

****'WHAT'S WORKING?' MINUTES****

SATURDAY 15TH NOVEMBER, 2014

Organized by Feminist Fightback with presentations from: Workers in higher/further education, Workers Liberty, angryworkers and SolFed.

Below are the minutes and presentation notes of our day-long workshop, 'What's Working?' held a couple of weeks ago at the Common House in East London.

The group was made up of, amongst others, workers in the education, transport, logistics and hospitality sector. We talked about how we are organizing, what limits we're coming up against, how our political background affects our particular strategies of organizing and how we could support each other in overcoming them, even though we come from different organizations and political perspectives of class struggle. Specifically: how do we see the workplace in relation to the rest of society, in relation to political social change, how does our political organisation relate to workplace conflicts, theoretically and practically?

The discussions were open, we think with space for political disagreement without having to feel like we are just defending our organizational position/line. We decided to continue our discussions with another meeting in early 2015, with the aim of forming a kind of 'London-struggles' group that meets every few months to:

1. Talk about the latest developments in our workplace struggles or attempts to organise, as well as thinking about how we can practically support each other;
2. Have an open space to critically reflect on important struggles that are happening at the moment e.g. E15, Ritzy, NHS etc. We could also discuss important international struggles and the dynamics driving them, their strong and weak points, how we can relate to them in the UK.
3. Have some theoretical discussion about relevant topics that naturally come up when talking about work, labour and smashing capitalism!

So this is also then an open invitation to anyone interested in attending future meetings. Drop us an email at feministfightback.org.uk to get on the mailing list or check our website and Facebook page for the date of the next meeting.

Minutes of the day are below, and with links to peoples' presentation notes where they've provided them ...enjoy!

We started with an **introduction** to the day, explaining:

-Why is the agenda like it is?

We split the day up into presentations talking about different sectors, because

each sector is organised differently, and we think to a large extent this affects the different possibilities for organisation e.g. sub-contracted non-unionised cleaners in a hospital would organise differently to highly unionised tube drivers. So that's why we think need closely to look at how different groups of workers are brought together by capital, how they relate to each other and co-operate on a daily level that then forms the basis for thinking about how we can organise.

But as communists and anarchists of various types, we can all agree that workers from different sectors somehow have to come together and overcome their sectorial boundaries in order to overthrow capitalism so the idea in the discussions is to think more about how we can overcome these divisions between workers in different sectors and what can be learnt in general from our collective experiences.

-Why did we want to hold such an event?

We felt that a lot of us were beavering away, within our workplaces as individuals and as part of our own organisations, and there was no space to come together to critically review these struggles, and learn from and politically question each other's strategies. These are quite bad times for struggle, so understandably, we want to attract others by being positive, talking about victories and so on; but on the flip-side: where is there space to talk about defeats and difficulties? Either these types of discussion happen internally within organisations or not at all, so we wanted to have a non-sectarian event where we can hopefully create an open and friendly atmosphere to have these types of discussions.

We then sketched out a brief picture of what austerity and the crisis has meant in the UK, primarily in terms of the effects on workers to mainly understand the effects of the potentiality of working class collectivity.

Conditions for workers within austerity Britain

We think it is important to see what kind of tendencies there are, which generalise conditions within the working class and which reinforce or create new lines of division. Understanding the changing realities of our lives and social relationships then becomes the basis for our self-organisation. Looking at how these changes are being mediated by political and trade union institutions acting within the working class is also crucial to our understanding of the barriers, frameworks and often wildly divergent agendas which make up the current field of 'organising' in the UK.

So briefly, to sketch out some developments in the last 6 years since the start of the crisis in 2008, we can say that;

1. Real wages have been falling and the social wage, (which is made up of the

services and direct payments provided by the state for our subsistence) e.g. health services, childcare, unemployment benefits and social housing, have been subject to major restructuring and cuts. This adds to the burden of proletarian existence, particularly those of women, who disproportionately rely on these services;

2. Lower wages and a higher degree of casualisation has led to an increase in working-hours;

3. Income inequality has increased;

4. The pay gap between younger and older workers has risen by more than half since 1997. This division presents itself as the main division in most workplaces, with people on older contracts with better pay and conditions working alongside newer people on shittier pay and conditions. This is down to a large increase in the low wage sector, zero-hours contracts, temporary/agency work, more self-employed and part-time workers;

5. Benefit changes such as the bedroom tax are not so much about saving money but increasing the rate of social exploitation i.e. making us shoulder more of the burden of reproducing ourselves as well as generally working harder for less. Once we see that four out of five jobs created after 2010 belongs to the low wage segment (wages below 60% of average pay, meaning around £7.70 p.h.), it sheds a different light on their 'recovery';

6. On one hand the austerity measures push people back into the family as a 'last resort', which is the material basis for the attempts at enforcing reactionary stuff like: e.g. the attempts to change abortion laws. On the other hand the crisis increasingly undermines the family (cut in childcare provisions etc.). Primarily, working class women have to juggle with these contradictory tendencies;

7. We can see a double pressure on the downward trend in wages: a) through an increase of sanctions and cuts targeting unemployed workers and migrant workers and b) through attacks on the 'privileged' workers in the remaining 'strongholds'. The cuts to benefits also need to be seen in the context of the relationship to work- basically the benefit cuts make it more likely that people stay in shitty low-waged work;

8. All of this has a large impact on housing, as rents and energy prices are increasing. Housing is particularly interesting because of its traditional historical role in appeasing certain sections of the working class, with rising house prices plugging the gap in the longer-term decline in real wages. As getting on the property ladder becomes more difficult, so too do the chances of integrating some sections of working class discontent at falling wages and living standards;

9. The minimum wage has become a threshold for many working class people -

which does not rescue them from the spiral to the bottom, but on the contrary, prevents them from asking for more. In this sense it is of major importance politically when workers - in particular female, migrant workers like in the case of the Medirest workers strike - openly say that they strike against the minimum wage;

10. In response to these worsening conditions on one side we have 'political' campaigns for living wage (largely tied into party politics etc.) and on the other hand, a relative isolation and hardness of small struggles which actually fight for a pay rise e.g care workers in Doncaster, which has now turned into the longest running dispute in NHS history.

In light of all this, we could say that struggles that challenge the divisions amongst workers need to tackle the following:

- * the process of 're-application' for jobs or the black-mail of 'job cuts' vs. 'accepting worse conditions'
- * the pay freeze
- * the minimum wage
- * casualisation (zero-hours, agency work, self-employment)
- * the division between permanent and temps
- * the atmosphere that migrant workers have to accept any conditions
- * the pressure to do 'unpaid labour' (voluntary work, cuts of social services)
- * the acceptance of property law over need for housing etc.

PUBLIC SECTOR, ORGANISING WITHIN THE UNIONS

Our first session concentrated on workers within education and transport, and because of the major role that unions play in these sectors, the discussion focused on the realities of organizing in workplaces where the unions are the major forces of organization and where, at some point, you come up against the limits of working within such bureaucratic structures.

We began with a brief **introduction** of the state of the unions today and our different political analyses of them. We sketched out a:

- libertarian communist position of the unions (i.e. unions don't exist to call into question the wage relation itself - only to negotiate a better deal in this inherently unequal relationship between capital and labour. For this reason, they are not a revolutionary organ of the working class and whilst not saying that we shouldn't join a union, it's basically saying that we shouldn't have any illusions about what they are and what they can do for us. Unions are also a legal/formal organization, which effectively work to include/exclude other groups of workers. As revolutionaries who understand the necessity of breaking down divisions amongst workers, we have to ask 'how do we organise within a bureaucratic structure that largely maintains these divisions?')

- Trotskyist position of unions (they actively work to radicalise and democratise the unions by working within the union structures, getting their own and other left candidates to become stewards and reps to steer the union in a more radical direction. At the same time they see that 'unions alone are not sufficient' in order to change social relations, so the party is the bridge between 'economic struggle' and political goals.)

- militant/grassroots unionist position (i.e. unions like SI Cobas, IWW and Workers Initiative in Poland who tackle the main problem of unions generally dividing workers being challenged by actively trying to coordinate struggles and workers across sectors e.g. the IWW in the early 1900s.

In the last few years in response to massive cuts in public spending, the large main unions have called some big one-day strikes. However, they haven't managed to halt restructuring and they've only managed to secure very modest victories at best for workers so far. It has generally been more difficult to take strike action through the unions over things like casualisation, privatisation and zero-hours contracts. But in the face of dwindling membership, the unions have been forced to respond in some way e.g. GMB have been more actively trying to represent low-waged workers and UNITE have invested a lot in 'Unite Community', a model based on a network of activists doing community organising and offering services like debt counselling to people, basically helping them 'manage' under austerity.

Whatever we think about unions, I think we'd all agree that whatever potentialities we think exist within the union framework, and we'd probably all say that we should join a union where we can, there are major barriers, especially in the mainstream unions, we'd have to contend with in trying to organise ourselves.

The following presentations talked in more detail about these barriers and how efforts at organizing within highly unionised workplaces panned out. We started with **Education**:

- F. an hourly-paid lecturer (HPL) at SOAS who talked about the struggle of HPLs to get better pay in the 'Fractionals for Fair Play' campaign and their experiences of coming up against the union; [\[full presentation notes can be found on the ff website\]](#)

- L. a lecturer at the University of Warwick who talked about the wider changes to higher education e.g. how fees and competition have changed the relationships between students and students and teachers, and who is trying to organise as a union rep herself. While not having major faith in the unions, even she was surprised at the extent to which the unions had been obstructive to actions that university workers wanted to take on; [\[full presentation notes can be found on the](#)

[ff website\]](#)

- and M. (SolFed) who talked about organizing in their rather more militant UCU branch in the further education college in which she works.

In the question round that followed, we focused on the relationship between the main division between workers – those on permanent contracts and those who are not, and how these could be overcome, especially with the added factor of being in different unions and having different levels of solidarity based on material differences between them. An interesting point was that many HPLs and contract workers in higher/further education were now being employed by specialist temp agencies like Unitemps, which threw up questions of who actually is responsible for their pay and conditions.

Transport

We then had a presentation from B. from Workers Liberty, a tube worker who is a union rep in the RMT. She talked about the general political position of Workers Liberty, a Trotskyist group that tries to work within the existing union structures and build mass support amongst the membership in a more socialist direction. She also talked about recent attempts to mobilise the union leaders and membership around the introduction of fingerprinting machines for sub-contracted cleaners. While staff were concerned, the campaign largely failed (although some machines are now 'not working') because of lack of publicity, lack of an activist layer within the union, lack of co-ordination, and the increasing divisions between different groups/grades of workers.

We then had an hour of **discussion** on the questions raised by the presentations and experiences in the room.

Some questions were:

- How do we/our organisations see 'unions?'
- Do we see unions still as a viable force able to win significant victories for workers? If so, how? If not, in what terms can they still be useful to us?
- What possibilities are there for 'change from the inside' and what would be needed to get there e.g. do we just need more militant members? And is this realistic?
- What possibilities are there to organise outside of existing union structures within sectors whose struggles have primarily always been union-led?
- How can we break down divisions between workers so as to build more collective strength in struggles?

A summary some issues raised were:

- Practical questions around how to get information about the state of workmates' pay and conditions, which can then become a basis for demands. How can a survey be used to mobilise support and get things going? The very process is crucial to building support and in the case of SOAS worked to get people out of their isolation.
- We talked about the realities of organizing within the union structures, that in the case of the SOAS campaign, there was no way to stay outside the union forever, because they were needed for the formal/legal process e.g. with regards to negotiating better contracts. We talked about our various experiences of having found resistance within the union to organising certain workers e.g. someone talked about working in adult and community education, which is organised by local authorities and is made up a very dispersed set of workers, the majority of whom are hourly paid. To start off with, the union did not want to support them, It was a fight. Was that fight useful or not? In education in the borough there are thousands of workers in NUT and Unison and they are not in contact with each other. We take action isolated from other groups of education workers and the unions are not interested in bridging these gaps. We are going against a trend, the sub-contracting of education. There is even a fight to get sub-contracted workers inside the union. And the union then says we haven't got the resources to do this work.
- How do union 'betrayals' happen? We see lots of 'militants' enter union structures and they want to do good things, but the process by which one becomes socialized into the union, through going to conferences, mixing with other union people, having a certain status and position within the union bureaucracy etc. inevitably makes it harder to 'go against the union', even when you might disagree personally with a union leadership's course of action.
- Where the opportunities for rank and file organization are, how we can maintain a collectivity that is usually built initially outside of the formal union framework, together with other workmates?
- To the question of whether and to what extent we should engage in existing union structures, there was disagreement. On one side, we could say that unions by their very existence are an expression of class conflict, and for that reason at the very least we should engage with them. On the other hand, we see a pattern of whereby whatever collectivity is created by workers themselves, the process of being sucked in and spat out by unions is a phenomenon that cannot be uncritically ignored. How can we maintain this collectivity in the face of the union's destructive tendencies?
- First and foremost we need to make our own political process and have our own discussions, before we go to the union to tell them what we want them to do for us.
- What do we do when the strategy of withdrawing our labour does not work because our work is devalued and unnecessary to the process of capitalist accumulation...?
- There is currently a lot of anger against the unions, especially in light of

increasing stress and pressure over performance targets. How can we use this? One attempt was to set up LANAC, a rank and file group of education workers that provided a space to discuss strategy and experience. But this energy was somehow directed towards elections.

After lunch, we watched a couple of films, one about the Tres Cosas cleaners campaign and the other about the Ritzy cinema workers in Brixton.

PRIVATE SECTOR, LARGELY NON-UNIONISED WORKERS

Logistics

We started the afternoon session with a presentation by angryworkers on their organising efforts in warehouses in west London and how their analysis of class politics affects their approach to organizing, including an explanation of the workers' enquiry method; they talked about the general situation and conflicts in the warehouses in which they work; as well as future plans e.g. a newspaper and tour of warehouse workers across the UK. [\[Full presentation notes can be found on the ff website\]](#)

Hospitality

We had a presentation from three members of Brighton SolFed about their attempts at organising hospitality workers and the principles of anarcho-syndicalist organizing: No bosses, assemblies, having a bottom-up approach and local decision-making. Their strategy is a mixture of strikes, pickets agitprop (leaflets etc) and they have been successful in all of the y cases that they have taken on.

Discussion about low-waged sector workers and strategies for organising.

Here are some questions we started off with:

How do we go beyond actions that deal with individual cases?

Are 'external' political organisations necessary to organise precarious non-unionised workers? What role do/could they play?

Can we generalise the public sector/cleaners strikes in terms of their ability to relate to different groups of workers?

What practical support do we need and how do we go about getting it?

Some issues that were raised were:

- An advantage of union is that it can act as a barrier between the employer and the worker – the flip side is that it is disempowering for the union to be seen to be providing the workers with a service rather than workers organising themselves. Theoretically, the union could act as a body of

- resources for workers to use, but this is not often the case in practice. Is this situation inevitable?
- To the question of whether union forms and structures are viable in low-waged, precarious work like restaurants, this is an ongoing discussion within SolFed. They are not a registered union. Bureaucracy is there to negotiate, so it is just not realistic to set up a registered union. They are unable to create a stable organisation inside a workplace so they have decided to organize based on a model of creating wider networks of solidarity. They always say to workers that they have to do stuff themselves, but even so, it can be hard to break out of the dynamic that we are providing a service. Even grassroots unions often do not relate their struggles to a critical workers perspective. There must be a connection between these struggles and the abolition of capitalism.
 - Whereas some big unions are present in sectors where there are big concentrations of low-waged workers, they often only represent the permanent worker. So in many cases, working outside unions is the only viable option. The main aim is to get together as a group of workers who are able to discuss all possible options of struggle, from sabotage to strike. Joining the union might be one option, but workers should be collectively prepared beforehand: what do we want from the union apparatus, how does the union procedure usually work? – and present the reps with a plan of action.
 - We are now supposedly in an economic 'recovery'. New unionism may have found a moment, but what will an alternative actually look like..? How will things come together? Maybe we could look to the US where things are a bit more advanced. There are a lot of struggles around the minimum wage, there are occupations and riots. But there are many different political strands to these battles, a lot of competing interests and outcomes. We need to look beyond the surface level where campaigning efforts look really good and see whether working class collectivity is managing to survive and grow. The question is, will Occupy next time be able to stay outside of the class experience, and how or can these broad strands come together?
 - There shouldn't be a dogma about trade unions or political group self-organisation at work. Class struggle trade unions in Italy have been quite effective in the class struggle. There are experiences and resources that can be utilized effectively. The base unions such as SI Cobas have been successful in helping to build a workers movement and they managed to overcome divisions in the workplaces. It is only within struggles can we relate to more general transformations.
 - While 'self-organisation' can be taken to mean being the face of your own struggle, it is not always possible.
 - How do we link our workplace struggles to a world beyond capitalism? This raised questions around the split that is often made around economic and political struggles. On participant spoke about a day for teachers in Tower Hamlets where they made a manifesto for teaching that went beyond the 'defensive struggle' and towards something more offensive,

and gave a window of opportunity to think about what we actually want and are fighting for on a bigger level.

Conclusion

- We felt that there was an appetite for more detailed discussions about particular struggles, which are open and create a space for critical reflection. There was a proposal to meet every three months for further discussion. *Decision to organise a second meeting in February 2015: A. L. F. D. and M. to take this forward. Email feminist.fightback@googlemail.com if you are interested in helping out.*
- Because of the high number of education workers that came to the meeting, we thought it would be a good idea to have a rank and file UCU/ education workers meet-up. *Meeting to discuss issues around hourly paid teaching on 11th December in Hackney - for more info email alice_robson@hotmail.com*
- We thought about collecting our experiences and discussions on a blog.
- Who needs practical support and who can offer it? This exchange was worked out in the short-term. We need to think about how we can coordinate this in the longer term.