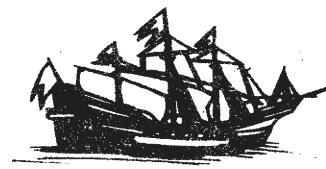




WAKE UP! WAKE UP! IT'S YER BOTHERED...

SchNEWS



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STITCHED UP!

"They're trying to take away my worker's rights, my trade union rights, my woman's rights and my human rights." **Kamla, sacked worker**

For the last two years, 53 sacked hospital workers have been engaged in a struggle which has received even less coverage in the mainstream media than the Liverpool docks dispute. Even a recent article on forgotten strikes 'forgot' to mention the Hillingdon women! The mostly Asian women have been battling against Unison (their own union), Pall Mall employment agencies, Hillingdon Hospital and the legal system; all of them colluding to deny these women their basic rights.

The roots of the current dispute stem from 1986, when the domestic staff at Hillingdon Hospital found themselves employed, not by the NHS, but by a company called IC. This was part of the new 'contracting out' of specific services, like catering and cleaning to the lowest bidders in the private sector. *"They thought that the people could do more work for less wages,"* says Malkiat Bilku. In the process the staff lost sick pay, bonus and pension rights and had their holiday entitlement cut from six to two weeks.

Then in 1989 another company, Initial, took over the contract and cut working hours. The number of staff fell to 220, though the work remained the same. In 1994, the contract was passed on again, this time to Pall Mall, part of the Davies Group conglomerate. Pall Mall attempted to force the women to take a 20% wage cut which amounted to about £40 a week from an already meagre wage of less than £7,000 a year. They tried to intimidate the women into signing the new contracts by asking for their passports, holding them for a week while they check them and made photocopies. Pall Mall said they wanted to make sure that the women weren't working illegally. Enough was enough, and the women refused to sign - and so were sacked. Unison, the largest union in the country,

refused to support the women until they took direct action, occupying their Head Office and telling the bureaucrats *"We won't go away. This building belongs to the people, because we are the members."*

But this reluctance to support the women meant that at the first opportunity, the Unison leadership dropped the case in January of this year. They cut a deal with Pall Mall, WITHOUT consulting their membership, claiming they had made the 'best deal' for the women - offering each worker £500 compensation, despite the fact that some of these women had been working at Hillingdon for 30 years.

Ironically, largely because of its behaviour at Hillingdon, Pall Mall has been losing numerous NHS contracts much to the benefit of those who might otherwise have had to work for them, but not of the strikers themselves. Meanwhile the Hillingdon contract has been passed on yet again, this time to Granada, a prominent money-spinner in the catering and media trades.

Meanwhile, Unison has silenced the women by denying the strikers a platform at their union conference, and refusing to move the Unison Committee meetings away from Hillingdon Hospital - meaning Malkiat Bilku, the elected strike leader, cannot attend as there is a court injunction forbidding her to enter the place. Malkiak comments: *"We have been treated badly by Unison. They have betrayed us...for 30 years we have been paying our union subs."*

Curiously, the very same Unison conference which refused a voice to the Hillingdon women have donated £10,000 to the Liverpool Dockers! On the picket line the women have received racist intimidation. They've been assaulted by stones and bricks.

Although support from the official organisations has been, at best, poor,

This is a SchNEWS special to commemorate the two year anniversaries of the Liverpool dockworkers and Hillingdon hospital workers labour disputes. In both cases these workers were sacked for standing up to their bosses. Despite two years of struggle, they have refused to lie down and take it, so we've decided to dedicate this whole issue to tell people just what they've been up against - and how they've fought back.

At SchNEWS we cover a diverse range of issues from the anti-road protests at Newbury to the Zapatista struggle in Mexico, but in reality all these issues are interlinked. There is no such thing as a single issue - the same companies that are taking away workers rights are also destroying the planet, and are part and parcel of a system which measures the value of people, animals and the planet in pounds, pence and shareprices. Some way to measure life!

So let's forget our petty differences and work together, because that's the only way we are going to create a world where people are more important than profit...

they have received global recognition for their struggle; solidarity actions across India, links with the Liverpool Dockers and women's groups nationally. The women recognise that their position is symptomatic of a global system, and is not specific to this incidence. Bilku firmly states: *"This is slave labour. If we accept, it happens to the next, then other people, then other people. It has to be stopped."*

They receive no strike pay, so financial support is desperately needed - they don't even have enough money for tea and coffee in their strike HQ. More info: 0956 135311

2nd ANNIVERSARY ACTION!

Wed 1st Oct. Mass picket 7am outside Hillingdon Hospital, March at noon from Colham Green, Colham Road (U4 from Uxbridge tube) Rally 1pm Uxbridge Civic Centre speakers include Malkiat Bilku, Arthur Scargill President NUM, Shirley Winter Magnet Women's Support Group, Jimmy Nolan Liverpool dockers.

DONATIONS! HSSC, c/o 27 Townsend Way, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 1TG

Described as 'ordinary men and women, who have become extraordinary', the dockers and the Women on the Waterfront (WOW), have conducted one of the most imaginative and creative responses to global casualisation in trade union history. Like this...

- mobilising massive international support and action
 - joining Reclaim The Streets in a historic anniversary action which later led to a 20,000 strong party in Trafalgar Square
 - recording a single called "****K The Millenium" with the KLF.
 - taking the term 'flying picket' literally by sending dockers out to the world's ports.
 - getting everyone from Robbie Fowler, Jo Brand & Chumbawumba to shout the score
 - and telling their former bosses to stuff their £30,000 bribes.
- In short, the Liverpool dockworkers have been a beacon of resistance and hope...**

Not only have they buried the myth that the worker's movement is an outmoded irrelevancy, but they have shown the way. By breaking down the barriers between not only countries and 'North and South', but also between the unions, environmentalists and refugees in the fight for a better world. The direct action movement has begun to realise that workplace struggles are just important as roadside struggles - and that the greater our alliances the more chance we have of creating a better world. We've said it before - this isn't about single issues, this is about fighting for a planet where, to put it simply, people are more important than profit.

"Our stand is simple and straightforward. We sell our labour power and we uphold our right to withdraw our labour power, otherwise we're slaves"
Mersey Docks Shop Stewards Committee

It's 1972. Five dockers are sent to Pentonville Prison for picketing and thus breaching the Industrial Relations Act. This sparks a national dock dispute and the threat of a general strike. The Government backs down and the dockers are released from prison within a matter of hours.

A quarter of a century later and some 500 Liverpool dockers remain sacked after refusing to cross a picket line. But this time, their sackings didn't lead to calls for a national dock strike - for the backbone of their union has been smashed in ports up and down the country. And we certainly didn't hear calls of 'all out for a general strike.'

Thanks to 18 years of Conservative rule people no longer have the right to strike, picket or act in solidarity with others. A trade union movement that had been forged out of confrontation with the law now bows down to Acts of Parliament. Its leaders - safe in their nice jobs, cars and houses "thank-you-very-much" - had not only allowed these attacks to happen without significant opposition, but had left those who fought back out on a limb.

And those involved in the new protests - the direct action anti-roads movement - well, joining a union isn't exactly high on your agenda when you're low or no-waged.

But two years on, the plight of the dockworkers and their fight back against all the odds draws admiration not just from the old left, but also from the direct action movement.

"Once you start standing up fighting against one injustice, it opens your eyes to so much going on the world that you need to stand up against." Sue Mitchell, WOW

The background to the dispute is the reality of flexible working conditions, employment deregulation, streamlining, cost cutting and removal of so-called 'outmoded practises.'

In 1989, the National Dock Labour Scheme, regarded as the last protection against the "evil" of casual labour, was abolished. Conditions in ports began to worsen.

One docker explains "After I became full-time my wages were £170 top line with pension, no sick pay, no work clothing. They'd call us out to work at any time for up to 80 hours a week. You can go in at 7.45 am and if there's no work in they sent you home at 12 o'clock, tell you to get eight hours' sleep and come back and do the night shift."

Dockers were on call 24 hours, or as the members of the WOW described it,

"They call it work to finish the job, but it became 'work to finish' our men - 12 or 14 hour shifts, constant phone calls changing their shifts, no social life."

The dispute began when dockers were ordered to work overtime for a disputed rate of pay. They protested and were sacked. Within a day, the entire workforce of 80 men were sacked. They immediately mounted a picket line, and all 329 men employed by Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, refused to cross it. They, too were summarily dismissed because under trade union law they could be sacked for "secondary picketing." And so began a mammoth struggle...

"I'm fed up with the trade unions hiding behind those laws, they must have millions in their funds. I mean my husband paid into that union for 31 years and they can't even come and support the 500 men. It was the dockers' money that built their big offices in the city centre. I can't understand why they can't have the backbone to just say 'Let's stick together and stand up for these people.' What else are unions for?"
Sue Mitchell, WOW

As dockers join

On a recent trip to Brighton for the Trades Unions Congress (TUC) SchNEWS cornered Dockers' Shop Steward Bobby Morton and asked him a few questions over a couple of beers.

SchNEWS: With Tony Blair telling the TUC "we will not go back to the days of industrial warfare, strikes without ballots, mass and flying pickets, secondary action and all the rest of it" and banging on about "the flexibility of the present labour market" isn't your dispute a throwback to the past. Aren't your tactics old fashioned and irrelevant?

Bobby: No, I think they are extremely effective. Yesterday's editorial from Lloyds List (influential shipping journal) says that the ship owners representatives are crying foul over our international day of action saying this is a terrible thing to do, is old fashioned and out of sync with the Labour Party. But what they are basically saying is that these bastards are hurting us, and it shouldn't be allowed to happen, so I think the tactics Blair condemns are very effective weapons and ones that should be used on a more regular basis.

Sch: The Labour government is the major shareholder in Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, but in the first six months in power, they have shown complete disinterest in intervening to settle the dispute. Before the election, Labour said they would introduce legislation to reinstate sacked workers, and now they have reneged on that -

where do you go from here?

B: When the Labour Party were talking of reinstating people who were unfairly dismissed they were talking about disputes which would have been deemed to be official. One that would have had a legally organised strike ballot, and of course we never got the chance to do that because we were faced with a picket line and had to make an instant decision. To have a ballot it would have taken us probably a month to organise, and during that month we would have been crossing the picket line on a daily basis, which we wouldn't do.

Sch: What do you think of the support internationally compared to the support in Britain?

B: Apart from financially there is no support in Britain. People say nice things to us, and give us the money, which we appreciate, of course, but physically there is no action whatsoever taking place in the UK. I've got friends in industries all over the UK who would like to help but find themselves incapable of doing so because of

tancy running through your union, and strikes everyday, then obviously you're going to have a greater work load and there's gonna be more expenditure of your members money. Everyone wants a peaceful life - it's human nature. They just wanna draw their wages and are terrified of any type of militancy that may grow out of the Liverpool docks dispute

Sch: People have now obviously got greater expectations of the Labour government. Do you think people will start to get angry and take action once they realise these expectations aren't being met?

B: Well there will be a little bit of both. I'm talking to people this week who voted Labour who genuinely believe that after the honeymoon period, when things settle down, the government will change their stance and become more mellow towards the trade union movement. But they are living in a dreamworld, cos you're stuck with this for as long as long as the electorate allows them to get away with it and the only time you will see a change is if

erpool in September 1996, well that was a marvellous experience for us - and it does no harm to say it here, that a lot of our people who are more traditional, didn't want the involvement of the Reclaimers. However, we carried the day and extended the invitation and after you lot had left Liverpool everyone was delighted; even the ones who had been sceptical about it, suddenly turned round and said 'that was a good idea when are they coming back again?' It gave us a very important lift at a very psychologically important moment because it began to dawn on our people - 'hell we've been out of work now for a year, its a milestone in our lives' and there is a tendency when you reach a milestone you start to go downhill and become depressed. Because of the action of the reclaimers on that weekend it gave our people a real boost.

Sch: Why do you think that your dispute has captured the imagination of people involved in the direct action movement? I mean down in Brighton we can hold meetings on prisons or asylum seekers and there's not a lot of interest, but the dockers dispute seems to cut across the divide. Why do you think that is?

B: I think there are two different reasons for that, the first going back to your traditional industrialists. They have this romantic idea of international solidarity which we have always boasted we have. On another scale one of the things we've said right from the very start is that we won't take the easy way out and take the severance pay of £30,000. I mean here we are now, we've got no money and we could take the easy option, take that money and walk away, but we've always said that its not about money. You could make it £100,000 and it wouldn't make a difference. We are looking at getting our jobs back not just for ourselves but to pass it down to the youth of Merseyside, and the types of jobs we are wanting to pass down are full time, well paid jobs with good conditions not the type of jobs that exist in the port of Liverpool now.

So with the international action it's looking to the past, but when we're talking about the youth, were talking about the future, and this is where we found we had a common bond with the Reclaimers, and the environmentalists - because those groups want a better future for themselves, the children, for the planet, and its something that just gelled together.

THE COMMON CAUSE

Environmentalists' cause with dockers began in 1989 when the waste disposal company Rechem won a contract to dispose 3,000 tonnes of highly toxic chemical waste from Canada. The Liverpool dockers refused to unload it, forcing the ship to return to Montreal.

"What right have any of us to sell our kid's futures? How could you look yourself in the face shaving each morning, if you'd done that!"

Jimmy Campbell,
sacked Liverpool docker

In the KLF, SchNEWS asks ...

WHAT TIME IS VICTORY?

fear - particularly in my industry if you lose your job and you're over 40 you'll never work again, and people are afraid of losing life's comforts.

However, the most amazing thing for me - especially when we listen to the claptrap Tony Blair is spewing up all the time - is that all of the countries which have been mentioned as part of the international day of action, they all have strict anti trade union laws and yet they still supported us. For example people in Canada, have been threatened with suspensions and the sack and the West Coast of American Union threatened with being sued for millions. Yet they all went to great lengths to tell the newspapers and the employers that regardless of any legislation they were going to take that secondary solidarity action in support of the Liverpool people.

Sch: So why do think the unions here in Britain are running scared - do you think that if the dockers won, it would be a thumbs up for militancy, which is exactly what the unions don't want?

B: The unions are terrified of that. They've grown comfortable. If you're a general secretary and you've got mili-

there's a moodswing.

Sch: Have you got any idea why you get more support from comedians than politicians?

B: Well to me, all politicians are comedians so I don't know where you draw the line. The comedians that support us are working class people with working class values and ideals. For example a son of Liverpool, who is a very very rich so called comedian is Jimmy Tarbuck and he wouldn't fart in our direction and neither would Cilla Black. But when you get down to the likes of someone Lee Hurst and Jo Brand with a working class background these are the people that support us, cos they speak the same language as we do.

Sch: You said that there hasn't been much physical support in England. How important do you think the direct action movements' involvement with the dockers has been, especially the 1st year anniversary actions in Liverpool?

B: It's so important, because when I describe the lack of action in the UK, I was talking specifically about industrial action. Reclaim The Streets and the other groups that converged on Liv-

DOCKING GREAT ARTICLE CONTINUED

Sch: That's what we try to do with SchNEWS, to bring all the different struggles together and say to people 'look - these issues are they same, despite our petty differences we all want the same thing.' Recently in Brighton they've introduced Project Work-for-your-dole scheme, and because people are being forced onto it, and we need action now it has meant everyone from trade unionists to claimants to anarchists to socialist workers has to work together.

B: The key word is action. When we were earning say £20,000 a year, in full-time employment and could go to the pub every night, when we met at trade union meetings we used to argue like cat and dog about Marx, Lenin, Trotsky - fuck me these people had been dead for 50 years! But all of a sudden, once you're thrown into the dispute and taking part in action we don't talk about them anymore, thank God, we have to sort out day to day activities - when your taking action your mind is working and you're not dwelling on the past.

Sch: Coming back to the trade union movement, it does seem to need an injection of imagination at times. In the British Airways dispute workers were threatened with the sack if they took strike action, so did a mass sickie instead. It was a good example of getting round the anti trade union laws. What do you think?

B: There all kinds of ways to skin a cat. Several years ago the air traffic controllers in Greece were threatened with the sack if they took strike action so they merely informed their employers that they were going on hunger strike! With imagination you can let it run riot with any number of things, but you've got to have the ambition and the will to do it, and again going back to your question traditional trade unions have got no imagination

Paco, a docker from the Canary Islands, told of a bitter 18 month dispute, with ingenious tactics that maddened the employers. The Galleria Preciado department store, which received its goods through the dock company was targeted. "On one day 1,300 women all went into the store at the same time, spending hours shopping, without buying anything. The shop was completely full of women asking for goods, trying everything on, but purchasing nothing. There's no law against that!"

They employed the same kind of tactic at the bank where the dock company had it's account. Everyone went to the bank, hundreds queued up to deposit 100 pesetas and then went to the back of the queue to wait until they got to the front again, to draw out 50 pesetas. The bank lost its entire day's business.

One morning over a thousand women suddenly appeared on the picket line and rushed through the dock gates towards a ship being worked by strike-breakers. When the 'scabs' saw 100s of women boarding the ship, most jumped overboard. The police had to mobilise fast to fish them out of the water!

Sch: What's your relationship with the local constabulary - they are the scariest bunch of cops SchNEWS has come across apart from Belfast!

B: We have a dual relationship, some of the local constabulary are actually human beings and then you've got the other half - who belong to the Operational Support Division, and with that division one of the qualifications is that you've got to have a lobotomy before you can be considered for the job. With the latter we have no relationship whatsoever apart from being beaten over the head.

Sch: What about the good aspects - you lot get loads of holidays abroad? Come on admit it, that's what you did it for.

B: You might have noticed that I have an all year round suntan! Before the dispute I've mainly travelled round Europe, then early in the dispute there came an occasion where I had to go to the East Coast of America. Three of us went there to picket the entrance of a dock, in the middle of the worst blizzard they'd had in New York for 70 years! Then we get invited to a convention in Florida - the business only took half an hour and we spent the rest of the week relaxing in the sun waiting for our plane! We got away with going to Florida, but then we got an invite to go to Honolulu. How the fucking hell were we gonna tell our lads who have been in dispute for months about that one!

Sch: How do you decide who speaks at meetings - isn't it really important that as many of the dockers as possible have a chance to go round the country so they can see just how much support they have got? At our direct action conference the lads who'd never spoken before at a meeting couldn't believe that all these crusties and punks gave a shit about their dispute.

B: It's very difficult to come back from the West Coast of America where we are treated like gods, and go to a mass meeting of our people, and transport the feelings and emotions from the other side of the world. So now we've encouraged the rank and file to go round and speak and experience the support as it helps lift the spirits.

In December 1996 three flying pickets went to Baltimore, US, where the giant 36,000 tonne Atlantic Companion was due to dock from Liverpool. The trio mounted their American picket at the dockgate in a raging blizzard, the worst for 70 years, just before Christmas when the longshore workers needed full wage packets for their families' festivities. Despite being offered 4 times their normal rate of pay to unload the containers, the Baltimore dockers refused. "We told them what it was about and they turned their cars around. We were ecstatic, over the moon, dancing there in the snow." The ship then sailed to Norfolk Virginia, where the dockers followed it by car and at midnight mounted a picket. A go-slow was operated by longshore workers, and so the ship was sent to Newark, followed by the flying pickets. Not one worker crossed the Newark picket line for the next four days. Their action had triggered the mobilisation of the ILA, one of the strongest unions on the US East Coast. At one of their meetings, Bobby Moreton came away with \$50,000 in a carrier bag! Later the ACL were to pull out of Liverpool for a month.

Sch: Bill Morris (the Transport and General Workers general secretary) has not only told you to disassociate yourself from those activist troublemakers, but he has also made derogative comments that the dock dispute has become more a political movement. It does almost seem like a new political movement - what do you think?

B: I don't see it as a political movement. I see it as helping people, a level of awareness. For example, two years before we were sacked environmentalists went into the port to stop wood from the rainforest being offloaded. People arrested people were put in a cage in the docks. The minute that happened all dockers stopped work. We approached the police and said 'unless you release the people from that cage within the next half an hour all the dockers will be going home.' When we came back from our teabreak 20 minutes later, everyone had been released. What the Merseyside Dock Company really hated about us was that if an injustice was perpetrated on one person then the rest of us would turn round and say - 'we're not having that, unless you stop the injustice then we will all go home. You sack him - you sack me.'

Sch: What would you say to people who've got casual jobs, working in service industries, with short term contracts and no union representation?

B: I've got a son who is 17 and will soon be looking for work in Merseyside where there is nothing except McDonalds. I would advise him wherever he ends up - get organised.

Sch: Where do you think the dispute is going? We've heard rumours that some dockers want to call it a day and that donations aren't as good as they were some months ago.

B: We've got to be honest about it, none of us thought it would go longer than three weeks - and when the first offer was made some of the men wanted to accept it. But we're not gonna settle for a deal unless it involves everyone. We've got to see it out until every single one of us has an alternative. Last night I was talking to a Bosnian miner and I realised that compared to them we've had nothing like the hardship they have suffered. At one stage they had no wages, and there are no state benefits - and I asked him 'if there was no money coming into the house how did you survive?' He replied 'if there's no money coming into your house how do you survive?' And we both realised that we all rely on the same sort of miracles.

Sch: Cheers, Bobby - here's to the overthrow of capitalism! XXX

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Liverpool L6 4 AS.
Telephone: 0151 207 3388
Fax 0151 207 0696.
e-mail: dockers@gm.apc.org
web site: <http://www.labournet.org>.

and Finally ...

"That more than half of all working people are caught up in the iniquities of casual labour, making Britain the sweatshop of Europe, is not considered real news." John Pilger

disclaimer

SchNEWS warns all readers what ever the odds to stand up to what they think is right.

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