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Dealing with Difficult Bosses

Solidarity Federation

Spring 1998

Do you ever wonder what your life would be like if society was organised along different lines?

As a postal worker, my job can sometimes be routine, so to relieve the boredom, I sometimes daydream about such things, particularly what the job would be like 'come the revolution'. Of course people would still want letters delivered, but does that mean the job wouldn't change?

It would – though the fine details would be up to all of us to work out when we are in a position to do so. Some things are assumed, although if management stopped running the post office, we would make sure everyone got their letters. The sole purpose would not be profit at all cost. That would mean shorter hours and no more 6 day weeks, no more overtime to make ends meet, no more macho management bullies. And that's just for starters. And don't forget you – 'the customer' – no more junk mail, no more bills, no more tax demands, eviction notices or the like.

Too good to be true? Surely, we would be lost without management to tell us what to do? The answers to these questions are no, and no.

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When I first started at the Post Office 10 years ago, one of the first things I heard hurled at a manager by an old timer was 'this job will run without the bosses but not without us'. Startlingly simple, but an assertion which is borne out with experience. We do the work. We know the job inside out. We know how to save time and money. We know how to do everything most efficiently and in the least hours. Management are constantly trying to get that information out of us so they can make cuts and increase profits.

We wouldn't tell them what we know. In fact, we do everything we can to sabotage management's efficiency drives. But it's our knowledge and experience which, one day in the future, 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. One thing that has kept me at the post office so long is my fellow workers disrespect for petty authority. And that includes union bureaucrats along with the bosses.

An understanding amongst us is that anything management want us to do is bad news. Time and again their proposals are kicked out following a brief debate. Sure, we are not always as solid as we would all like, but the basic uncooperative attitude is always there. The management start a get-smart campaign, and we start a get-scruffy campaign, you know the type of thing. The bosses statements are met with our resolve. Their appeals for the guilty to step forward are met with cries of 'I am Spartacus'. Team briefings are an excuse to piss around, and if you can piss-take the manager by carrying out orders literally, all to the good.

All this schvejkian messing about might seem rather empty and pointless. After all, it isn't going to kick anything off towards a 'revolution', is it? Still, I say it is something worth celebrating. This stubborn bloody-mindedness is behind the still-common unofficial walk-outs. It led to the vote for strike action last year. It is behind the ongoing battle to defend what little we have and to fight for better.

And we have another understanding – whatever the union recommends must be a crap deal. The union bureaucrats have themselves to look out for, not us. It is all part of a great tradition of workplace resistance, done with inventiveness and humour. It's something to be proud of. It's a way of showing we are not devoid of imagination, and this will sometime be turned into something more positive.

As you may have gathered, I'm not a cynic, and neither are most of my colleagues. Where there is disobedience, there is hope. It is the difference between existing and living.