, most mothers are entitled to 26 weeks paid maternity leave and an additional 26 weeks unpaid leave. To get maternity pay, we must earn over £77 per week and have been working for over 6 months by the time the baby is 15 weeks from being due. For the first 6 weeks, this should be 90% of average earnings, then a flat rate of £100 for 20 weeks. If pay can't be claimed, Maternity Allowance may be claimed from the DSS. Fathers/male partners get 2 weeks paid paternity leave (subject to the same qualifying conditions as for maternity).

7. The right to be free from harassment.

We are all entitled to a workplace where there is no racial or sexual harassment, bullying, prejudice or discrimination. Agency and part-time workers have the same rights as full-time workers.

8. The right to defend ourselves.

We all have the right to protection from dismissal for asserting our statutory employment rights. We also have the right to join with our fellow workers and organise ourselves collectively, and to join a trade union.

9. The right to refuse work that is unsafe or where training is not provided.

We all have the right to refuse to work if we find ourselves in imminent danger. Also, laws governing agencies mean they should not send us to jobs for which we are not qualified, and they must ensure that proper training is provided.

Standing Up for Ourselves

Casualisation and so-called flexible working are ways of undermining working conditions and exploiting us more than ever. They also make permanent jobs more vulnerable. So casualisation does not only affect temporary and agency workers, but all workers.

Employers will sack workers they do not like, knowing full well that many are reluctant or unable to go through an employment tribunal. It is not enough having a few statutory and contractual rights at work - we need to stand together to ensure that the rights long fought for are respected.

Only by standing together can we prevent bosses from intimidating and victimising us. We cannot leave it to the Government, the bosses, political parties, or the established trade unions. The most effective way of defending our rights is by organising ourselves and taking collective direct action. By forming our own groups where everyone is equal, we can resist exploitation and enforce our rights at work effectively.

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