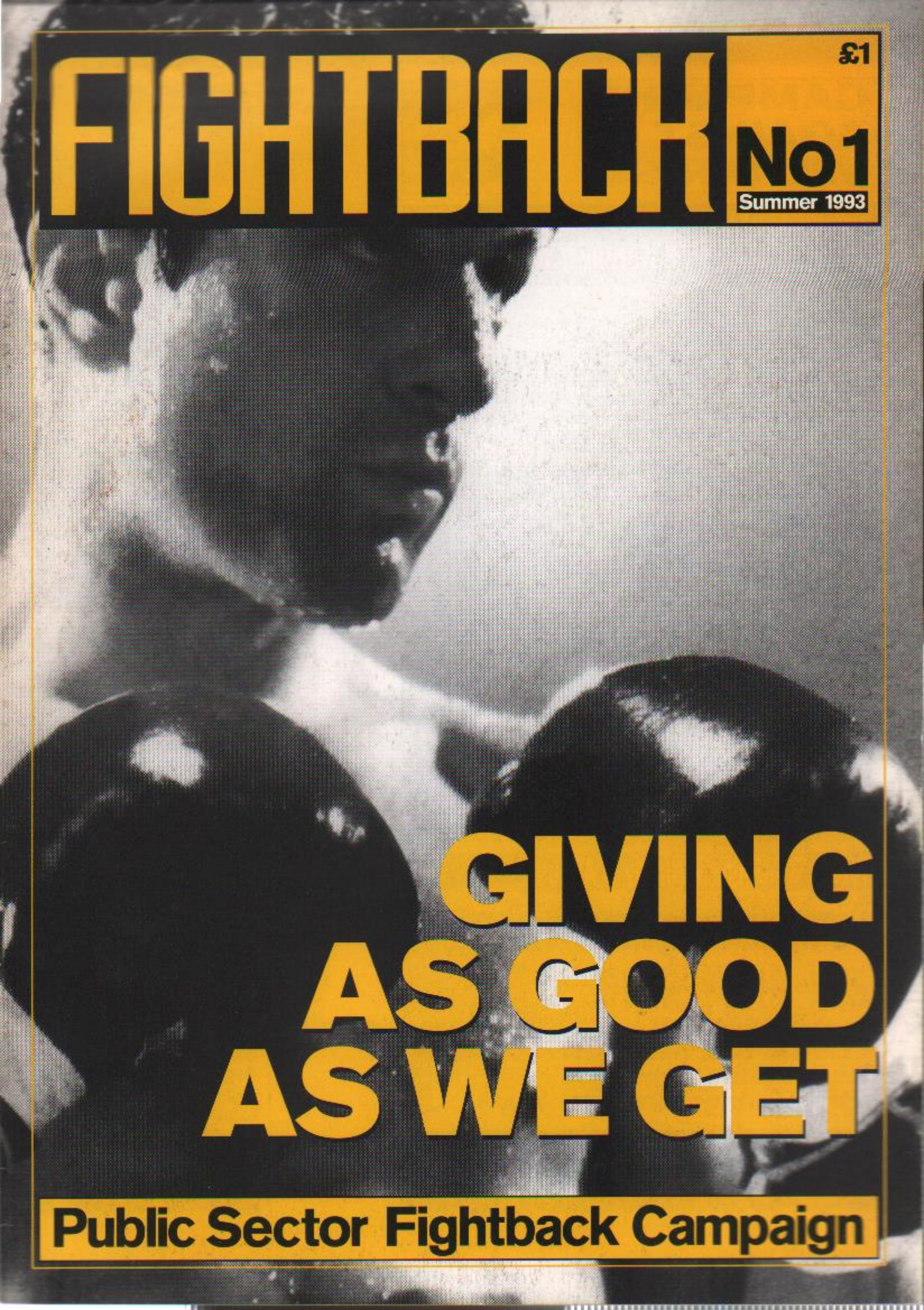




FIGHTBACK

£1

No1

Summer 1993

**GIVING
AS GOOD
AS WE GET**

Public Sector Fightback Campaign

CAMPAIGN AGAINST MILITARISM



**A fortnight of action against militarism and war
Friday 23 July to Saturday 7 August 1993**

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Friday 23 July—Thursday 29 July

Towards 2000

a week of political discussion and debate
about militarism in the nineties (see page 9)

Saturday 7 August—Central London

March against militarism and war

CALLED BY THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST MILITARISM AND THE IRISH FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Friday 30 July—Saturday 7 August

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FOR DETAILS OF ANY OF THESE EVENTS WRITE TO ROBERT
KNIGHT, CAMPAIGN AGAINST MILITARISM, 92 CROMER
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This is the first bulletin of the Public Sector Fightback Campaign. It is the product of the experiences and political work of a number of activists over the last few months. We work in a variety of different sectors and workplaces from Sheffield schools to the London underground. But what unites us is the sense that, while we all face common problems, the traditional trade union structures help to divide and isolate us rather than to bring us together.

In each and every workplace there are quirks and differences. But in discussing and organising around the defence of jobs and services in the public sector, common problems

throughout the public sector, management was becoming more aggressive and coercive. On the other hand current union structures handicapped rather than aided any fightback. We started this campaign to challenge the idea that nothing can be done about the management offensive and at the same time to overcome the problems thrown up by the traditional union framework.

Why a *public sector* campaign? Without underestimating job losses and changes in work practices in manufacturing industry and the private service sector, we feel that the public sector is at the sharp end of the employers' attack. We work in jobs that create no profit for the capitalists. Many of the services we provide, such as an education for

to preserve its right to negotiate job losses than to defend its members—but by creating new organisations adequate to our needs.

During the tube dispute many of us raised the issue of solidarity in a host of different workplaces—both our own and elsewhere. We recognised the necessity of overcoming sectional differences and people's sense of isolation. We found that even to do something as basic as provide tube workers with information about the ongoing negotiations, we had to go outside of normal union channels.

The immediate result of that experience was the manifesto that is printed on the back cover. But we realised we had to go further. We had to create a national network of

Why a fightback campaign?

become obvious. Through collective discussion we have been able to clarify ideas and work out tactics and strategies in a way we might not have been able to had we remained divided by union and workplace. We have found that placing a local issue in a broader perspective has helped us overcome the insularity and isolation we often felt when we confronted a problem either on our own or with a small group of workmates.

What sparked off our campaign was the dispute on the London underground last autumn. Management was pushing through a complete reorganisation of the tube system which would have meant job losses, wage cuts and a worsening of service conditions. But while there was considerable anger within the workforce, this was never translated into action. Both politically and organisationally tube workers were too divided to challenge the management offensive effectively.

Only a few of us were tube workers; others worked in other transport sectors; far more in local government, education and health. But we realised that what was happening on the tubes was common to all of us. On the one hand

working class children or health provision for old-age pensioners, are not the kind that employers feel are vital when their profit margins are squeezed. From their angle, even a decent transport system becomes a luxury in a slump.

The government's attack on the public sector is both a means of slashing 'unnecessary' expenditure and a way of blazing a trail for the private sector. The scale of the attack on the public sector is unprecedented. For employees it means wage cuts, lost jobs, longer hours and contracts torn up. For those in the community it means months on hospital waiting lists, unaffordable bus and train fares, VAT on heating bills. For all of us it means the creeping debilitation of poverty and the insidious lowering of morale and expectation of what life can offer.

We formed the Public Sector Fightback Campaign because we were not prepared to sit around and simply let this happen. We believe that working collectively we can begin to fight back. Not through collective organisations as they currently exist—the tube dispute showed again that the official trade union movement is more desperate

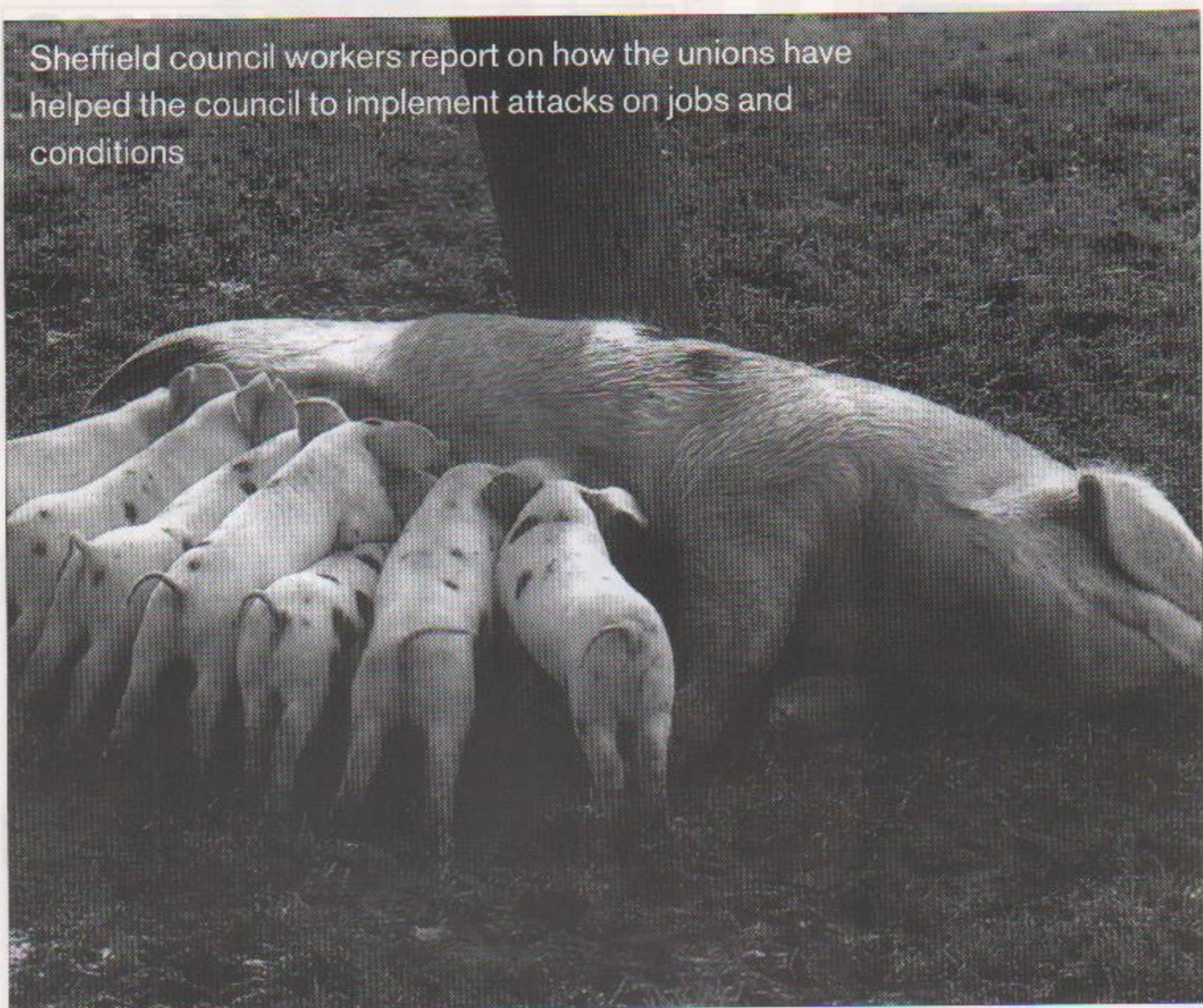
activists and a means of getting our ideas to more workers in the public sector. Hence the campaign and this bulletin.

This bulletin contains reports and assessments from activists in various parts of the public sector from around the country. We hope this is a way of stimulating debate and of breaking the isolation that many of us feel. We hope to produce the bulletin regularly and to use it as a way of exchanging information and ideas and as a vehicle through which we can build solidarity and a public sector fightback.

We hope you will not only buy this bulletin but will take copies into your workplace and sell it. We want you to discuss it with us and with others, and we hope you will challenge its ideas. We want you to write for it. Most of all we want you to participate in creating a network of activists whose collective experience and power can help reverse the current attack on our jobs and living standards.

Fightback is edited by Sharmini Brookes. Our national contact address is the Public Sector Fightback Campaign, The Edge, 92 Cromer Street, London WC1H 8DD; phone (071) 278 9755. Names of sector contacts are on page seven.

Sheffield council workers report on how the unions have helped the council to implement attacks on jobs and conditions



Sheffield: a case study in collaboration



In the early eighties Sheffield city council and the surrounding area of South Yorkshire were celebrated for their radicalism. Badges and t-shirts advertised the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire'. The reputation was always built on shaky foundations—cheap bus fares that have long since gone, the announcement of a nuclear-free Sheffield and the planting of 'Peace Gardens'. That was about the long and the short of it.

Sheffield's 'gas and water' socialism had always depended on the coffers of Whitehall rather than the organisation of working people. As Whitehall's largesse turned to penny-pinching, so Sheffield council began ditching its claimed commitment to radicalism. For almost a decade now the council has been transferring the financial stringencies imposed upon it on to teachers, city hall staff, bin-men, bus crews and the working class of Sheffield as a whole. It was able to escape a political backlash

by shifting all the blame for cuts onto the Tories.

Up till now the council has softened the impact of the cuts through creative accounting, and limited job losses by increasing the rates and poll tax. Now that is no longer enough. At the beginning of February the council demanded over a thousand voluntary redundancies (including 215 teachers) from the 27 000-strong workforce. The council imposed a deadline of ten days for people to come forward. To exert

added pressure, the council drew up a hit-list of 230 people for compulsory redundancy. Not surprisingly, the required number of people signed up for voluntary redundancy by the required date.

Then the council announced that it needed to get another 1400 workers off the payroll to balance its books. However, it told us, if we agreed to take a voluntary pay cut, then it could set a legal budget and there would be no need for further redundancies. Members of the biggest union Nalگو eventually voted narrowly to accept a three per cent pay cut.

'What you are seeing here', claimed Mike Bower, Labour leader of the council, 'is the very antithesis of this government's liking for selfish individualism. Our staff's sacrifice is a clear demonstration of people acting collectively.'

This was adding insult to injury. The Sheffield cuts were part of a vicious attack on our jobs and living standards. The council was able to push them through because of the lack of collective action. Other employers recognised this. 'The driving force' behind the Sheffield deal, wrote an appreciative *Financial Times*, 'was not so much the government's pay ceiling as the realisation by the Labour-run council that it is obliged to produce a budget that does not breach the limit set by the department of the environment.' (4 March 1993)

Inside the town hall it was difficult to find anyone who had any enthusiasm for the pay cuts. The dominant mood was one of fatalism. People saw the pay cut as unpleasant but necessary to save jobs. 'What else can we do?' asked one office worker. 'It's better than redundancies.'

Despite this pervasive sentiment the actual vote inside Nalگو to accept the pay cut was very close. About 6300 voted for and 6000 against. Many council workers still argue against it, but for the majority it is no longer a topic of conversation. As one worker commented, 'The air has now been cleared.'

Perhaps the biggest problem we faced in standing up to the council was that the unions, far from working out a strategy to fight the cuts, were intimately involved in implementing them with the council. This served to disorientate the workers on the receiving end. Bob, a residential worker, outlined how complicit the unions were in the deal:

'The wording on the Nalگو ballot paper to accept the pay cut was "Do you want 1400 people to lose their jobs? Yes or No." Before the three per cent deal was agreed, a five per cent wage cut was floated at a mass meeting and summarily turned down. Nalگو officials later presented the three per cent cut as a victory. They even had a celebration. But at one stage the negotiations nearly

fell apart. The membership were pressuring the branch officials and the council threatened to pull out. The officials were shifting themselves, it's the first time I've seen that happen.'

'Nalگو at the national level didn't advise people to vote against. They weren't happy with it, of course, because it weakened the national bargaining position, but they didn't go against it.'

'For a long time the unions have been helping put through the cuts. Over a year ago it was the union that approached the council to get voluntary redundancies in place of the compulsory ones the council had proposed. The council just keeps coming back for more. A lot of people voted against, but they haven't really thought about what to do as an alternative.'

Paul Hudson is the executive officer of the local Nalگو branch. A key mover in the pay deal, he personifies the symbiotic relation between the council and the unions. This is how his apology for the pay cut runs: 'While it is correct that the number of jobs and quality of services has been reduced in Sheffield, it is also correct that we have had more success in protecting jobs and services than any other local authority I know of in Britain.' Hudson can regularly be seen drinking with management negotiators and Labour councillors at a city centre pub, 'The Surrey'. We can only conclude that the success he refers to is that the Labour/Nalگو mafia is still in work. Thanks to them thousands of us are not.

Some sections of the council workforce rejected the pay proposals. At the Olive Grove works department the workers, who are mainly in the T&G, voted ten to one against taking a cut in pay. One of the depot workers told me why:

'We voted against because we've already sacrificed too much. There are too many unions at this site. Three years ago we had a strike, but some worked while the others picketed. Since then it's been no use. Rather than accept the cuts we should sit down and talk.'

The views of another worker at the same depot showed, however, how sectionalism has paved the way for acceptance of the cuts:

'I was a tradesman but in the restructuring they cut me down to a labourer. They promised to keep my wages at the same level but soon after they cut them. What should we do instead of taking the pay cut? Well, there is too much overtime, there are too many office staff, and lots of materials are wasted in there.'

It was a conclusion that would have pleased Mike Bower and Paul Hudson. Working with the unions the council has been able to take advantage of and play up sectional differences. In the current climate of insecurity, looking for another target or cost-cutting exercise becomes just natural common sense. But what

makes sense for the council puts a greater and greater burden on workers, as a local paper observed:

'A works department official said they had already halved the possible number of redundancies by getting staff to agree to new working practices. The majority of the 3000 works department staff voted to give up fringe benefits such as having their bus fares paid to and from work, work rotas to provide cover and virtually gave up overtime pay by taking time off in lieu whenever possible. Some employees say the new agreement has meant they take home up to £35 less than they used to.' (*Sheffield Weekly Gazette*, 6 August 1992)

The council always comes back for more. Co-operation in the first deal makes each section of workers weaker in the face of the next attack. What started for workers as a short-term expedient is now an organised assault from the council.

A key element in the council cuts strategy is the education sector. Here, where schools are now competing against each other for pupils and resources, the pay deal process has intensified divisions as Margaret, a teacher, explained:

'The pay deal has been very divisive. Ancillary workers at the school who are in Nalگو were split. Some saw it as the thin end of the wedge and voted against, others thought that it was better than redundancies and a way to protect education provision.'

In the early stages of the negotiation for a cut, teachers were excluded because their pay is set in law by the government. So the council sent each teacher a letter and a form asking him or her to allow the council to take one per cent from their wages to fund a voluntary redundancy programme. The headmaster of each school would collect the forms. Margaret explained what happened next:

'The head recently announced the school had a shortfall of £100 000 and that seven staff would have to go. A skills audit is being passed around the teachers to see who has the skills to stay and teach more classes. Talking to Nalگو staff about the cuts, some have said that they are safe and not interested in doing anything about it.'

Yet it need not have been like this. If from the beginning we had realised that defending the council could only be at the expense of defending our jobs, and that sectionalism was our Achilles' heel, we could have developed a very different strategy to fight the cuts. We still can. But to do so we need to recognise the unions are too implicated in the council's cost-cutting exercise to be of any use in defending their members. Instead we need to create our own structures, capable of putting the interests of council workers, not council bosses, first.



Have you heard the one about 'Save Our Services'? It goes like this. There's an 80-year old woman who rings up the housing office to say that she has had no heating or hot water for a week. The council promised her it would be repaired in five days as an 'Urgent' order. The repairs clerk replies that the council has run out of money and that all 'Urgent' orders are being held up in an ever-growing pile. We don't know the punch line yet—but we can guess.

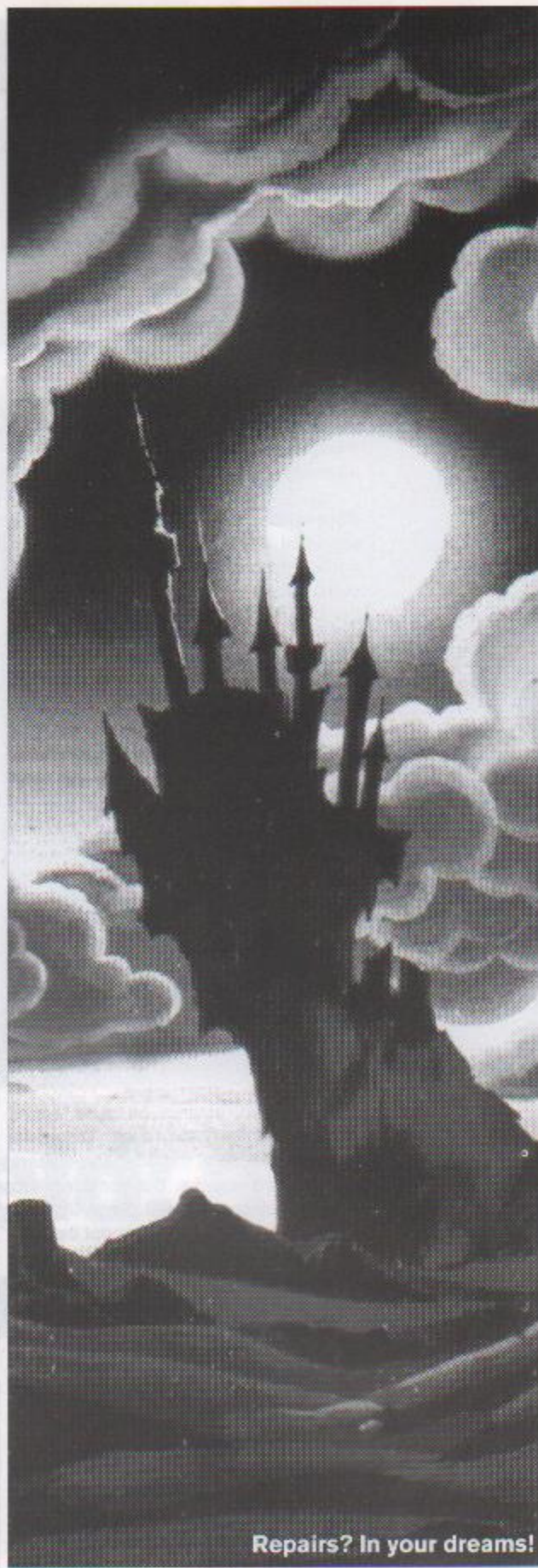
Have you heard the other one about 'Defend Our Services'? This one's about a single mother, with three children under five, living in a one-bedroom flat on the fifth floor of a block with no lifts. She rings the housing office because she is at her wits' end. The next-door neighbour has mental health problems and keeps forgetting to take his drugs. He keeps streaking along the balcony in the middle of the night, banging on her door and urinating on the doorstep. Above her is an alcoholic who gets drunk every other Thursday after cashing his giro. From then until the following Monday he and his friends shout, fight, throw furniture out of the window, and piss and vomit over the balcony. The woman wants a transfer but the housing assistant says that the housing officer post is vacant so there is nobody to see her. The council has a job freeze so the best solution available to her is to fill out a form. The only question is on which growing pile in which in-tray it will end up.

You don't think these are funny? You think I'm joking? Anyone who works in housing will know that this is only the tip of the iceberg.

In response to the first big cuts in the housing budgets in the late 1980s, Labour councils and trade unions argued that the way to organise opposition was around the slogan 'Defend Our Services'. Many felt that calling for more jobs, higher wages and better working conditions was too extreme. We could draw maximum support for the anti-cuts campaign by arguing for defence of services rather than defence of jobs.

Now with swingeing cuts and mass redundancies both jobs and services are going out of the window. Most housing workers realise that there are no services left which can be defended—although it might still be a bit embarrassing to say this out loud.

Housing workers are fed the lie that they can maximise income for the council by delivering a sensitive service to council tenants. Local authorities have hijacked the language of liberal social policy to prune budget costs at the



Repairs? In your dreams!

expense of housing workers and tenants. Management imposes more and more austerity measures—and does it all in the name of 'service delivery'.

In housing, 'providing a service' really means 'policing scarce resources'. Council priorities for staff action are:

- **the collection of rent arrears**—this work means evicting people who can't afford to pay and those who are denied the benefits to which they are entitled—the elderly, mentally ill, single parents, black people, refugees and large families. What's any of this got to do with service delivery?

- **letting empty properties**—this means forcing the homeless to accept a run-down flat in a run-down tenement block on a run-down estate. These are places that are barely fit for animals—with dog shit on the stairs, urine in the lifts, rotting rubbish on every landing. The intimidation is intense because it is a 'one offer only' system. What's this got to do with service delivery?

- **reducing repair costs**—well, that's simple. It usually means telling the tenant they can't have any repairs. Now and again someone may call round and tell the tenant that the damp and mould growth on the wall is due to condensation. The solution is therefore that the tenant must keep the windows open to let the air circulate. That's the spirit of sensitive service delivery!

The defence of services has become the smokescreen for the most brutal attacks on the most defenceless sections of the working class. Some housing workers have so taken on board this idea of 'saving services' that they themselves come up with vicious anti-working class ideas. In Brighton, for example, some housing officers have argued that since the unemployed are more prone to rent arrears, and get even more behind with the rent if they have children, they shouldn't be allowed to be parents!

At the same time the commitment to defending services has encouraged longer hours, more work, less holidays and more cuts in pay and has put us in the position we are in now. It means that we start the current campaign against the cuts from a position of weakness.

Now more than ever it's vital that we explode the myth about service provision and start demanding what we need—jobs with decent wages and working conditions. Only then can we start talking about delivering the services tenants want, need, and deserve.

The service delivery joke

Networking



From its inception the Public Sector Fightback Campaign has set out to create a series of activists' networks across the public sector. We want to establish contact and political discussion between workers who are kept apart by the structures of workplace and union but who nevertheless have comparable experiences. The networks cover local government, transport, health, education and teaching.

The immediate aim is to overcome the sense of frustration and isolation often felt by individual workers. Networking does not simply provide us with an organisational advantage. We know that to stand a chance of winning we must sharpen the arguments we put to persuade our fellow workers that we can win. This is best done through collective discussion. That is the political function of a network.

We see ourselves as workers first and foremost and we want to fight for the best possible life we can achieve. This means fighting every redundancy and wage cut. We know that to have a chance of winning we must organise independently of our bosses, whether they be local councils, trusts or charities. What happens in each workplace will be informed by a few general points which are laid out in our founding manifesto (see page 16). But beyond the most general level each fight will be different. We need day-to-day contact with other groups of workers, not only to bring to bear the maximum organisational strength on management but to draw on the widest possible political expertise. Each dispute needs a new way of expressing the same point. We can hope to win nothing except through our own efforts and through rejecting the tradition of compromise and collaboration which has held us back.

A network of activists minimises the insecurity that comes from seeing yourself as an isolated individual. It can provide the confidence and support necessary to pursue a plan of action. Paul is a teacher in a Sheffield secondary school and a campaign supporter. The cuts announced at his school are especially severe. He explains how the teachers responded:

"When the cuts were first announced I thought people at my school were going to be fatalistic and accept there was nothing that could be done. As an NUT rep I called a meeting to discuss the cuts. Along with a colleague, I had been

arguing with other teachers that spending cuts were a political decision of where to put resources and could therefore be changed."

"At the meeting a few people argued that they wouldn't change their minds and we should all take a pay cut to maintain jobs. However most people accepted the argument that events weren't set in stone or at least they wanted to do something to show their opposition."

"As less than half the staff are in the NUT, we called a meeting of all the staff in the school and from this formulated a letter to the governors stating our opposition to the cuts and our willingness to take steps to oppose them. After a lot of arguing and arm-twisting most people signed it."

"The day after the governors' meeting and the day before the end of term there was a staff meeting, where the headmaster and chair of governors intended to give us formal notice of the cuts. Rather than let them strike a morale-sapping blow just before the holidays, during which everyone would confront the problem only as individuals, I argued that we should walk out of the meeting to formulate our own collective response. People's anger and frustration meant the suggestion was taken up."

"It was obvious to all of us that if it remained at just our school we couldn't do anything. So we decided to contact other secondary schools in Sheffield for a meeting in the holidays. To my surprise teachers from eight different schools turned up."

"At this meeting we had a direct polarisation between those who argued that we should organise around public support for the integrity of education and those like myself who saw the issue as being one of arguing for effective solidarity action from other teachers and workers. Public sympathy for the miners ended up as the form in which their struggle was shunted off to defeat. If we were to win we would have to organise against the council in a way which might not guarantee the support of vicars and discontented professionals."

"Later meetings have broadened out the scope of our network and although things are at an early stage, we already have a wider network of communication and political exchange than I have ever known in all my years as a teacher in this city."

If you are interested in joining or creating a network, get in touch with a sector contact, or with us at our national address (see page 2). For sector contacts, phone (071) 278 9755: education: Richard; civil service: Carlton; FE sector: Dennis; health: Brid; local government: Sharmini; transport: Pete.



A job for life? T

A worker with unpaid bills argues that we should all demand the impossible



It seems obvious to all of us who rely on a wage packet for our existence that having a job is the only guarantee of a decent standard of life.

Even when we are single and in a good job, we are only a couple of wage packets away from being struck by poverty. When we bring up families in our early maturity, and when we lose the capacity to earn money in our old age, our economic and social existence becomes precarious. It might be different if we didn't have to pay rent or a mortgage for life. But in this society, a job for life is the least we should expect. Yet today both employers and the unions ridicule the very idea of a job for life.

In the fifties and sixties, most people accepted the idea of a job for life. In the spirit of post-war welfarism, full employment—another way of saying 'a job for life'—went alongside the guarantee of health care from the cradle to the grave. Of course in practice this vision never became a reality. Nevertheless, both employers and trade unions accepted that it was a reasonable demand. No longer.

In the recent railworkers' dispute, Sir Bob Reid, chairman of British Rail, told the RMT that its opposition to job losses amounted to a demand for 'jobs for life'. That, he said, was demanding the 'impossible'. Until not so long ago, the story went, a young worker joining BR, complete with a sense of participating in a great enterprise and, what's more, with travel concessions, could expect to go through life to the final moving moment of the gold watch ceremony before leaving for retirement. Now all that can be expected is the dole.

Such a policy might make sense to Reid. After all, if employers can't make a profit out of us, or if they want to cut the service we provide, then they won't see any point in keeping us on. This is



A job for life—burying the dead?

a sensible argument for them but makes no sense to us at all.

Being a railworker or any other kind of worker is not a lifestyle choice which working people can afford to give up. On the contrary, a wage packet every week or a salary cheque every month of our working lives is the only chance most of us have of a half-decent existence. The only way most people can get decent

housing is by accepting a mortgage as a 25-year millstone around their necks; are those who decry the idea of a job for life prepared to let us stop repaying our debts for life? Throughout our working lives we are expected to make payments towards our old-age pensions. Will Bob Reid pay railworkers' pensions out of his own pocket?

The arguments for a job for life make

Too damn right!

obvious sense. But so far have such basic working class ideas been eroded that union leaders seem incapable of articulating them. In response to Reid's claim that the unions were demanding jobs for life, RMT leader Jimmy Knapp denied that they were asking for any such thing. All we want, he claimed, was an assurance that there would be no compulsory redundancies. In fact the RMT wasn't even asking for this much. What it wants is a deal similar to those already made in the private and newly-privatised sectors. At Yorkshire Water, there will be no compulsory redundancies—for a year. At Rover, job security has been replaced by total job flexibility. The only jobs union negotiators are interested in are their own—they want to ensure that theirs at least are jobs for life!

The defensiveness of the labour movement has eroded working class expectation of employment. Most of us at least half expect to have some period of our lives without a job. And even if we have not had the experience ourselves yet, we all know a relative or a close friend who has had to scrimp, save and maybe even gone under when they lost their job. From the old expectation that we would join the labour market at fifteen and get the gold watch 50 years later we have moved to a new expectation—that unemployment is natural, just part of life.

But each time we move away from asserting our right to our job we lower our horizons and pave the way for further attacks. Quite simply we can't afford to compromise on our most basic needs. In 1993, more than ever, a redundancy

means the reduction of yet another worker to penury.

The expectation that a job for life is a right is being replaced by the worry of what will happen if our job is taken away. The last thing we should do in these circumstances is drop the demand for a job for life and the aspiration that we can achieve a much higher quality of life. We need to restate the fact that a job for life is the minimum we need. We have to challenge the boss who says this is unreasonable and the union organiser who puts this fight off to the future. There is a simple proposition that we should take to heart. A job for life is essential for us just to carry on. Well, then, if this system cannot provide even that, that's a convincing argument for a different society that will.

TOWARDS 2000

A week of discussion and debate organised by the Revolutionary Communist Party and sponsored by

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Debates on ● Reporting the war in Yugoslavia ● The road to peace in Ireland ● Censorship—the domestic face of militarism ● Race—the new frontline

Tickets and Information: Tickets cost £43 waged/£32 unwaged before 1 June, and £50/£38 on the door. Special rates for school parties. Make cheques payable to RCP Association and send to BM RCP, London WC1N 3XX, or contact Linda McAlpine on (071) 278 9908. Tickets are also available from The Edge gallery, 92 Cromer Street, London WC1H 8DD, and The Angle, The Arcadian, Ladywell Walk, Birmingham B5 4ST.

Friday 23 July–Thursday 29 July 1993
University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1

Five hundred further education and sixth-form colleges have just become private companies. A lecturer looks at what this means for college workers



The privatisation of further education is big business. The annual budget for further education is £2.4 billion. There are more than 500 colleges, including 380 further education colleges (FECs) and 118 sixth-form colleges. Some of these corporations will be big companies with over 1000 employees and turnovers in excess of £20m. There are 90 000 full-time and probably more part-time lecturers, as well as 60 000 non-teaching staff. Student numbers are 1.6m at present and are set to rise by 25 per cent over three years—though only 15 per cent of this expansion will be fully-funded.

This huge new business sector has been created with a single function—youth containment. The new industry is charged with devising a range of national youth containment schemes. The one thing that is not on the agenda is education. However inferior education at the local tech might have been, there is nothing of value in its replacement.

Our ability to challenge these new developments in further education is undermined by four myths. Exposing these myths is essential if we are to create a fightback in the further education sector.

Myth 1 : 'Education means partnership'

There is a belief that managers of educational institutions have goals in common with their employees, whether

both anger and fear when it campaigned around the introduction of new contracts imposing a 37-hour week with unlimited teaching hours and reduced holidays. But the union's sole demand was for 'assurances' from employers that new contracts would not be imposed before national negotiations. Where this assurance was given, colleges were exempted from strike action.

This strategy might have protected Natfhe's bargaining position but it was disastrous for workers. Those at colleges which gave no assurance were left isolated, and solidarity action was precluded. The assurances that were given are worth nothing, since the government is holding back funding pending the introduction of the new contracts.

Rather than peddling the myth of partnership, we need to popularise the notion of 'them' and 'us'. Employers are not fellow educationalists but hard-nosed bosses. We should treat them as such.

Myth 2 : 'Expansion is good for you'

Many lecturers look favourably on the idea of educational expansion as a way of allowing many more young people from poorer backgrounds to get into college. This might have been a valid argument in the boom period of the sixties, but not in the slump of the nineties. Expansion of student numbers at a time when resources are being slashed means less education for all.

Every step to the final award of a 'non-vocational' qualification aims to ensure the tighter control of young people's lives. What might be good or innovative about certain aspects of these curriculum changes is not the issue. The issue is the squeezing of resources and the tightening of social control. The policy reflects the government's political project of doing away with anything that resembles education for the great majority of young people. As one nurse tutor put it, 'It isn't about education, it's about control.'

Myth 3 : 'Special needs will be met under the new system'

Expansion is also supposed to benefit young people with 'learning difficulties and disabilities'. By redirecting existing resources and proclaiming its commitment to special needs, the new further education funding council has pre-empted criticism and won support. All this means is that, through specious special pleading, the great majority of students will be taught in decaying buildings, in overcrowded classes, without books, resources and often teachers, while those with special needs will still have inadequate provision as well.

Myth 4 : 'There is nothing we can do about it'

The most debilitating myth of all is the one that there is nothing we can do to defend jobs and conditions. Of course, if we accept the other three myths, then we are certain to be defeated.

The legacy of failure, incompetence and complicity that has been left to us by the unions has demoralised many. The anger that many of us feel at the

When further education

teaching or non-teaching staff. The lecturers' union Natfhe articulates this view most clearly when it talks about 'partnership' between staff and management in colleges.

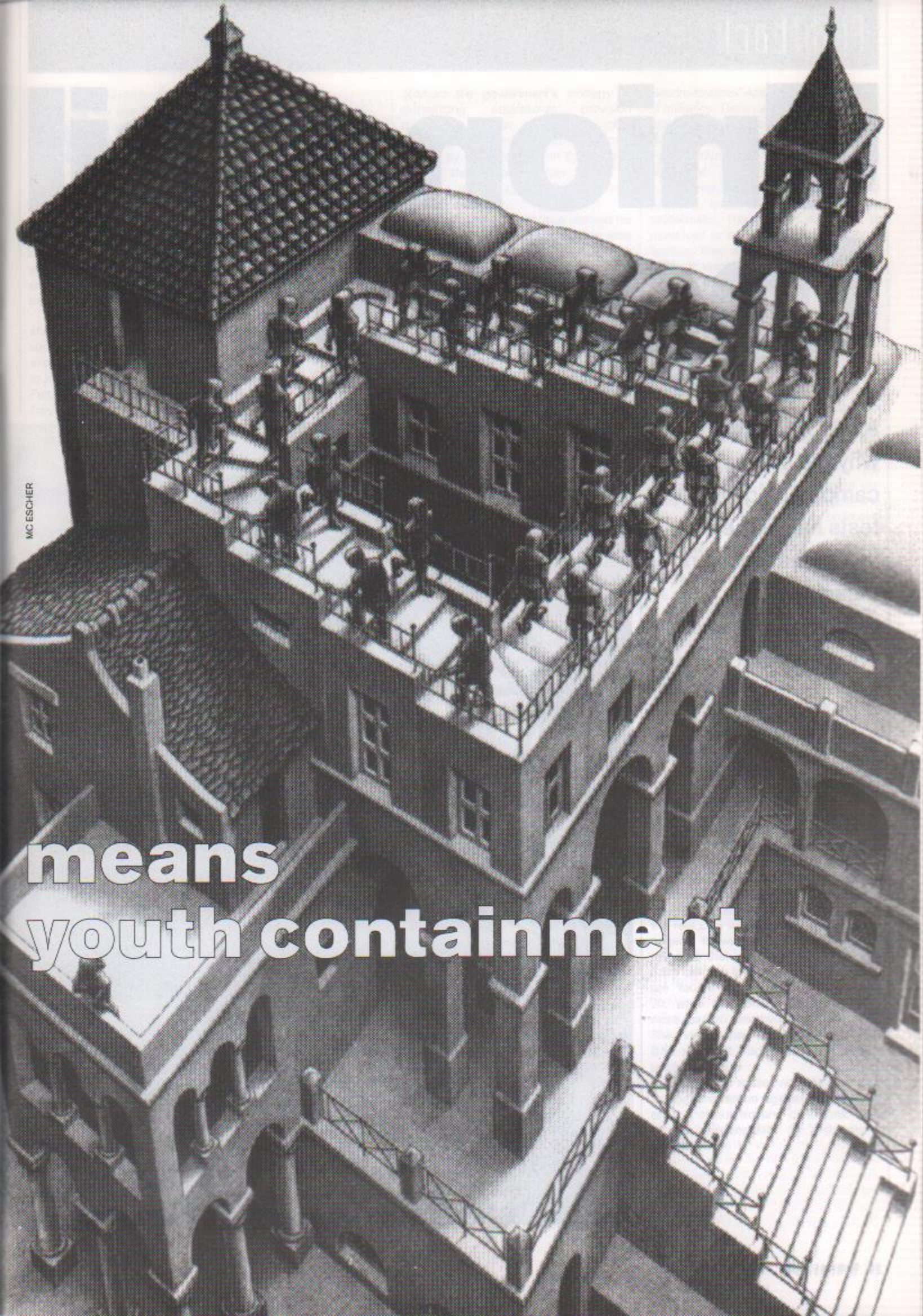
College/corporation principals on the other hand recognise that they are like any other employer, and confrontation, not partnership, is what is on the agenda. College principals have joined Roger Ward's Colleges' Employers' Forum, an efficient and confrontational bosses' organisation.

Management knows that the condition for success when you are under-funded in an economic slump is the crushing of the workforce. Even the *Times Educational Supplement* can see that lecturers 'will pay the price' of incorporation (26 March 1993). Natfhe tapped into

College buildings need £1.2 billion of repairs. Most accommodation is overcrowded or unsuitable. The annual education cost of an average student is £2 000, but much of the expansion will be paid for at £750 per student. Students are already complaining about the lack of teaching masked as 'flexible learning'. Young people with no future are simply being offered a range of pretend qualifications such as the low skill level 'non-vocational qualifications', which merely accredit their ability to be disciplined employees. What other function has the introduction of 'learning contracts' apart from that of teaching discipline? Why else are we going to see the strict monitoring of attendance to stop the 40 per cent drop-out rate which so alarmed the audit commission?

imposition of slave contracts is mixed with fear and insecurity. 'It's going to get worse. I can't see anything getting better', Ken, a lecturer in Community Education, told me. Sue, a lecturer in Beauty Therapy, felt what the new arrangements meant was 'more work, more hours, more students, more stress.'

We have to reject the myths of 'partnership', or 'defending the service', or the redivision of a cake which gets smaller by the month. We have to face up to the fact that as long as we do not do this, everything will get worse even if we pretend that it isn't happening. Seeing ourselves as what we are—hard-pressed public sector workers who need to fight alongside others—is the first, necessary step away from fear and towards an effective fightback. ●



**means
youth containment**

Unions fail the test

A teacher explains why the unions' campaign against tests has helped the Tories maintain their attack on teachers' jobs and living standards





Education minister John Patten has beaten a retreat on his pet project, the Standard Attainment Test (SAT)—testing schoolchildren at ages seven, 11 and 14. The broad opposition of teachers, the education establishment and parents has claimed this as a victory. In fact, the fight against SATs has always been a diversion which has allowed the Tories to pursue their real agenda: raising teacher productivity and introducing a Victorian system of payment by results.

Patten did a sterling job in reinvigorating the nation's teaching unions. Even such bastions of anti-strike professionalism as the NAS/UWT and the ATL voted to join the boycott of the tests. But for all Patten's personal failure, the collapse of Tory plans for testing does nothing to

obstruct the government's strategy of dismantling educational provision through a major assault on jobs, conditions of service and resources. Indeed by concentrating on the issue of testing, the opposition has turned its back on real struggles which confront teachers every day.

Patten's critics might have disliked his tests, but everyone accepted the idea that tests were the key to improving educational standards. The only debate was about what kind of tests were necessary. Patten's opponents argued that they, and not government ministers, were best placed to answer this. In so doing they effectively accepted responsibility for an education system that was being dismembered all around them.

The government's emphasis on the need for tests was a way of placing responsibility for the education system on to the shoulders of teachers. As Professor Anthony O'Hear argued, 'testing is not just of pupils. It is equally of teachers and schools. Many...fear public scrutiny of their work.'

The government wanted to legitimise cuts in resources and enforce higher productivity on teachers. It did so by raising the issue of standards via testing, and most of its opponents took the bait hook, line and sinker.

At the heart of the anti-SATs campaign lies a defensive and dangerous assumption—that teachers could only take on the government by linking their struggle to that for improved educational standards. Many teachers believe that the strikes of the mid-eighties failed because the Tories and the media were successful in portraying teachers as 'militants' who 'did not care' about their pupils' education. As a result everyone now wants to prove how much they do care, and how responsible they feel for the education system.

The best way to win parent and media support, many teachers now argue, is to act only on 'educational issues' which have the pupil's best interests at heart—not vulgar issues like having enough teachers and paying them a decent wage. Sarah Baxter in the *New Statesman* warned that 'Teachers' complaints of overwork do not evoke much sympathy, however good their case.' (30 April 1993) A widely distributed leaflet from a radical pressure group took heed of the advice, arguing that 'everyone has a stake in defending the future of our children'.

Ironically it is the traditionally right-wing unions that have dared to mention the problem of teachers' workload. They are less defensive than the more left-wing unions, since Patten can hardly get away with describing the

Headmistresses' Association as a hothed of militancy. Tests came to symbolise the growing frustration with heavier workloads—ten levels of grading and 1400 performance targets sum up the nightmare.

However, even posing opposition to SATs in terms of workload can be problematic. The problem with SATs is perceived in an exclusively educational fashion: they are a hindrance to your 'ability to teach effectively'. What the ATL wants is a different kind of testing that is less detrimental to educational standards. While the right-wing unions at least recognise the problem of teacher workload, they too are drawn into accepting responsibility for the state of the education system.

The best way we can ensure a proper education for working class children is first and foremost by fighting to safeguard and extend pay, conditions and material resources. That means worrying less about our responsibility for the education system and more about our need for decent pay and conditions. It is still conceivable that the proposed boycott of tests can be used as the basis for effective action, but only if it is seen as an opportunity to demonstrate the viability of collective action which places the interests of teachers to the fore.

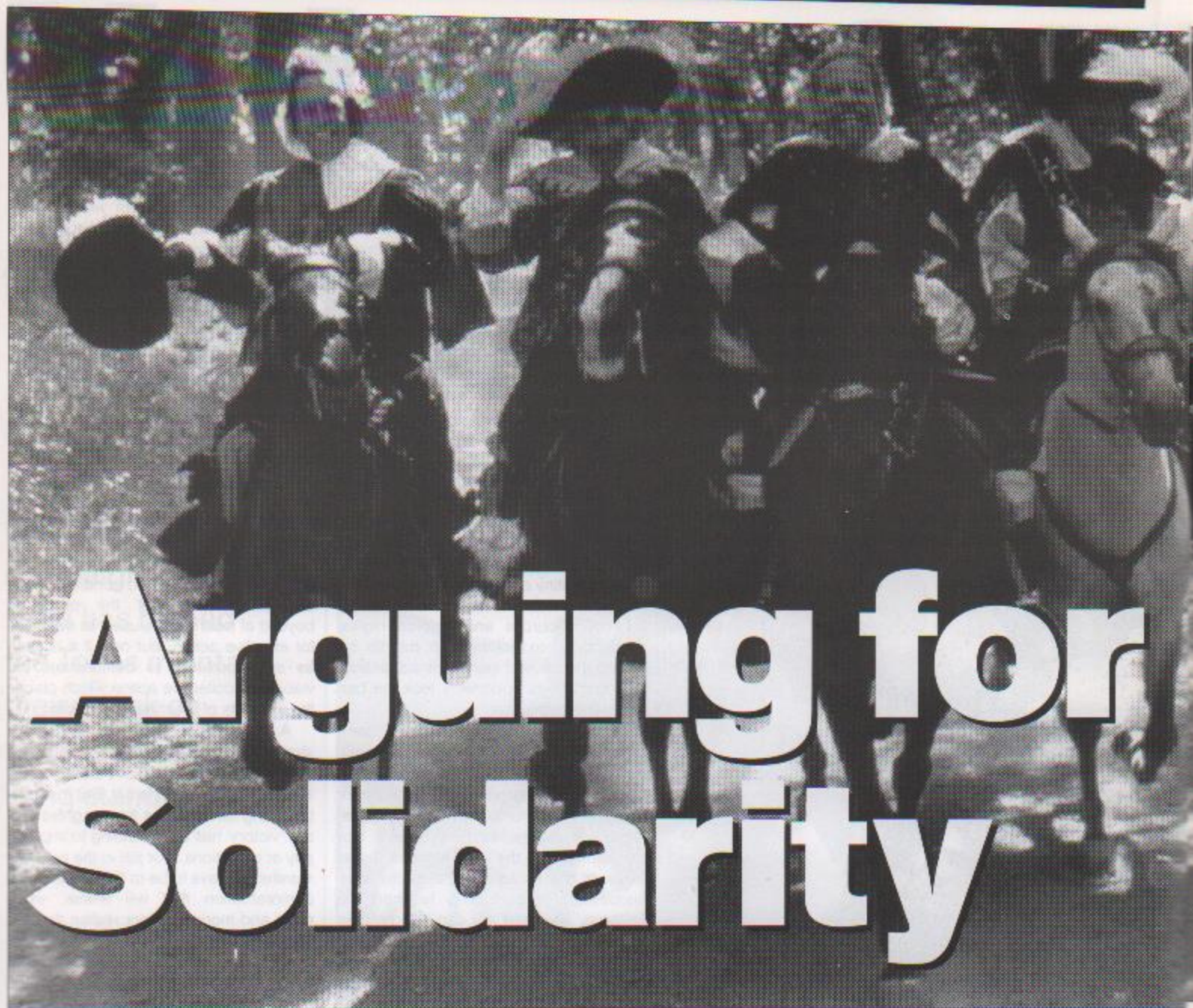
A major consequence of the unions' strategy will be the demoralisation of teachers. The collapse of Patten's plans is being hailed as a victory. But it will not take long for teachers to recognise that this 'victory' has done nothing to improve pay or conditions. Our job in the next few months will have to be to fight against the demoralisation that will ensue, when more and more teachers realise that the 'victory' over Patten has in fact made it even more difficult to oppose redundancies, payment by results and all the other attacks that are coming our way.

The government's plans for testing have to be placed in the broader context of a whole series of measures that are being used to increase the workload of teachers and to impose cuts in provision. While the debate about tests raged, the real cuts in education went unchallenged. It was recently and quietly revealed that nearly a quarter of the 3.6m children in English primary schools are taught in classes of more than 30, while the number of classes with more than 40 rose by a quarter in 1991. The virtual pay freeze—an insulting 0.55 per cent wage increase—remains unchallenged.

We need make no excuses nor apologies to argue against the continual erosion of our working conditions. That is our responsibility for educational standards.



On the way to consult with John Patten...



Arguing for Solidarity

A Hackney council activist argues that solidarity means more than token gestures of sympathy



The spate of local government disputes in the London boroughs last summer were frustrating affairs. Greenwich, Newham, Islington and Hackney were all in dispute at the same time, but there was no co-ordination between workers in the different councils or between workers in different unions within each council. None of the disputes had any impact at all on workers not immediately involved. The strikes were marginalised from the realities of work and life.

The local Nalگو officials won funding

from the national union to keep the strikers on full pay. The strikes remained entirely passive while the union waited for management to come to heel. Most strikers accepted this strategy, since they were on full pay anyway. There was no strategy for winning the dispute, so strikers just stayed at home. Even in the best of times a strike must be fought hard and won as quickly as possible. In a long drawn-out dispute a workforce may be worn down, especially if it is not engaged in organising action on a day-to-day basis. Our weapons are dynamism and invention; management feeds off our passivity. And these are not the best of times. Councils are determined to pass their problems on to workers and so, with no threat of the strike escalating, they were happy to sit tight.

As soon as the national union withdrew full pay, the strikes disintegrated since they had no direction, strategy or participation of the workers involved. The union negotiators had dropped most of

the original strike demands so there was little point in hanging on. Most strikers returned to work with little or nothing to show for their action. In fact the position was worse at the end of the strikes than it had been at the beginning. Management, having ridden out the disputes, was more confident about going on the offensive. Many workers, on the other hand, concluded that strikes didn't work.

Since the summer many of these Nalگو workers have been asked to give solidarity to a variety of different workers in dispute: miners, nurses, teachers. In reality they have been asked to take part in token gestures of support and photo opportunities. Stay-aways from work and public sympathy, however loud, should not be confused with effective solidarity action.

The public response to the miners' issue got the London metropolitan district of Nalگو on to the bandwagon. The union bureaucrats had been sitting on a motion from Camden Nalگو for three months



which called for a co-ordinated response from all London council workers to fight the cuts. In the spirit of a token response, the district leadership organised instead a one-off march. It was badly publicised and organised. Many branches and workplaces didn't know it was happening. As a result, at best only a few hundred turned up. Union leaders used the police to keep the marchers out of an indoor rally which they claimed was all-ticket. Well, none of the 'ticket-holders' turned up, so the organisers spent their time leaning from upstairs windows to listen to speeches at an impromptu rank and file rally. Many of those who had come on the demo were young and angry, but after their experience of this fiasco it will be more difficult to persuade them to take action again.

More recently, Nalگو proposed a National Day of Action to coincide with the simultaneous action of miners and railworkers. When the NUM backed off, Nalگو settled for local days of action.

Each branch around the country was asked to ballot the membership on a local issue that directly affected them. They claimed this would interest more people than a national strike call that wasn't for the miners. How much more divisive can you get?

In Hackney the ballot issue was the threat to the 'Hackney Factor'—a local addition to our pay which came about several years ago as an incentive to work in London's second most deprived borough. The council had threatened to get rid of this payment, claiming that this was the only way to stave off redundancies. Workers were up in arms. We were not going to go down the path of Sheffield and take a pay cut. Most were eager to take action and oppose the cut.

The branch leadership, however, was more timid. They opposed strike action and proposed instead a lunch-time rally. Recognising this as the useless gesture it was, most workers did not bother to turn up. Such was the turn-out that the rally was called off.

Some activists couldn't explain the lack of response this time except by blaming the workforce. Another group of activists, including myself, understood the matter differently. We argued that workers weren't to blame for ignoring union activities that were pathetic and derisory. Rather, the problem lay in the demoralising strategy carried out by the union leadership. To gain mass support for solidarity, we had to offer cogent political arguments, and a strategy to carry those arguments into action.

Our first chance to argue these points came a week later when I raised the issue of solidarity in support of the day of action called by miners and railway workers. For the first time I got a negative reaction from many who had been active in the past: 'If we can't get them out on an issue that directly affects them, they certainly won't come out for the miners'; 'Nobody will support another one-day strike. They're fed up with them.'; 'The branch executive will say it's too late to organise a ballot or meeting, and nobody will take unofficial action.'

All of these responses had more than a germ of truth in them. But I argued that while a one-day strike wouldn't change the world, we should use the opportunity to argue for solidarity on the basis that we had to strengthen ourselves by supporting our friends in a battle against our common enemy. Winning solidarity requires us to put the case that we have a common interest in defending jobs, wages and conditions against a set of opponents who are determined to make us pay for their rapacious and decrepit system. The problem with days of action was less that they were one-day strikes than that the bureaucracy ran them to ensure that they never got out of political control.

In the previous summer local government workers had been defeated because they had sat back and failed to go out to other workers to convince them of the need to give support and solidarity. The workers involved were left feeling that strike action was inappropriate. Now management feels more confident that it won't face a war on more than one front at a time.

One-day strikes have become the perfect vehicle for token gestures of sympathy because the union bureaucracy is able to control them. However, there is nothing inherently wrong with the tactic of the one-day strike if we can use it to get over our political message. Such action can be a useful measure of our strength and the prelude to a wider campaign, or it can be the excuse to avoid action. It is up to us to make of it what we can.

At the moment we have to seize every opportunity and work out how even an empty gesture can be turned around and used as the pretext for getting more workers involved in discussion about their circumstances, and to find ways for us all to engage with other groups of workers who will themselves be experiencing the same problems. This is the remit that a few of us including myself set ourselves after the catalogue of disasters that had begun the year.

We felt confident that workers would support unofficial action if they thought it would be effective. Most workers are in fact now cynical of the officially-sanctioned action that is recommended to them. When it comes down to it, our actions are made official and effective by our collective strength, not by the approval of law or bureaucrat.

Our first move was to call an informal meeting of all the activists we could get hold of. Fifteen people came to this first meeting. There were workers from the local DSS who were in the CPSA; manual workers in Nupe and the TGWU; Nalگو members from different sections, and even an unemployed worker. It was the first attempt to establish a cross-union, cross-workplace group from the ground up. We were able to use this forum to start an activists' network and to use it to begin to co-ordinate for collective action.

Our first argument for solidarity came up around the issue of the miners and railworkers. Many were still hesitant about what we could achieve. But because we were open about the need for a proper political discussion and said what we stood for, 200 people attended the rally that we ourselves had organised. It was the most successful meeting that Hackney had seen for a long time, because those who came knew that they would at least be spared the platitudes of the traditional rally. For us it revealed the potential that we have, once we raise the issue of class solidarity as a matter of direct and pertinent necessity. ●

PUBLIC SECTOR FIGHTBACK CAMPAIGN MANIFESTO

THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEGUN THE MOST SWEEPING ATTACK EVER ON JOBS AND SERVICES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR. IT IS DESPERATE FOR US TO PAY THE PRICE FOR A SYSTEM WHICH DOES NOT WORK.



IT'S THEIR MESS, NOT OURS

It's not our concern to work out a strategy for the bosses. Any attempt to do so will always rebound against us. Tens of thousands of jobs have gone because our side has put capitalist profit before working class lives. Terms are now dictated to us—as in the Tomlinson proposals for London's health service and London Underground's Company Plan. Meanwhile the union leaders are still eager to advise the capitalists how to run their system.

Today we are asked to tender for our own jobs: to undercut the lousy wages and onerous working conditions that we already have. To add insult to injury, we are often asked to cover any shortfall by going out and begging for money. We can expect more of this as charities such as the Imperial Cancer Research Fund cut back their grants to hospitals like St Bartholomew's.

If we're to hold on to what we have and move forward, we will have to fight harder than ever before. ●

NO CUTS IN JOBS AND WAGES: FOR THE SERVICES WE NEED

Don't settle for what they offer. Think about what we need—not what we can put up with.

If we do this, we can begin to overcome the divisions that exist between different groups of workers, and between workers and consumers of services. We know that employers will try to exploit divisions between skilled and unskilled, men and women, black and white. We need a strategy that can bring unity against the management offensive.

This means no special cases—no one group of workers is more worthy of praise or blame than any other. Searching out public sympathy for frontline workers like nurses or ambulance drivers may seem attractive—but it is divisive. It counterposes a 'deserving' nurse to an 'undeserving' cleaner. This breeds resentment and recrimination.

Sympathy is no substitute for effective solidarity action. Eliciting public sympathy may be a reasonable starting point but that is all. Everyone 'toots for the nurses', but that does not add a penny to the wage packet. We cannot afford to hold back from effective measures just to appear respectable. Do you want to be a well-loved victim or a worker with a well-paid job?

The clearest division we face is the 'choice' between jobs and decent wages on the one hand and the provision of services on the other. We are told: 'If you are greedy enough to want a decent wage, it will be your fault that the old die of hypothermia.' We say: 'We do not accept the choice between slave wages and inadequate services. We aspire to a living wage and all the services that provide for our needs and dignity.' ●

FOR INDEPENDENT ORGANISATION AND RANK AND FILE CONTROL

We require organisations that always act with our needs in mind first and last. RMT's negotiations with London Underground before calling off strike action are exactly what should not happen. In secret, the RMT executive found a way to preserve its negotiating position in exchange for agreeing to redundancies. We should demand that all talks with the bosses are broadcast for everyone to hear.

Whatever their pretensions, local councils are employers like any other. But that's not how our unions have operated. In many cases we have management in our union branches. How can we discuss and organise for effective action when the boss is in the room? If management wants an association or union, let them form their own.

We need to organise across sections and sectors to overcome divisions. We need to build unity from the bottom up. It stands to reason that there would be a greater possibility of effective action if there were just one union that covered the tube, rail and buses, or if nurses were all in a single organisation. We are going to have to create such organisations ourselves. Effective action will not be brought about through existing structures.

We've all met the argument from fellow workers that they agree with us but nothing can be done. But some simple propositions which have always been true for the working class are just as true today. The longer we fail to organise, the harder it will become to fight back. The attacks on us are not going to stop. We have one possible chance to defend our class: to fight back hard and to fight back now. ●