Solidarity Federation
Queer among equals?
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business logic

One of the reasons reinstatement was always unlikely is that the individual concerned was on probation, and had not got around to joining a union when his contract was swiftly terminated. Not only did this mean he could be disposed of more easily, it meant that his workmates support for him would be effectively disowned by the unions to which they are affiliated.

Never mind that loads of gay men who risk a similar fate are their members and that the best way to protect them was to win reinstatement. The corporate interests of the union take priority, membership (and subs. income) must be maximised, solidarity counts for nothing. Anarcho-syndicalists are the opposite — for us solidarity is not a commodity to be provided on subscription, it is what links us to our fellow human beings.

Unfortunately, the institutions of the Lesbian & Gay Community have a similar business/service logic to the conventional unions. Even before Freedom UK 'outed' Pride as a business, it was totally dependent on sponsorship, mainly from purveyors of legal drugs. The rest of the Scene, and the press which serves it, are about finding our niche in capitalist society. Stonewall is a self-appointed, straight-acting, middle class civil rights body, Outrage is a more militant version of the same. To me, the problem has always been that I am subject to authority — if no-one can decide my face doesn't fit, I don't have any problems!

Brown's crime was not being a lesbian as such, but challenging the educational value of a play "exclusively about heterosexual love". This is officially regarded as putting your "personal interests" before those of the children in your charge.

Similarly, a gay man got sacked from a school for failing to disclose a Caution (not a conviction, mind) for Gross Indecency. He wasn't sacked for being gay, but for failure to disclose the "conviction". If he wasn't gay he wouldn't have been jumped by five coppers while snogging in a park in the first place. To sack him for failure to disclose the Caution is not discriminatory, oh no — this is an Equal Opportunity Employer, it doesn't discriminate. His workmates were furious, not being Equal Opportunity Employers, merely workers, they foolishly saw this not only as a failure to "actively combat direct and indirect discrimination", but as discriminatory and an act of victimisation of a gay man for having a sex life. ("We love the sinner, but hate the sin", remember.)

Meanwhile, back in the field of industrial relations, everything hinges on a technicality — was the word "Caution" mentioned *anywhere* in the recruitment literature. The issue of whether someone whom the police only caution is a sex criminal and a potential threat to young people in his care doesn't even arise if Human Resources can find a reference to cautions somewhere, anywhere. An Equal Opportunity Employer is not interested in its managers' equation of gay men with child molesters — institutionalised discrimination cannot exist.

The workforce at the school were threatened with "bringing the Council into disrepute" (by exposing its hypocrisy and discrimination) for discussing the sacking amongst themselves. The Council's cover-up of its discriminatory practice has not been challenged, and a reference to "cautions" was duly found.

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discriminating against you. The only way to drag the fight onto terrain favourable to us is through collective action.

direct action

Real direct action, as opposed to protests, is about forcing the police, the government or the boss to concede your demands without getting sucked into individual cases. The latter involve discarding the initial anger at injustice and enthusiasm for fighting it, and dragging out a process which stifles or limits the scope for gains. It also supports the armies of lawyers, trade union officials and politicians who make a living from mediating conflict.

Not that direct action is 100% effective in all cases, but not only is it more likely to get results, it will bring wider benefits. The advantage, or catch, for those of us confronting heterosexism is that it requires people to be open about who they are and what they are fighting for to get their workmates, neighbours and friends to fight alongside them. Tricky if you're not confident of their support and commitment — although often it's your only real option. And even if you're not successful, you may gain a greater measure of acceptance from the fight. Winning in individual cases will only bring a grudging tolerance with no relevance to the people you live and work with. Direct action forces people to confront the issues and to overcome their own fears and prejudices, because they have no-one to leave "the politics" to. Fighting for something together heightens both confidence and political consciousness.

For those who believe that 'straights' cannot be trusted, here are a couple of examples which have shaped my perspective. First of all, was it Hackney

Council's status as an "Equal Opportunity Employer" which saved lesbian Headteacher Jane Brown from Education Director Gus John's high profile campaign to sack her? Or was it the support for her from parents and governors at her school? Jane

Britain. The state's role is restricted to providing a legal framework which forces the unions to seek "partnership" with the bosses, who are under no real pressure to play ball, and are consequently less enthusiastic about the idea.

Anarcho-syndicalism starts from the basic premise that the exploitation and oppression of working people is fundamental to the functioning of capitalism. Social democracy is also opposed to exploitation and oppression, but not to capitalism, believing that capitalism is the goose that lays the golden egg.

Rather than kill the goose, social democrats believe that exploitation and oppression can be minimised by regulation, and seek the role of regulators. While many of them would love to be more militant, and understand the usefulness of industrial action, they are committed to playing by whatever rules are laid down for them. Debates among social democrats are about the rules, not the game.

change the game

For anarcho-syndicalists, the goal of getting rid of capitalism in order to end our exploitation and oppression determines our approach to "industrial relations". We are forced to play the game, but we must work to change it, not just the rules. A fully-fledged anarcho-syndicalist union with a mass membership and an organised workplace presence would be playing a different game, and boycotting Joint Committees and individually-based Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures. Its very existence must challenge the legitimacy of the boss and seek to undermine capitalist social relations.

The individual or small group of anarcho-syndicalists has the task both of playing the game and of trying to change it, not just the rules. The way to change the game is to play it on terrain favourable to the workers, rather than on the existing field determined with agreement from the bosses. That field favours those

While the establishment is ever intent on fanning the flames of social stigma, people seek real and effective ways of fighting back.

There has been a frenzy on lesbian and gay law reform lately. In fact, ever since President-elect Blair spoke in favour of 16 in the Age of Consent debate in 1994, murmurings about equal opportunities have continued. Meanwhile, in the real world, anti-discrimination is a pressing issue both in and outside the workplace.

Being queer, I feel strongly about the need for anti-discrimination measures. However, as an anarcho-syndicalist, I am opposed to the structures within which such measures would be applied. This is not purism — I've actually been involved in challenging an act of discrimination through these very structures. Experience tells me it won't deliver.

Many businesses and service providers boast of being Equal Opportunity Employers. Lisa Grant's case against South-West Trains has shown such boasts both to be hollow when it comes to costing money or challenging management diktat, and to be legally worthless. After three and a half years fighting to get her employer to include her partner Jill Percey in spouses' company benefits, the case was finally lost in June. The High Court rejected her appeal against a ruling that she can not sue her employer for breach of contract over failing to comply with its own Equal Opportunities Policy.

Even if an Equal Opportunities Policy was a legally-enforceable part of a contract of employment, that would guarantee nothing. Such organisations have become expert in disguising discrimination, focusing on the means of victimisation, not the context which reveals its discriminatory character. Human Resources Consultants (personnel advisers to you) specialise in advising managers how to deal with those of us picked out for victimisation without giving legal grounds for discrimination suits.

This already happens in race, sex and disability discrimination cases where there is legal "protection". Similar measures would be used to get round any Sexual Orientation Discrimination legislation, should it manage to overcome the "family-oriented" (read "right wing") Christians who dominate the government. The heart of the problem lies in facing the boss, or the law, as an individual case. This happens both in law and in workplace Grievance Procedures.

individual cases

If you are lucky enough to work where there is still a functioning recognised trade union, you are likely to get sucked into the latter. Once again, the focus is on technicalities, not realities. Legal implications are paramount because Grievance Procedures are there to avoid potentially embarrassing and costly compensation cases. In an atmosphere where workplace organisation, let alone industrial action, is seen as ultra-left posturing, the role trade unions are claiming for themselves as "social partners" is as the safety net for the bosses.

Without a trade union representative pursuing a point, complacency is likely to set in. Image conscious bosses, such as Local Authorities, value the role conventional unions play in identifying the cracks in their image before anyone else notices. The latter also serve to channel collective anger and expressions of solidarity with a workmate discriminated against or harassed into a forum where the damage can be limited, the details made confidential, and the individual isolated from the support which forced the bosses to address the issue.

Trade unions did not deliberately seek out this role. They have, however, consciously adopted it in order to find a role which will justify membership. Their over-riding financial priorities — pension funds, banks, investments, etc. — made the Tories' anti-union

laws, supported by a Labour Party which has undergone its own parallel change of role, effective. The sequestration of funds due to supporting, or not suppressing, effective industrial action, would pose a real threat to the corporate survival of the existing unions.

The attacks on unions which culminated in the defeat of the miners in 1984–85, and of the print unions a year later, destroyed the credibility of industrial action as a means of defending jobs, pay and conditions. In Local Government, where much of the impetus for Equal Opportunities had been built up, this was followed up by the destruction of "municipal socialism" through Rate Capping and the Poll Tax. The Labour Party shifted rightwards under this onslaught — Blair did not fall from the sky.

enter SolFed

Contrary to popular myths, anarcho-syndicalism is not simply trade unionism by anarchists, subject to the same critique as the conventional unions. Anarcho-syndicalism is itself a critique of the existing unions, both theoretically and, where we are organised in the workplace, in practice. Since our organised presence in recent times has been almost exclusively within the European Union, that critique has been focused on opposition to participation in Works Councils and other union elections.

Solidarity Federation, however, has its origins in a critique of the existing unions' approach to industrial relations in Britain, based on our own experiences. We refer to this system as "social democracy". It is based on the idea of the employer's and employees' representatives sitting together on Joint Committees to resolve disputes without resort to industrial action. This used to be called Corporatism, a system borrowed from (Italian) fascism, and based on the idea that the state was a third partner, an honest broker.

Nowadays, overt state intervention is not on the agenda, even for social democrats. Hence 'Social Partnership' -a new name for New