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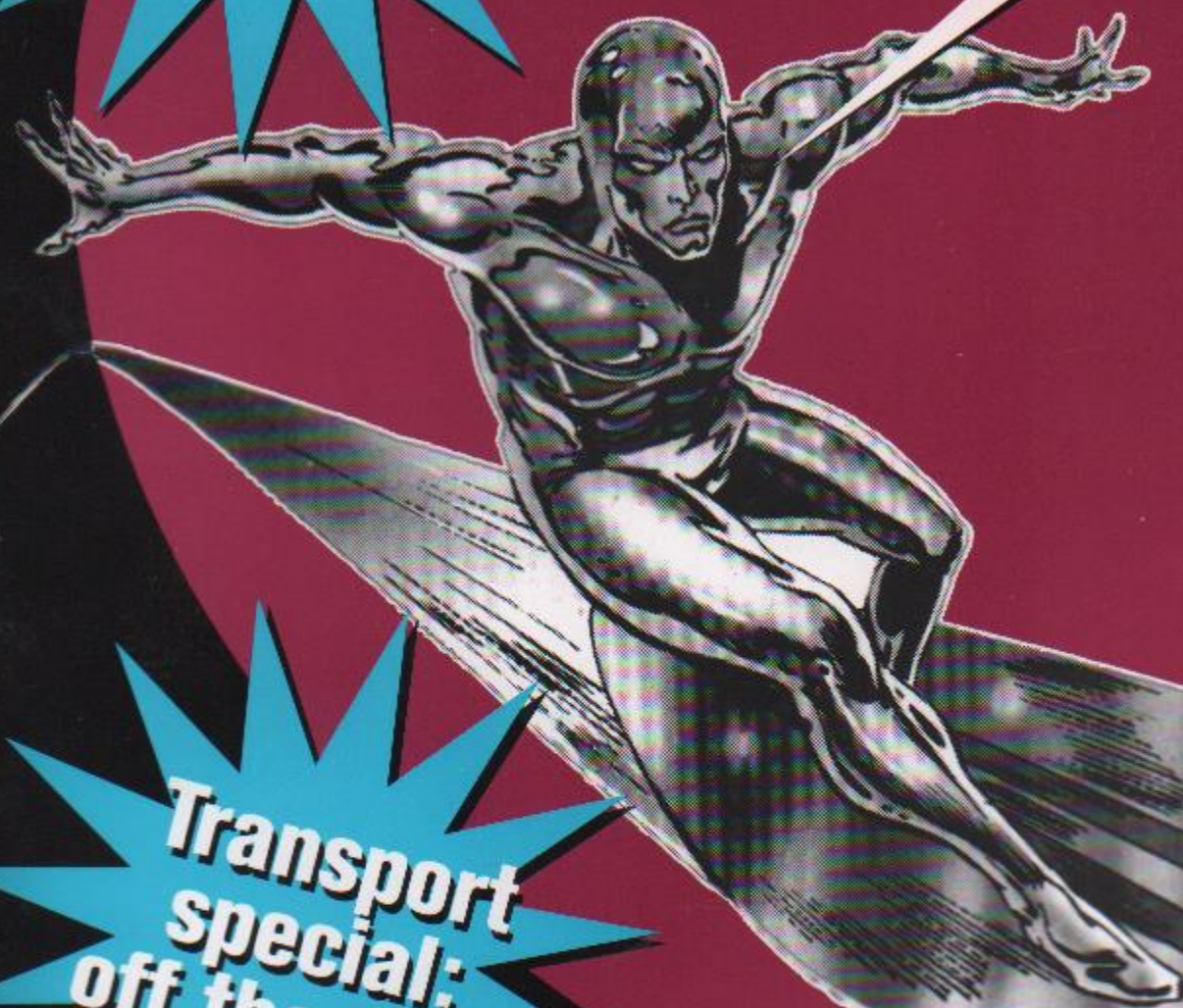
No4 Winter 1994 £2



Fightback

**Fear and
loathing in the
workplace**

**THE FORCE
IS WITH US**



**Transport
special:
off the rails**

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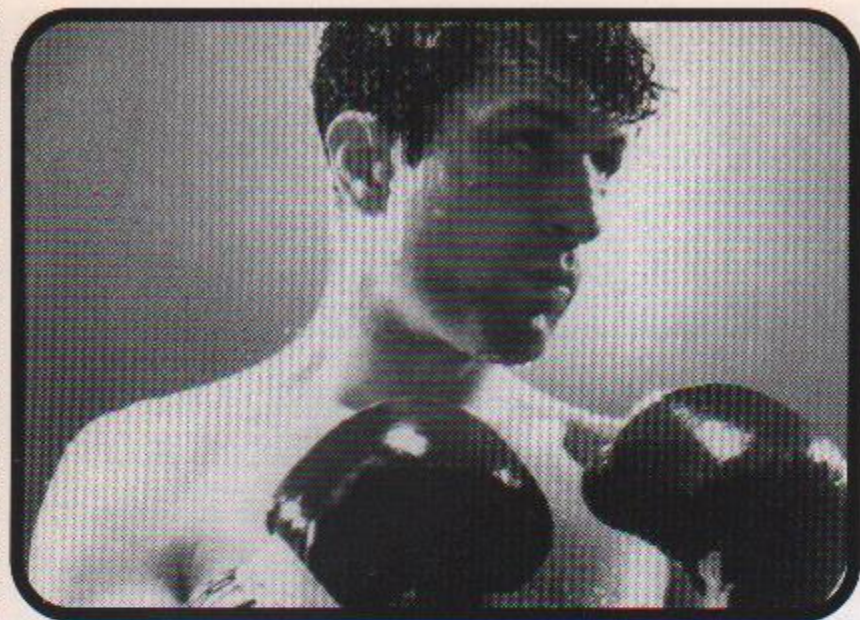
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To receive this bulletin regularly, and take part in Fightback events and actions, join the Fightback network now.

Write to Carlton Brick at Fightback,
BM PSFC, London WC1N 3XX or phone
(0171) 278 9908 or fax (0171) 278 9844
or e-mail fightback@camintl.org

Edited by Alan Harding, Debbie Weston, Peter Ray
Design by Richard Stead, Sally Gray
Production by Michael Kramer, James Malone



FIGHTBACK

Between now and the New Year supporters of the Fightback campaign will be engaged in a comprehensive survey called 'Attitudes to work', which will investigate the thoughts, preoccupations and aspirations of the working class today.

It might seem strange that a campaign committed to resistance should engage in what could be an academic exercise. But, if we are to develop effective forms of resistance, it is essential to know what the working class is thinking in as systematic fashion as possible. The recent experience of the working class and the collapse of collective responses to problems means that the traditional methods of assessing the outlook and predisposition of groups of workers no longer pertain. In the past, we could all ascertain the mood of the class through the forms of action it took. Concerns and preoccupations were expressed through motions to union meetings. On demonstrations and through discussion on the shop floor, the mood of workers became evident.

Today, such indicators may not exist at all. If they do, they are at best unreliable and at worst they can mislead. In the meantime, as we document throughout this issue of *Fightback*, the reorganisation of the wage labour/capital relationship—the way we work—carries on apace. We need to know how these changes are understood and experienced by ordinary people. Have workers fallen for the Japanese-style quality jargon? Is pay an issue any more or are PC equal opportunities concerns more important?

We in Fightback have been hazarding some pretty good guesses. The bulletin itself and our summer conference indicate we have gone some way in understanding the new ways that people experience work. But this is based on limited experience and relies too much on our own instincts. We need to check our intuition more scientifically.

As we go to press we are completing our pilot study in London, Nottingham, Newcastle, Manchester and Sheffield. The full survey will not only have a greater geographical range, but will accurately reflect the present composition of the workforce. We need as much help as possible to make this project a success. If you wish to participate in the production of the survey we would like to hear from you. If you have colleagues and friends who are interested then a representative of the campaign will visit you and hold an explanatory briefing meeting.

We don't want you to complete a survey. As a reader of *Fightback* you are not exactly a random sample. We want you to participate in making the survey a springboard for a far-reaching discussion of the present state of the working class and its future.

If you are interested contact Alan Harding:

Fightback, BM PSFC, London WC1N 3XX;
phone (0171) 278 9908;
fax (0171) 278 9844;
e-mail fightback@camintl.org

EDITORIAL

USEFUL

'Caring for three million people around the clock with the CareXpress helpline' reads a newspaper advert. Is it BUPA or the AA? No, it's the T&G 'leading the way in trade union services'. This is the pathetic face of John Monk's 'revitalised' trade unions.

The new trade unionism is indeed different from the trade unionism of the 1960s or 1970s. It is a sorry support service for victims. Writing in the *Guardian* on the eve of the TUC conference, Monks illustrated the new role of the unions in relation to home workers: 'Workers like these—insecure, ill-informed about their rights, victims of the new flexibility—need someone to turn to, someone informed about their rights, able to speak for them, to advise and, if necessary, to go to court on their behalf. Such a role for unions has been widely acknowledged.' Contrast this whinging view of the future with the time when the widely acknowledged view of the unions was as 'the enemy within'. When people wore badges with this slogan on and adopted it as a defiant and accurate description of trade unionists as fighters against a system which couldn't provide for their needs.

People's expectations have narrowed so that pleading for help seems all that you can do. By adapting to such a climate the trade unions can grow. No doubt the left will welcome any increase in numbers. They may start talking about 'mass organisations' again. To adopt a simile from Marx, the new trade union movement will be like a sack of potatoes. The missing element will be the concept of trade unions as combative organisations which can unite workers.

The union bureaucracy have finally drawn out the logic of their special case pleading for various groups. They can now plead for individual workers as special cases for society's care and compassion. The bourgeois press is happy to see this development and bourgeois politicians are preparing the beer and sandwiches once again. House-trained unions are no threat. The critical stance of *Fightback* towards the unions is refreshing. It's time to get off our knees and stop thinking of ourselves as victims. How do I join?

Patrick Ilford

In *Fightback* (Spring 1994) two articles seem to deny the police any role in society. What do you think someone should do if they are raped or mugged or burgled? In an ideal world situation where we had working class defence groups we wouldn't need policemen. Isn't that the correct line? But these groups don't exist. Are you suggesting that victims of crime ring *Fightback*?

The police are switching to a softer role as a result of a series of reforms starting with the Scarman Report. You can be cynical about this, but the fact is that many police officers are graduates and they are being changed from the inside. For example, a real internal war is being waged on the old racist and sexist 'canteen culture'.

Sometimes the roles of police officers and social workers are identical. We find police officers running victim support groups and social workers doing the same thing. Would you say that social workers are 'not with us' but are simply there to police the working class? And what about youth workers and teachers? Elementary sociolog-

ical analysis indicates that many state employees have a dual role. One aspect of this is a coercive or disciplinary function. You can't simply collapse the more social function into the coercive one. If you do it with one group, you might as well do it with all and condemn teachers and social workers.

Concern with investigating child abuse has given social workers and teachers more of a policing role than ever before. On the other hand, involvement in the wider social environment has helped police officers to understand the needs of the community and this can only make them more accountable. Without exaggerating their scope, there are some very positive changes in the way in which policing is being conducted. If you disagree then you must condemn social workers and their ilk.

Andy Oxford

Throughout the last edition of *Fightback* you declare that the labour movement's tradition of collective action has been eroded and there is no resonance for collective solutions in the present climate. In case after case you conclude that new forms of collective action have to be argued for and you are the only group prepared to lead various struggles. The RMT dispute and the Natfhe dispute prove you wrong. The signal workers remain solid after many weeks and Natfhe members are preparing for a national series of strikes and struggles against lockouts when term begins in September.

Unlike your organisation I would never underestimate the ability of the working class to defend itself.

Steve Birmingham

The articles on lecturers and Natfhe in the last issue of *Fightback* have been useful in clarifying what is really going on in the FE sector, and what needs to be done to stop the rot.

Here in the north-east, some college managements have been forthright in pushing forward new contracts, whereas others have sought productivity gains in other ways (eg. larger classes). The fragmentation of the national union and their bizarre policy of local deals has done nothing to challenge this. Indeed, when people have taken action in defence of their interests, the national leadership has been generally unsupportive. For example, at Northumberland College in Ashington lecturers took strike action during enrolment (after the management had deducted 1/190th of their annual pay for a previous one-hour strike!). Just when it looked as if the action was being effective, the NEC suspended all action because college employers had agreed to national talks. When these eventually broke down on 16 September, the momentum had been lost and the management again gained the upper hand.

Activists in Natfhe now face a hardnosed management, and demoralisation amongst the membership is setting in. The battle over new contracts seems all but lost—learning the lessons and preparing for the changes still to come in further education is the task we now face.

John Newcastle

**Please send your letters to *Fightback*,
BM PSFC, London WC1N 3XX or
e-mail them to fightback@camintl.org**



Fear and loathing in the workplace

The climate of fear and personal insecurity that pervades society today is gaining ground in the workplace. Workers feel increasingly isolated and forced to respond to problems as individuals. The more we see ourselves as individuals threatened by our clients or colleagues, the more we focus on the problem of individual responsibility for problems, the more management and the authorities can exploit our isolation to gain control of our working lives.

In the following pages Fightback supporters get to grips with different aspects of this problem and look at some of their attempts to resist the climate of isolation and fear.

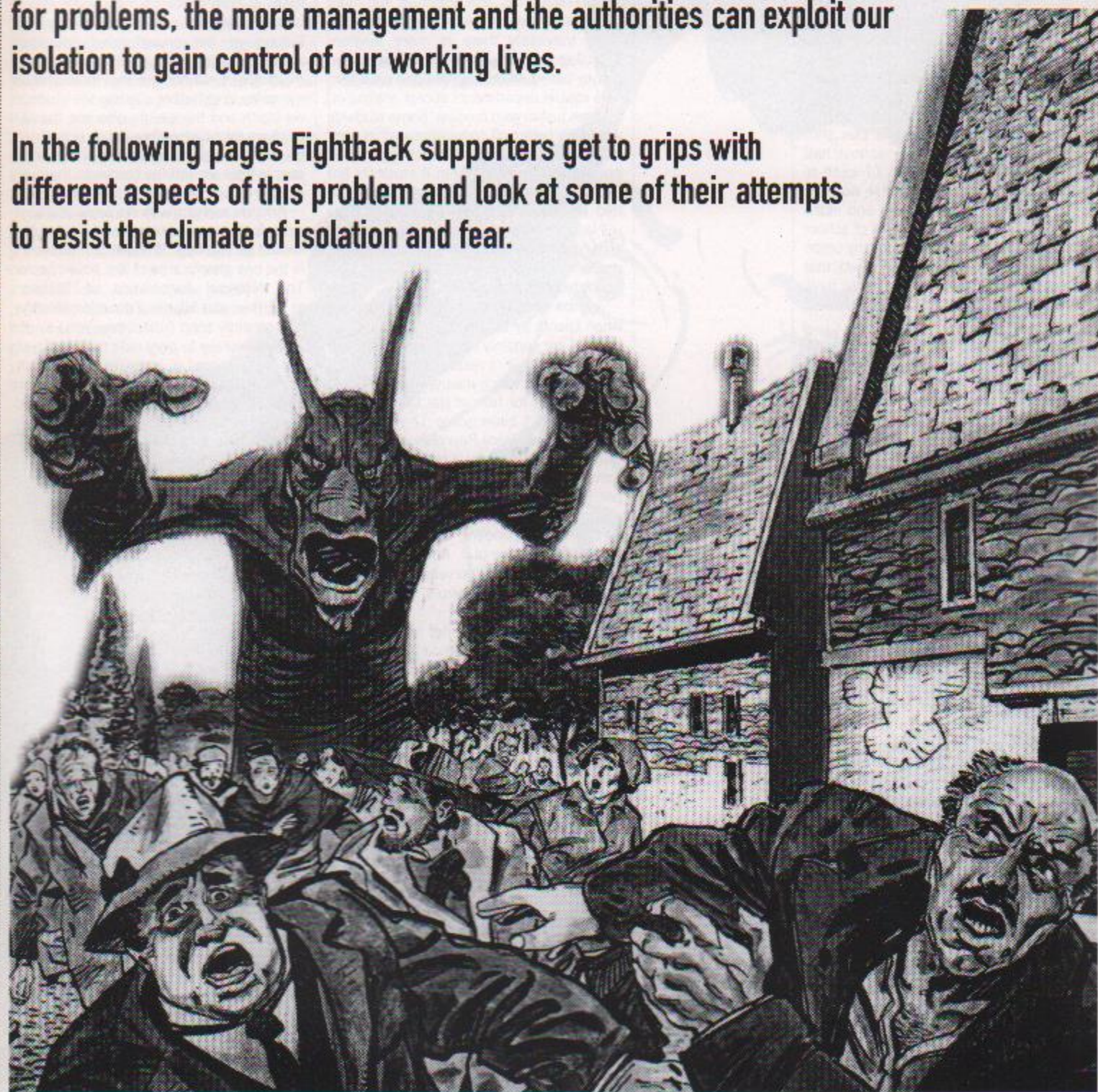


Illustration by Walt Simonson from *Monster Masterworks* © 1989, Marvel Entertainment Group

FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE WORKPLACE

Public sector workers express a growing fear of violence on the job.

But what are we really frightened of, asks a teacher in Further Education

DANGER: FEAR AT

● If you ask most public sector workers what frightens them most in their working lives, many will tell you of the last time some disgruntled 'service-user' threatened them. I'm a teacher in Further Education (FE) and the constant staff-room discussion is how best to deal with the unruly mob that passes for our students. Tales of job-like pupils and irate parents abound: 'one mother turned up with a baseball bat after I gave her daughter D-minus.'

Teachers' unions have made headlines by declaring that classroom assaults are on the increase. The Department for Education has sent schools an inch-thick set of circulars to provide guidance in dealing with 'pupils with problems'. Reports that staff at a Middlesbrough primary school had a whip-round and chipped in £1 each to pay for a security guard surprise nobody. Panic buttons, security passes and video cameras are becoming a feature of school life. I was offered a rape alarm by my union branch secretary when I mentioned that I taught one night a week: 'we might have lost the pay dispute, but at least we've won the right to work safely.'

Teachers are not alone. Doctors report that they are so frightened by their patients that they have to take dogs, bodyguards and even fake guns with them on call-outs. Department of Social Security (DSS) workers have campaigned for protective glass windows. Social workers want to do home visits in pairs. But are these fears real or imagined?

While many have the impression that things are getting worse, hard factual evidence is difficult to come by. Certainly perceptions have changed and public sector workers are more frightened than in the past. However, the statistics quoted in the press suggest that some of the fears are out of proportion to the dangers. The British Medical Association (BMA) reports that 8.5 per cent of doctors have been assaulted and 50 per cent threatened by patients over the past two years. Meanwhile a recent Royal College of Nursing survey of community nurses records that while more than one in 20 have been threatened with violence, one in five had experienced vandalism (much of it to cars) and one in four had been verbally abused, it was the fear of assault that was the most serious concern.

Even without statistics, knowing that service provision is so awful these days, you can see why some of our 'clients' might take it out on those workers who 'man' the front line. The BMA admits that violence against GPs occurs in part because patients have high expectations (presumably they want treatment!) and become frustrated when they cannot be met. As a consumer I can identify with the irate man in the DSS who screams abuse at the clerk when he's told

his giro is lost. I too have felt like hitting the housing benefit worker who told me she was too busy to deal with my claim three months after I submitted it. And those parents who physically remove the local social worker who has come to snoop around their home must have all our sympathies.

There is more pressure on those of us who work in the public service sector—staff cuts, less resources and more clients mean we are overworked and underpaid. Inevitably there is more tension. FE colleges, for example, are now allocated money based on recruitment and retention. This means departments accept anyone on courses just to gain funding. Some students would be better off (educationally) in non-examination classes but the college would not get any funding. Even if students are excluded for their behaviour, teachers are told to take them back—or the college will lose money. And then with classes overcrowded and teaching materials inadequate, inevitably some of these students get frustrated and lash out.

So how should we, as workers, respond when clients try to take their frustration out on us? I am certainly not advocating that we grin and bear it. I resent the current PC teaching ethos which means I can't shout at my students for fear of the Children Act. Why should I allow some 17-year old to humiliate me? Bruce Reynolds, a teacher in Kent, was attacked by a female pupil who then told the head that he had assaulted her. He, not the pupil, was disciplined. 'I'm not too worried about kicks on the shins', he told the *Independent*, 'but I feel very bitter about the injustice of it. After that, I didn't stand in the way or intervene in fights. It is too risky to even touch pupils'.

(8 April 1994)

Management should not be allowed to victimise workers for defending themselves. How we deal with the differing situations that face us in the workplace should be at our discretion. Only the workforce—and not the government or management—should decide how we respond to problems. Common sense should prevail.

However, the solutions now being advocated by trade unions will not help us. Union members in housing offices have been discussing 'good-behaviour pledges' from 'aggressive' tenants. But more codes of conduct about how to behave will solve nothing, simply creating another set of rules not to break. In fact, many of the proposals are likely to aggravate the situation. Some branches of the CPSA (civil servants' union) have passed motions calling on management to install security measures like video cameras in the dole offices. These would not protect DSS workers. But they would be used to monitor all claimants—and maybe staff, too. In a climate where employers are keen to oversee the workforce through

appraisal and mentor schemes (increasingly linked to payment by results), why give management more powers to check up on employees every minute of the working day—even if they say they only want to be our guardian angels?

Meanwhile, the teachers' unions call for security gates at FE colleges and for more expulsions, which can only help the government to criminalise young people and to blame badly disciplined students for the failures of the underfunded education system. If we go along with these sorts of measures, it will confirm the 'them and us' mentality, and further alienate the students we teach and the clients who use the services we administer. If we act as policemen, we should not be surprised when some people treat us with the contempt they may already feel for the boys in blue.

Another problem with the present discussions is that service sector workers are presented as helpless. Workplace counselling is the one growth area of the public sector. The National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) has recently tried (unsuccessfully) to use a stress survey to persuade the employers not to impose a massive productivity increase. Telling the employers that we are all on the brink of nervous breakdowns simply makes us look pathetic. If our working conditions are intolerable, we should organise to do something about them, not whine or plead for pity.

And we should question whether it is really true that the worst thing about work in 1994 is the fear of being attacked by our clients. The fact that employees are more susceptible to panics about violence is a symptom of our general insecurity at work. In reality the overwhelming fear that stalks the classrooms in FE colleges is the threat of redundancy. But because we feel so paralysed about confronting the source of that problem—the government and our employers—we start to transfer our fears onto other targets.

For instance, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)—a union not known for its militancy—is threatening strike action over assaults on teachers, and yet there is no talk of strike over government tests, cuts

WORK

in resources and increased workload. Nigel de Gruchy, general secretary of the union, says that 'If the government gave an alarm to all 400 000 teachers it would cost about £20m. Money would be better spent on that than on producing glossy publications' (*Times Educational Supplement*, 1 April 1994). Yet he says this as the government announces a derisory 2.5 per cent wage increase. If there's money around Nigel, we want it in our wage packets! Of course we need more staff to cope but that's something to fight for, and the people we will have to fight are John Patten & Co, not Johnny Bloggs in our biology class or John Bloke in the dole queue.

This is an important point; after all, who is it that we are frightened of? That angry patient, demanding that the doctor gets his mother into hospital before it's too late, works in housing benefit. That furious claimant shouting at the lad in housing benefits is a part-time teacher desperate to pay his rent. And that irate parent demanding a decent education for her daughter

is the local nurse. Who are we being asked to be frightened of? Each other?

Watch out! There's a mad axeman behind you! Oh sorry, it's just Kenneth Clarke preparing to make another cut in your budget. ■

Illustration from *Adventures into the Unknown* drawn by Ogden Whitney



FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE WORKPLACE

Smoking may be bad for you, but backing a smoking ban is worse

PROHIBITION COMES TO

PROHIBITION COMES TO NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

Prohibition comes to the County Council on 1 April with the introduction of the smoking ban in all office-type accommodation. This will mean that 'having a fag' will effectively become a sackable offence—even if those around you do not object. Management tell us that these new regulations are for our own good, but they are much more likely to damage our health than a packet of Silk Cut. They tell us that the smoking ban is a health and safety issue. Who are they trying to kid? These new regulations are just one more way in which restrictions on our behaviour are being imposed by the very same people responsible for job losses and cuts in services throughout Nottinghamshire.

Goodbye workers rights, hello disciplinary measures!

You don't believe it? Take a look at the Resources Committee minutes from 5 November 1993 where they decided the new regulations. The committee showed its true colours when it said that the main reason for not allowing smoking breaks is because 'there is no contractual entitlement to smoke during work time'.

They are absolutely right: nowhere in our contracts does it say we are allowed five minutes for a coffee...or even two minutes to go to the toilet. Are they going to ban these next because there is no contractual entitlement? Do they seriously expect us to work constantly from the moment we arrive in the morning to the moment we leave without a break to stop us from going completely barmy over the workload? They have got to be joking!

The decision by management

to ban our informal five-minute smoking breaks has set a dangerous precedent that we should all be aware of and oppose. They have in effect rewritten our contracts in their favour and claimed that it has been done for our benefit. The ease with which they did this will give them confidence to do it again around other issues. If we as council employees cannot defend ourselves against what affects us directly, then how will we be able to fight the cuts and job losses which affect everyone? Passive smoking may irritate, but being powerless while your boss steps up the pace is a real killer.

Health and safety issues used to protect us from the hazards of the workplace (eg, through better furniture, better office layout, safer equipment, etc). Nowadays they are being used to 'protect' us from our workmates, and to hell with office safety! So instead of making our stuffy offices less stuffy by installing proper air conditioning, management are trying to persuade us to report our friends who smoke. 'Shop thy neighbour' is the theme which pervades the dangerous political climate today. In all cases, management concern about the way we choose to live adds to this climate, and, more often than not, it ends with someone being given the sack.

It's about time we told management to butt out of our lives. They have no right to sit in judgement on us. If you are a little concerned about their over-concern, then get a copy of *Fightback* and join others in the public sector who are getting together to do something about it.

J&C
Council Employees
Fightback Campaign

We printed our leaflet (see left) and raised the 'Right to have a fag' issue at a union AGM when closures and redundancies were on the cards. Nottinghamshire County Council implemented its smoking ban at the same time as it was cutting services and pushing for a pay cut in negotiations with Unison. It may seem strange, then, that we decided to pick on such a seemingly lightweight matter.

The smoking ban was on everybody's lips, far more than talk about the derisory pay offer. The militant anti-smokers never lost an opportunity to talk about their eyes watering in the proximity of smoke or to rehearse Roy Castle's brave struggle one more time. Then you had the bemused smokers who began to feel 'oppressed'. Many smokers consoled themselves with the thought that the ban would help them give up. Others became guilty over their 'anti-social' habit. It was difficult not to talk about the smoking ban.

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

But we had an even stronger reason. While in many ways we would rather have discussed the pay round there was already a pervasive sense among our colleagues that the pay decision was simply an unfortunate fact of life that was beyond everybody's control—like your fridge packing in. On the other hand, real problems were seen to be caused by the irresponsible or anti-social behaviour of others.

Locally the fear of other people has been reinforced by the discussions around the possible introduction of surveillance cameras in the city centre and the media jamboree around the kidnapping of baby Abby from a local hospital. And this fear is a real barrier to building the necessary sense of common interest that is needed to fight a pay cut. The sentiment that other people were the cause of our everyday problems was a political problem that had to be tackled—taking up the smoking ban was a great way to do this.



Illustrations
from *Sin City* by
Frank Miller, 1992

The first thing we did was to produce the leaflet. With hindsight we tried to jump to the main political issue of management control without explaining how dangerous the behaviour or lifestyle arguments were in and of themselves. Although the ban had been introduced by management, smoking was seen by many people as an anti-social act that needed to be regulated. It was tricky to argue how a ban such as this would lead to more management control with more cutbacks and job losses.

The second opportunity came with the AGM. Our motion argued that 'The smoking ban is an insult to our intelligence—it treats us like children and does not allow us to decide our own working arrangements'. Our message was designed to bring out anti-authoritarian sentiments in as much of the workforce as possible. We had more success. We immediately got practical support in building for the AGM through advertising our motion with a 'No more smoking? You

must be joking!' flyer. The fact that our flyer was on every notice board and on many office walls created a bit of a buzz.

Nevertheless we still didn't manage to get enough people along to the AGM to ensure that the motion was discussed. This was our own fault because we didn't take the opportunity to consolidate the initial interest. We had at our disposal an excellent article that debunked all the 'scientific proof' that linked passive smoking to lung cancer and other bronchial diseases (JR Johnstone, 'Scientific fact or scientific self-delusion: passive smoking, exercise and the new puritanism', in *Health, Lifestyle and Environment*, 1991). Never once did we get someone to read it and subsequently discuss it with us over a coffee. We only used the article as a source of facts and figures rather than as a way of challenging the whole notion of 'anti-social behaviour'. This would have been the first step towards building some kind of workplace opposition.



Manchester Fightback supporters tell British Gas what they really want

ASPIRATIONS?

On 17 August 1993, British Gas announced it would cut 20 000 jobs over the following three years. We got the news neither from management nor union, but buried in the courtesy copy of a voluminous document sent from British Gas plc to the Stock Exchange re the Monopolies and Mergers Commission inquiry into the gas industry. One paragraph said it all:

'Even with major rationalisation of the gas business, including significant manpower reductions of the order of 20 000 over the next three years (nearly one third of the workforce), profits will be constrained to below levels received in recent years.'

We later learned that our own site with a workforce of 1300 was to be sold. Early in May this year British Gas announced that all employees were to take an 'aspirations interview' with their respective line manager. The whole process was to be rushed through in less than a month, leaving little time to work out a strategy of resistance.

Unison bought the management line that the interviews were a way of giving the workforce an effective voice and offered no resistance! It never seemed to occur to the union that the politically correct tone of the interviews hid a straightforward redundancy drive. Employees were to be asked to give yes/no answers to questions regarding voluntary redundancy and willingness to work at other locations, or to consider part-time or variable-hours working.

It was at this point that the Fightback



Illustration: The cover of *Superman No. 1* by Jerry Siegal and Joe Shuster © 1939; DC Comics, Inc.

FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE WORKPLACE

Aspiration?

aspire [asp'ire] vb. [intr.] 1. [usually foll. by to or after] to yearn [for], desire, or hope [to do or be something]; to aspire to personal fulfilment. 2. to rise to a great height.

Q1) Would you like to tell me about your personal aspirations and how they tie in with your future at British Gas?

A) Certainly, I aspire to winning a couple of million pounds on the pools this coming Saturday, then buying a yacht, travelling round the world and eventually settling down in a nice little Caribbean hideaway. Thanks for asking. I really appreciate the interest you're taking in my personal aspirations.

Q2) I see. Failing that, do you wish to remain with the company in the longer term?

A) Yes please.

Q3) If the answer to Q2 is Yes, are you willing to let management distort and then smash any sense of what aspiration really means? For example, does the word 'aspiration' spring to mind when you're asked 'Do you wish to leave British Gas under the enhanced redundancy package?'. Or do you aspire to hours of traffic jams on the way to work at what could be an extremely inconvenient location? Is aspiration really about variable hours (ie, completely anti-social hours without the overtime rates), insecure terms and conditions, and pay cuts?

Management is trying to narrow down our options even further by singling us out one by one and forcing us to state choices about our working lives in isolation. The reality is that there are no choices on offer, and that everything in this workplace is conducted entirely on management's terms.

Meanwhile, Unison remains completely inactive; merely making vague statements to the effect that you don't have to participate in the aspiration interviews if you don't want to—which only serves to make individuals more isolated and vulnerable.

We are a group of employees with *genuine* aspirations, striving for something better in our lives. We refuse to accept this extreme debasement of our working conditions—yet that is precisely what 'aspiration' interviews are leading to.

We need to decide among ourselves what can be done instead of being pushed around and treated like children.

Campaign in Manchester started to consider how best to tackle the issue of job cuts in British Gas. Four of us formed a workplace group and we seized upon the aspirations interviews as a focus for a number of reasons. Everyone in the workplace was affected in an immediate way. To attack the idea of aspirations interviews was an ideal opportunity to appeal to pride and self-esteem, and through the response to gauge the mood of the workplace.

The original campaigners drew in more workers who agreed to act as 'listening posts'—to evaluate the overall response to the leaflet (see right) and to discuss the issues with those who showed most interest.

Most people were intrigued and read the leaflet thoroughly. A few were pinned on to office noticeboards and even better faxed to other sites in the region. One woman found the leaflet in a fax machine and placed a photocopy of it on every desk on her site. Many more people were engaged than we could possibly have hoped for but the reaction was shortlived.

The most important lesson of the campaign was not to waste any more time. Three years ago when redundancies were first mooted we had interminable discussions but did nothing. We were all constrained by the cosy relationship between management and the union and we lost an opportunity. Those of us in Fightback who took part in the 'aspirations' exercise now know that we have nothing to fear from our fellow workers. Our job is to come out with even more creative ideas that will enable us to build a permanent network of resistance rather than a cameo of possibility. ■

A sales clerk in the private sector finds his workplace increasingly repressive

BUGS IN THE KITCHEN

● Where I work, in the sales office of a large kitchen company in north London, me and my workmates get blamed for everything. Five years ago our office was pulling in £100 000 a day. Today we're lucky if we make £35 000. Now you and me might see this fall in profits as a result of the current slump, but not the manager. A few months ago a sales office meeting was called where he told us that if we were more polite to customers they would be more willing to do business with us, and the figures would not be so bad.

Me and my workmates are getting used to lunchtime meetings where we're told we are useless and that if we do not improve our attitudes we will be given a verbal warning. When the figures are good we get free mugs and pens and the occasional Marks & Spencer's voucher. When the figures are bad we get threatened with the sack.

Our bosses insist that the dramatic fall in profits is the result of us all being impolite to the customers so our phones were bugged to see what we were saying. Apparently they wanted to ensure that we were not being rude, and that we were not talking in a tone of voice that suggested we did not like our jobs. The real purpose of the bugs became clear, however, when a workmate of mine was taken to one side and told she was not answering enough calls.

The latest wheeze is video surveillance. There have always been video cameras in the public showroom but now there are

video cameras in the warehouse as well. The management claims that this is because the warehouse is open to customers, and therefore the cameras are merely an extension of those in the showroom. But the warehouse workers don't buy this. For them the cameras are the management's eyes, watching them work.

There have also been crackdowns in other areas. Recently my manager refused to pay me for two days that I had off sick. When I complained, I was told there was nothing I could do about it and that if I wanted my money I could always take the two days as holiday. A similar tone was taken when we complained about compulsory training on Saturday mornings.

The increased repression in my workplace has widened the gulf between the management and the workforce. When the profits were high and business was going well the management would call meetings to congratulate us on our hard work and stress the importance of working as a team. Now they tell us we are lazy, impolite and untrustworthy, that we've let the side down.

This has created surprisingly little tension between me and my workmates however. The hated repressive measures have fostered a 'them and us' mentality—the workforce has become extremely suspicious of the management. But by making our working lives more and more miserable the management has ensured that the fall in profits is not only bad news for them, but bad news for us as well.

TELECONTROL

The security of BT, like that of most large firms, increases on a day-to-day basis. When you enter work in the morning you are required to produce the latest electronic gizmo, an identity 'smart card'. This logs your journey through all the main security doors in the building, giving the management a print-out detailing your daily movements. Once you are through the doors the video cameras take over.

Until recently BT security cameras were far from all-encompassing (they left a blank spot by the toilet door). Due to an alleged spate of thefts—two in nine months—BT has become determined to stamp out crime, for the benefit of its employees, of course; the rationale is that those with nothing to hide won't mind.

BT managers haven't had it all their own way. When first introduced, cameras led to a lot of resentment from staff who saw it as an unnecessary management intrusion. However, after the theft of a purse, BT mounted a campaign pointing out that this makes us all victims: both BT and all its employees. The cameras were presented as being for our benefit.

The receptionist who was sacked when hidden cameras caught her putting some envelopes in her bag on her last day might not agree.

THE TEMPERATURE WILL
VARY BETWEEN 13 AND 14
DEGREES CENTIGRADE
THROUGHOUT
THE NIGHT.



Illustration from *V for Vendetta* by David Lloyd and Alan Moore © TM DC Comics Inc.

THE POWER THAT MAKES
MY STORIES COME TRUE--
THAT POWER MUST BE IN
MY TYPEWRITER!! THE
ONLY WAY I CAN DESTROY
X IS TO WRITE OF HIS
DESTRUCTION ON MY OWN
MACHINE!



Illustration from *Tales to Astonish* No.20 by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Dick Ayers

THE MANAGEMENT WITHIN

I didn't know him from Adam. He could have been anyone' is how the conference organiser described coming across an unannounced workman in the gloomy basement where she works. Apparently he had used the basement back door as a short-cut during the course of his work, and at one point had left it wide open. 'Anybody could have just walked in and attacked me', she said.

She is not alone in fearing that staff are at risk. The morning receptionist complained that, since the morning caretaker post had been shed, she often found herself all alone in the building between 8am and 9am, despite assurances from management that this would never happen. There is a full-time caretaker, but when he is doing shifts to cover rooms for evening meetings, he cannot be there first thing in the morning. Since our workplace is across the road from the DSS where drunks hang out, the caretaker has on several occasions had to remove unwanted visitors who follow staff into the building. Also a printer has been stolen in the last month by an unknown stealthy visitor in the early hours of the evening. At a union meeting, staff argued angrily that a review of staff security should be carried out by management and that name badges should be issued at the front desk.

But how at risk are we? We work in a common or garden administrative building. The only people who come and go are staff and middle-aged visitors using the library. It seems to me that the issue of security has arisen from projected fears

rather than any real threat of physical attack. The only attacks that I have witnessed have not been from unknown maniacs outside the building, but from the enemy within it. Over the past three or four years, management has seen through nine bitter redundancies and many more posts have been axed, left vacant or transformed into temporary positions as demoralised staff have left. Many grades have had their salaries frozen with little or no prospect of promotion. Pressure on remaining staff has grown as job descriptions have been torn up and rewritten by management. At the same time 'multi-skilling'—increased workloads to you and me—has come into vogue.

Staff feel profoundly isolated, mistrustful, very insecure and increasingly likely to blame each other for problems arising from understaffing. Referring to this sense of isolation, one person described a feeling that 'I could die behind one of those closed doors and I doubt if anyone else in the building would even know'.

The issue of staff security has been left unresolved as it has been overtaken by management announcing more redundancies. Union discussions about details at work have for now given way to why we should have to balance their budget at our expense. The initial frustration I felt about staff security being an issue at all was, however, explained to me by one of my more insightful colleagues: 'It's easier to argue about VDU regulations and staff security as a way of talking about having a job in the future, rather than facing up to more frightening problems you can't do much about.'

Two weeks ago in Edinburgh I attended a Scottish Child Law Centre conference to discuss children's rights. We all sat in a large circle and introduced ourselves—youth workers, social workers, teachers. Then a man, whom everybody appeared to know, wearing soft shoes and a loose woolly jumper, introduced himself as the deputy Chief Constable of Strathclyde Police.

The image of the police has been transformed over the past five years. Police on horseback charging protesting students on Westminster Bridge or black youth beaten senseless in the cells seem to belong to the past. And popular hostility to the police is muted nowadays. Football chants of 'Harry Roberts is our friend he kills coppers' are a distant memory.

Today's bobby is user-friendly. Where I work in Coatbridge you no longer have a police 'force' but a Community Police service. These PC PCs are carers for the community, keen to bring in more anti-racist laws and to set up special units with special constables to help victims of rape and domestic violence.

At the same time, the role of social workers has become more coercive. A social worker visits you today not to check that you are getting your full entitlement to benefit, but to check that you're not abusing your family. Greater powers now exist to take away your kids for leaving them 'home alone' or for simply not living up to the standard of parenting set by the UN Charter on Children's Rights.

However much the jobs of cop and social worker appear to be converging, it is important to recognise that a fundamental difference remains between the two. The image of the police may have changed but their central role remains the same—they are the ultimate coercive force in society, the blue line that defends the status quo. By contrast, the real role of social workers has changed—they have not always been primarily coercive. It is the prevailing atmosphere in society—one of fear and insecurity—that has both enabled the police to present themselves as our friends instead of our enemies, and led to more authoritarian social work.

The key role of the police is to defend capitalist society. Those who deviate from the norm or transgress the laws of the land are a threat to the existing order of British society and therefore repugnant. It is the job of the police to harass and persecute these deviants whether they are New Age travellers, political protesters, militant trade unionists or young black people.

When there is collective opposition to the establishment, the nature of the police force is crystal clear. In the 1984-85 miners' strike the full force of the police was openly deployed against the strikers. But today,

ARE WE ALL POLICEMEN NOW?

While today's cops insist that they are 'caring', today's social workers are increasingly coercive. A Coatbridge youth worker thinks that there is still a difference

when there is no collective opposition, the body armour, CS gas and batons can be used much more discreetly and selectively.

We live in a society where far from acting collectively to solve our problems we think of each other as the problem. We are frightened of crime, of drugs, of violent youth, of baby-snatchers. Irresponsible, out-of-control individuals are seen as the source of all our problems. In these circumstances the police can gain increased powers to interfere—from stop-and-search through surveillance cameras to enforcing city centre curfews—but, at the same time, come across as guardian angels saving us from ourselves and the evil sinners roaming the streets.

More and more police time is now spent policing the family. Hundreds of police domestic violence units have been set-up around the country. Nousey neighbours can have a field day calling in the police to deal with suspected abusers. Argue too loudly today and you will end up with an officer on your doorstep demanding an explanation. A perennial problem of working class life—domestic abuse—which often used to be sorted out within working class communities is now used as an excuse to extend the capacity of the police to intervene in the lives of working people.

The police have more powers in more areas of life today than ever before. No longer are the police and the system they guarantee seen as the source of our problems, instead it is the powerless who are wreaking havoc in our lives. The idea that it is individual irresponsibility which is at the root of social chaos is reaching ludicrous dimensions. Every area of our lives comes under the microscope: what we eat, what we see on TV, and how we have sex all become topics for investigation and control.

It is this widespread anxiety about moral breakdown and irresponsible individuals that has drawn teachers, doctors, social workers and many others into the front line of social control. The role of welfare is becoming one of surveillance. Do you have the right lifestyle? Why was little Billy late for school today? Are you smacking your child? Where did those bruises come from? The welfare state is less about giving a service and more about delivering a sermon, 'change your ways or you'll have no operation, no benefits, no Billy!'

There is a pressing need to oppose the

intrusive and coercive character of the state. We should expose the insidious process through which public servants come to act as state watchdogs. But to do so effectively we should preserve a sense of how different even social workers remain from the police.

It was in the 1960s that social work took off as a profession. The huge increase in the scale of state-sponsored social service provision was an extension of the welfare ideal. The job of the social worker was to help those individuals who couldn't cope, to provide benefits, and to get these people back on their feet. Many social workers were optimistic that the social problems which they dealt with were susceptible to a social solution. A degree of economic dynamism and prosperity, which allowed for full employment and social spending, lent credibility to their hopes. Even child abuse, the nightmare of the nineties, was seen as something that could be overcome by helping people overcome deprivation.

Welfare benefits were a right, and social workers helped us to get them, while coercive powers like 'The Place of Safety Order' were perceived as a tool of last resort to break a pattern of neglect and allow families to be rehabilitated. Emphasis was on the partnership between social workers and the family. In contrast, the police were seen as part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Even from the mid-sixties, when commentators rediscovered delinquency and poverty, the first response was to boost social spending. Only in the early seventies when the British economy seriously moved into recession did more conservative approaches to welfare spending begin to dominate the discussion.

Over the past 20 years as the recession has turned into slump, economic and social problems have begun to overwhelm the welfare state. Welfare spending itself has come to be seen as the problem rather than the solution. Paternalist and caring social work practice was savaged by the New Right which blamed the nanny state for creating an 'underclass' of dependent and therefore irresponsible people which was out of control.

Social workers were ridiculed for their optimism and for believing in their clients. A number of local authorities rejected the official social work qualification, the



Illustration from
Kid Colt Outlaw No167
by Stan Lee and Jack
Keller, 1973

CQSW, because they thought it was imbued with the same outlook. They set up their own training courses and monitoring schemes to force social workers to 'do their job'.

In 1982 *Social Work Today* heralded the shift in the outlook of the social work profession when it published an article denouncing the undeserving poor. In 1994 the notion of the 'underclass' is *de rigueur* among radical social workers. Social workers are constrained both by the limitations on resources and the endemic sense of fear in society. Social workers now see their job not as doing the most good for their clients, but preventing the most harm being done by them.

Calls for increased social spending today are not generated by a demand to alleviate the inequality created by a decaying economic system, but by a desire to control the activities of working class people. Today, social work is all about interfering in family life. It is now official social work policy in Scotland to ensure Zero Tolerance. 'All men are rapists' declare the posters on the walls in their offices.

The social work profession has drifted with the tide which is blaming poor and powerless individuals for social problems and supporting a crackdown on their behaviour. But it is still possible for social workers to reassert their role as welfare-providers, and—unlike the real thing—refuse to be imitation policemen.



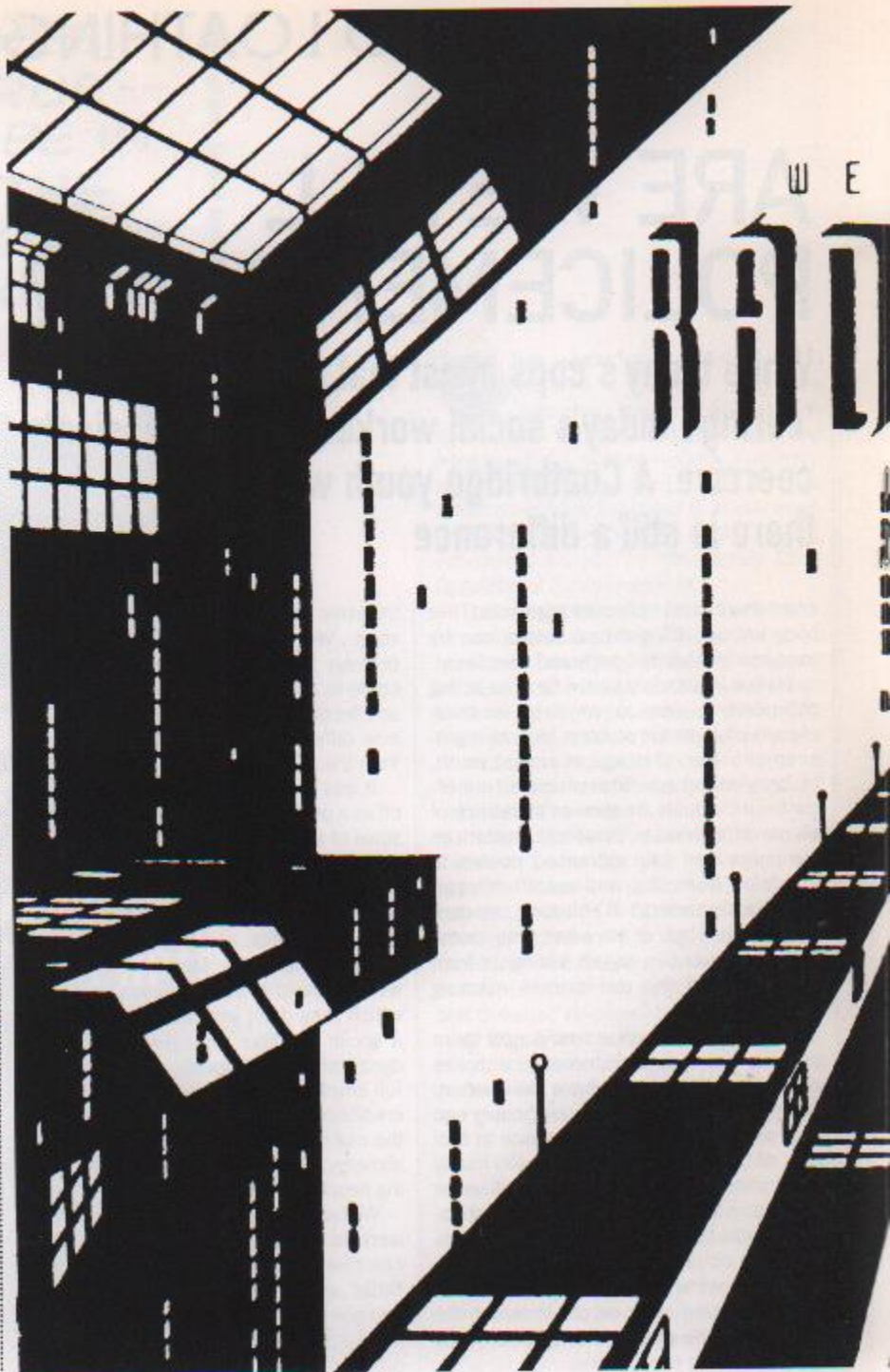
GOING OFF THE RAILS

The long-running signal workers dispute ended in September. It brought Fightback supporters no pleasure to see our analysis of the dispute completely vindicated. Not only did the RMT leadership succeed in dragging defeat from the jaws of victory, but management's restructuring plans have been endorsed by the union, while the strike opened up the debate about privatisation again.

The RMT signal workers' strike was a telling example of the balance of class forces in 1994. This dispute could have seen a decisive victory. Management and government were in disarray. Public opinion was more hostile to the government than to the workers. Yet no victory ensued.

Throughout its drawn-out course, the dispute was conducted through the media and public opinion polls. The terms of the dispute remained narrow, sectional and closed. In a real sense there was no strike at all. The signal workers had the same individual relationship to this event as the rest of us—passively watching the dispute unfolding on TV rather than actively trying to ensure it was a success.

In our special feature, Fightback supporters look in depth at the plans to reorganise the transport sector and the long-term weakness of the union response. They also look forward to an alternative approach, one which first suggested itself in 1992 when there were last disputes in the transport sector—coordinated action across the whole transport sector.



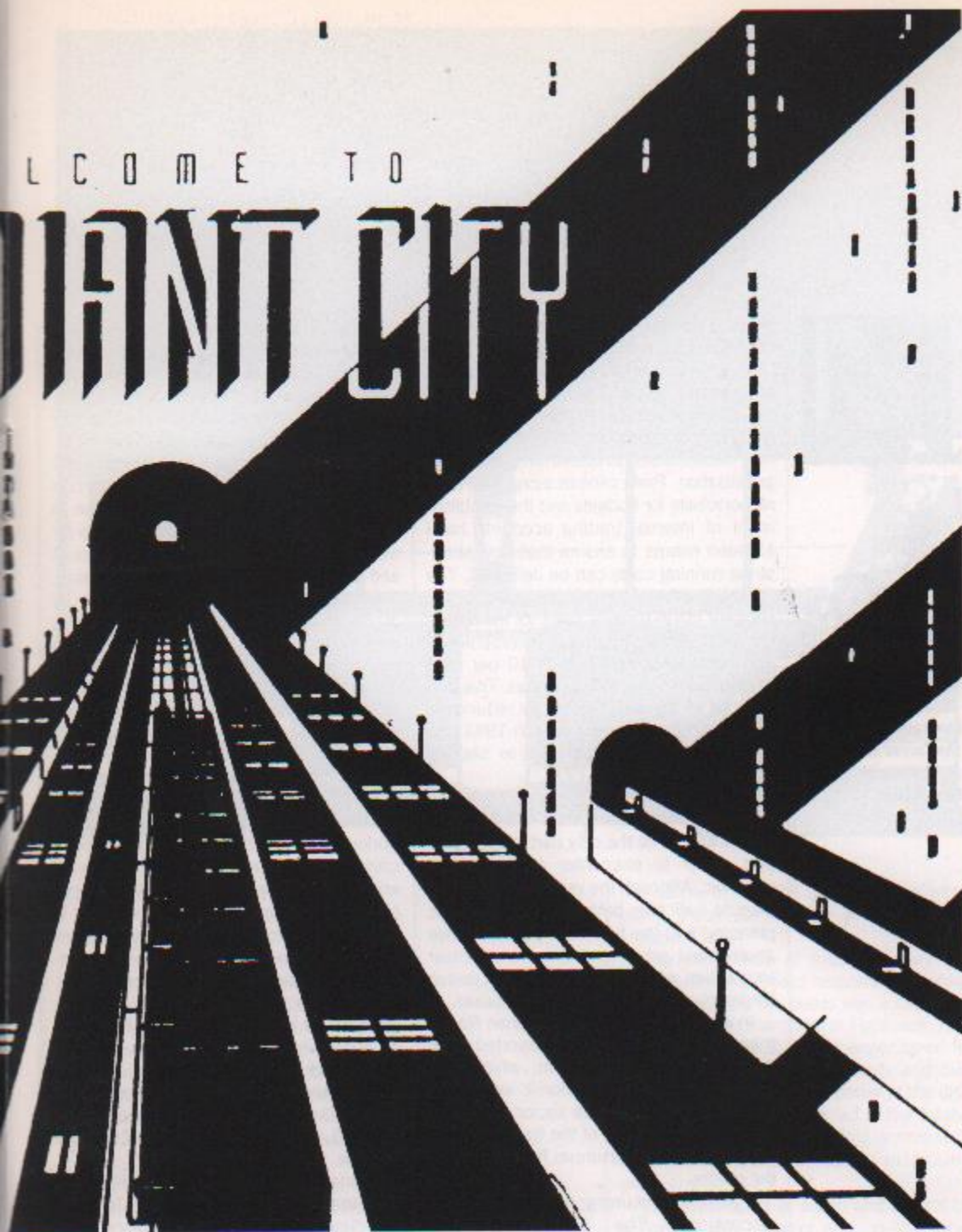
At first glance, the signal workers' dispute looked like a rerun of industrial disputes of the past. Not since the miners' and ambulance workers' stoppages has a strike lasted as long, or attracted such regular media coverage. However, the conduct of the dispute on both sides is very much a reflection of workplace conditions and concerns of the 1990s. The strike can only be understood in the context of changes affecting not just signal workers, nor even British Rail, but the whole of the public transport network. Union leaders like Knapp have conceded to management's demands for change and are arguing about their level of involvement in the process.

The dispute was about much more than a simple pay claim. The 2.5 per cent Railtrack offer is linked to a package of changed work practices and productivity hikes. RMT accepted the restructuring. Railtrack proposes to scrap allowances for irregular and unsocial hours; introduce flexible working (ie, replace fixed hours, to give managers the freedom to roster turns

of duty of up to 12 hours); and expand the job description of signal workers to take in equipment failures and cleaning the signal box. Railtrack plans to save £4.3m and admits that while 75 per cent of signal workers will get some kind of wage rise the rest will be worse off.

Knapp and the RMT did not reject these draconian measures out of hand, but said they would look at them once a better pay offer was on the table. There was no argument about the need for more productivity increases, the only sticking point was about whether or not productivity gains that had already been made would be compensated. In a letter to the *Financial Times* Knapp made his position clear: 'Changes in working practices are not being opposed by RMT.' (27 June 1994) The dispute was not a showdown about the pay that signal workers need; the discussion that the union was embroiled in with management was about how a pay rise should be funded.

The union was always on the defensive despite the general climate of support, and



TRANSPORT SPECIAL

WELCOME TO GIANT CITY

of hostility to the government and Railtrack. The dispute was seen by a great majority as another example of Tory incompetence. The government and Railtrack had great difficulty in presenting a united front against the strikers and shied away from upping the stakes through sackings and the issuing of personal contracts. In the early days Railtrack and the government were in public disarray over the 5.7 per cent pay offer made by Railtrack and subsequently withdrawn after government pressure. In the middle of August Railtrack talked about individual contracts and sackings but never pushed the issue. The only serious strategy was a 'hearts and minds' campaign, involving personal letters to strikers and a telephone hotline.

RMT, however, failed to capitalise on public sympathy and the employer's disarray. The strike dragged on and on from June, the powerful position of the strikers was frittered away by the RMT leadership and no decisive breakthrough was made. From the start, the RMT was willing to



Illustrations from
*The Sacred and
the Profane* by
Dean Motter



accept Railtrack's 'fund-your-own-pay-rise' argument. The RMT already had a compromised position the day the strike began. In consequence the RMT could not translate public sympathy into practical support. Its PR machine harped on about the dangers posed by untrained signal workers and it could not capitalise on popular support for the pay claim itself. Many rail passengers are on the receiving end of government-imposed pay restraints themselves and well understand the need for a decent wage.

The most fundamental weakness was that strike action, such as it was, was limited to signal workers. The union refused

to allow drivers to give solidarity and demobilised the signal workers, who remained observers to their own dispute rather than active participants who made it their business to go out and win practical support. A demand for an overall pay rise would have galvanised the whole workforce and encouraged the maximum level of participation to solve common problems.

RMT advice to drivers was limited to telling them that they could rely on employment protection legislation to enable them to refuse to work in unsafe conditions. Jimmy Knapp was most put out when British Rail offered to help Railtrack out with extra staff, decrying this as 'employer's secondary action'. All he succeeded in doing was drawing attention to the fact that the union would not even consider effective secondary action. The signal workers were cast in the role of a special case deserving of our pity but never a focus for widespread action and solidarity.

Railattack

The Railtrack package is part of a much wider overhaul of British Rail which started a few years ago. At the heart of this process is privatisation. Rail privatisation has caused a stir even within the ranks of the Tories. From the publication of the White Paper 'New Opportunities for the Railways', in July 1992 to the final reading of the Railways Act at the end of 1993 there has been a running argument revolving around the impracticality of the scheme.

The justification for privatisation is to attract private investment in order to reduce the subsidy to the rail network. Running a national railway is an expensive business. The only way that private investment would be a possibility is if the network was split into manageable chunks corresponding to the sections which on their own would make a profit. From April 1993 the rail infrastructure (Railtrack) has been split from the provision of services. Railtrack became a separate government-owned company in April 1994 running the infrastructure, including controlling operations and running the national timetable.

British Rail prepared seven franchise areas so that interested buyers could weigh up the merits of each section before putting in a bid. BR's freight services were restructured into three companies in readiness for privatisation. From April 1994 operators have been able to compete directly with British Rail for business. The idea is that over the next two to three years, all British Rail divisions will be transformed into limited companies like Railtrack. The limited companies will then be franchised out to private bidders or management buyout teams.

One big problem remains. Despite breaking up the network, the scale of investment remains prohibitive for the potential private

◀ operators. Charges for the use of track, signalling and rolling stock have to be paid in full by any operating company. The cost of one InterCity 125 train is £10m. Great Western Railway's bill from Railtrack for use of the line is expected to be £120m every year. This does not include costs such as fuel, maintenance, insurance and drivers' wages. The government subsidy will in fact increase. A figure of £2 billion has been quoted by opposition transport spokesman John Prescott. British Rail has already spent £92m, including £48m for the creation of Railtrack in the lead up to privatisation. The scale of the financial commitment means that any line considered cost ineffective will go, along with the jobs. The ability of Railtrack to run a skeleton service throughout the strike indicates that it may be prepared to do without much of the present system, and the signal workers that go with it.

The main headache that the strike has given Railtrack is its liability to the train-operating companies for not providing a working railway. The strike points to the highly problematic relationship between Railtrack and the operating companies which puts into question the success of privatisation, especially as more attempts to cut operating costs via redundancies and work intensification are inevitable. It is also a mistake to assume, as Knapp has done, that Railtrack will be able to operate independently of the government. Knapp insists that the dispute was caused by the government's refusal to allow Railtrack to give the 5.7 per cent wages deal. But since the whole point of privatisation is to allow the government to reduce its financial commitment, it is off the wall to think that the government would quietly accede to an RMT/Railtrack settlement running an express through the public sector pay limits.

Since 1980 there has been a drastic reduction in the level of government funding for British Rail. British Rail is funded partly by fares plus a grant paid by the government to maintain unprofitable routes and to make up any shortfall from fares. This subsidy was slashed from £1032m in 1979-80 to £600m in 1990-91—a 42 per cent cut. In the same period Network South-East suffered a 57 per cent cut in its grant.

Rail investment is funded by British Rail itself through borrowing (within government established limits), fares, and the sale of assets such as property. Average investment between 1980 and 1991 was £550m a year, only half the sum British Rail chairman Bob Reid says is necessary to keep the system even at its present level.

As of 1993-94 the government subsidy is £930m, well below the previous year's figure of £1154.8m. Investment in the same year was only £828m. The British Rail annual report for 1992-93 talked of £850m being



Illustration from
*The Sacred and
the Profane* by
Dean Motter

the bare minimum to keep the system ticking over. Serious cuts have already been made.

British Rail workers have borne the brunt of these cuts in terms of redundancies and conditions of service. British Rail's personnel policy has been designed to meet the new decentralised structure associated with privatisation. Profit centres along with local responsibility for budgets and the establishment of internal trading accounts have all been means to ensure that new shoe-string running costs can be delivered. The 1992-93 annual report promises a five per cent cut in running costs for the following year. This target was overachieved and costs were reduced by 10 per cent largely due to 9000 redundancies. This is in addition to the 8000 voluntary redundancies which took place in March 1993 and a further 6.3 per cent cut in staffing achieved by the end of 1993.

Cuts right across transport

British Rail is not the only part of the transport sector to encounter a cost-cutting epidemic. Although the vacillation in the rail dispute indicates both a lack of strategic planning and the political clout to impose government priorities, there are still clear similarities with developments in London Underground and on the capital's buses.

In a speech in May 1993 Stephen Norris, then transport minister, asserted that a healthy transport system, which was essential for Britain's economic well-being, depended on the private sector, deregulation and the primacy of the free market in order to achieve maximum free choice for the punter.

This is the recurring motif in transport discussions. The London Regional Transport Act of 1984 attempted to introduce greater private sector involvement by requiring both buses and London Underground to contract out as much of their activity as possible. On the tube this has meant the privatisation of cleaning, maintenance and computing contracts.

London Buses have been restructured into 13 operating companies which compete both with private companies and each other. The bus routes themselves have been subject to competitive tender, or through contracts directly with London Buses. Forty-four per cent of the network is now operated by the Tendered Bus Division. This involves 30 contractors (11 in-house and 19 private). The aim is full deregulation—the removal of restrictions on who can operate a bus route—this can be achieved once the privatisation and tendering process has been completed.

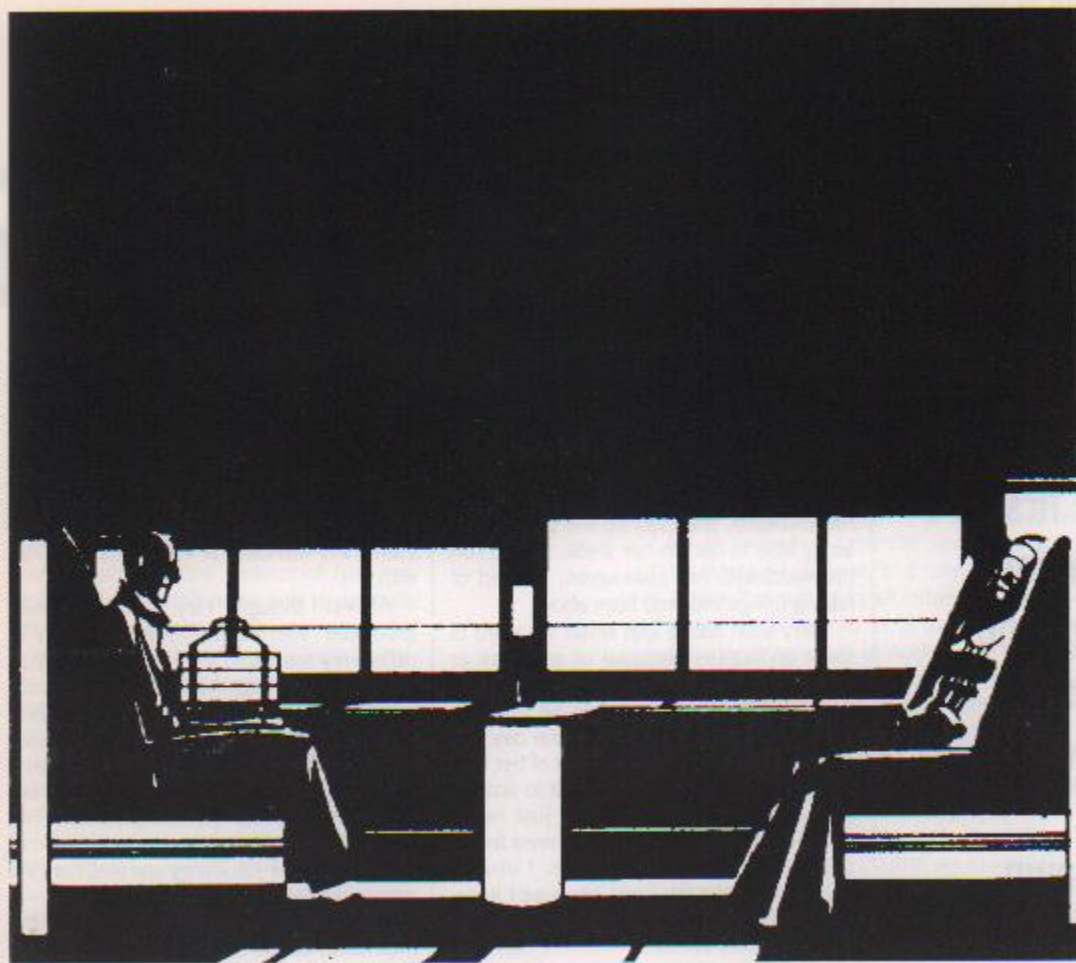
The logic of the operation is to transfer the burden of costs from the taxpayer to the individual fare-payer. London Underground Limited has declared an intention to be self-financing within 10 years. This change is

directly reflected in fares. Since 1979 Network South-East's fares have risen at 29 per cent above the rate of inflation, the buses at 33 per cent and the tube at 11 per cent. By the same token both subsidy and investment for buses and tube have fallen. Investment on the buses fell between 1980 and 1990, from £87m to £29m. On London Underground after a one-off increase in subsidy (1991 autumn statement) to pay for work associated with the Channel Tunnel and to fend off the impact of the recession, the budget was cut in the following year by 30 per cent! Major delays in existing work was the immediate result. There were no station refurbishments at all in 1993-94. The lift and escalator programme was delayed as were the removal of fire hazards and track replacement. London commuters get fitter, but get ulcers and a bit paranoid as well.

The delays in the works programme have made getting to work a nightmare for us all but the biggest blow has been to transport workers. The shortfall in funding has been covered with redundancies and increases in workload. On London Transport a five per cent cut in running costs was established in the main by forcing workers on bus routes not already tendered out to sign new contracts increasing hours and reducing pay. The 38-hour maximum driving time has gone out the window and the new average is 45 hours. Average pay has been cut from £7 an hour to £5.73, and a new sickness code means drivers can be dismissed after 12 weeks of absence. In one year alone, 1992-93, staff were reduced from 19 100 to 17 800.

London Underground codified its intentions in the 1991 Company Plan. The plan was clear about the need for greater cost-effectiveness through the elimination of 'out-of-date or irrelevant practices and procedures'. The same agenda that the RMT refused to address in the signal worker dispute. London Underground aimed to make each and every worker more responsible. Line managers were put on performance-related pay. Direct accountability for performance was initiated lower down the line to make sure each and every worker took responsibility for the service realising a profit. Three thousand two hundred jobs either vanished or were foisted on to other workers in the space of one year (1992-93). A further redundancy plan in March 1994 attempted to deliver a further £28m worth of cuts.

For the lucky workers who still have jobs the daily grind gets worse. Everyone is subject to compulsory overtime. Leave has been cut back, meal breaks and booking on/travelling time are no longer paid for, bank holidays are no longer at double time or even time and a half. New disciplinary procedures mean that workers can be called for interview to account for lateness



or short periods of sickness.

The workers divided

The unions have taken all this without a murmur. On the buses when the new contracts were imposed the Transport and General Workers Union advised its members to sign them. At the same time, the union put forward a strategy to set the same members up by putting forward the ludicrous suggestion that each worker as an individual put their name to a document of protest: 'I've signed the contract, I can do nothing but please sack me anyway!' Finally a series of one-day strikes was mooted after the majority of workers had already been constrained to sign the new contracts.

London Underground's Company Plan was introduced without a single day's strike taking place. RMT had balloted for a strike against the plan early in 1992, and received a majority for action, but called off the stoppage in favour of negotiating with London Underground in May 1992. When talks broke down RMT called a second ballot which registered a 3:1 majority for action. At the same time, the driver's union Aslef had a postal referendum which asked the membership whether or not they supported the imposition of the plan and produced a similar result to the RMT vote.

RMT called a strike for 24 November while Aslef moved on to a second ballot over action, the results of which would be known on 30 November. The RMT action was called off on the eve of the strike in the face of management threats and uncertainty as to whether Aslef members would cross the RMT's picket lines. The unions blamed each other. Aslef blamed RMT for not delaying the strike for a few days. RMT blamed Aslef for holding things up through having

two votes. In fact the union leaders were using these excuses to avoid decisive action.

The experience of frittering away the opportunity of a united response including the railways and the buses was a formative one for the first members of Fightback. Our frustration at the divisions engendered in the workforce by union strategy and our perception of the potential power at the disposal of transport workers led to the establishment of a campaign cutting across sectional division and committed to an uncompromising fightback.

The latest spate of action and threats of action on the railways and on the tube raises the same problems and potential for a successful struggle in transport.

In response to more threatened job cuts on the tube network, RMT balloted for action in March of this year. The union was so unconfident of winning support that it counted unreturned ballot papers as yes votes! A yes vote was achieved but the union opted for further negotiations. Aslef had intended to ballot its tube drivers over pay and coordinating any action with signal workers. Management improved the pay offer on condition that the ballot did not take place. This is a clear indication of management's fear of coordinated action on the transport network. The union accepted the deal.

There are a number of elements common to these disputes. In a period when management are attempting to bypass traditional negotiating procedures in favour of direct imposition of new draconian measures, the union leadership's main concern has been to try and maintain the old relationship of consultation. This preoccupation has meant that the union always makes

substantial concessions in order to preserve the form of being treated as an equal.

Knapp believed that he could do business with Railtrack if only the government would not interfere. This follows the pattern of union leaders acting under the illusion that they have common cause with sector managers against the Westminster bogeymen. Aslef endorsed London Underground's 'Decently Modern Metro' campaign for more government money. The union produced leaflets praising management efforts and asking passengers to endorse the campaign and write to the chancellor.

The most important factor in these disputes has been the unions' inability to organise cross-sector action. Transport workers are in a position to bring London or any other city to a halt. All the unions have balked at this, content to present hard luck stories and play to the gallery of human sympathy.

Life could be made very hard for the government in this sector. No one can pretend that there is a private alternative comparable to private education or health. No one can opt out from the transport infrastructure, so there is generally a lot of public pressure and constant unrest on the question.

But of immediate concern to us is the need to organise effective resistance. The considerable potential for workers to hit back successfully in public transport is being wasted by the unions. New forms of collective action are urgently needed.

Fightback supporters recently questioned a number of transport workers from rail, bus and tube about what is happening in their workplace. One of the striking things we noted was the similarity of the experience in all three divisions. The other common factor was that individual workers knew very little about what was happening around them—tube workers on one line don't know anything about other lines. Bus, tube and rail workers at the main stations may rub shoulders with each other, all exposed to longer hours, worse conditions and threats of redundancy, and yet have no communication whatsoever.

Individual unions fighting their own corner and even keeping their own membership in the dark are in no position to overcome this problem. RMT and Aslef members acting together would have been the best chance of achieving success for both signal workers and train drivers—the union leaders had other ideas. The experience of signal workers and train drivers is a lesson for themselves and for the rest of us. If we want to win there is little point in waiting for the leadership to do anything effective. We will all have to work out how to do it for ourselves. ■



FIGHTBACK CONFERENCE

WORKERS

In June Fightback held its first national conference in London. Over 300 workers attended and participated in the discussion. The conference marked an important stage in the development of our campaign.

From its inception Fightback has been determined to challenge every preconception about the way we organise in the workplace and continually to pose new questions in order to come up with better solutions to the problems we face.

Many of the debates that took place at the conference were by no means concluded. In order to carry our work forward we have decided to reprint a number of the introductions to conference sessions here. We hope that they will stimulate you to take part in clarifying the issues that they raise.

My friend Mary was promoted to staff nurse recently. She thought she had got her chance to prove herself. She was made responsible for working out the ward rotas and for organising cover. Flattered at being given so much responsibility, she relished the prospect of being able to decide her shifts, and to run the ward with her colleagues, instead of having things imposed from above.

Mary soon found that when the ward is short on nurses because of sickness or leave, her responsibility extends to covering the ward herself. She used to be asked to do cover in exchange for overtime pay, but now her extra hours are just part of her new job. She is, supposedly, entitled to time in lieu, but, as she told me, 'It just never works out like that. The time is never there, but the responsibility always is. I usually end up covering the ward because I know that if I don't, I'm responsible for putting children's lives at risk'.

Wherever we may work today, we increasingly find that we are responsible not only to the employer, but also to the customer, and most of all, to ourselves. It seems plain common sense that since we all have a stake in what goes on at work, we are all responsible. And the more responsibility we have, it seems the more control we have over what goes on. In Mary's case, her own sense of responsibility as a professional gets her doing things like putting in unpaid overtime and doing 18-hour shifts which no manager wielding a big stick could persuade her to do.

The appeal of professional responsibility is not unique to nurses. If we cast a glance around any workplace today, it seems that everyone's either a manager or a professional. It is unfortunate, of course, that most of us are not being paid for it. Nonetheless, invoking professional guilt or a managerial ethos is very effective in getting people to work longer hours and be more productive.

Linda, a newly qualified secondary school teacher, described her dismay at a Monday morning staff briefing when the head teacher told them all how proud he had been on going into school on a Sunday to find so many teachers there, giving up their own time for the good of the school:

'Nobody told them to go in and they weren't getting paid for it. For God's sake, I'm finding it hard enough just getting the time to keep on top of my marking and lesson preparation at the moment. And, if I want any chance of promotion, I'm expected to organise things for the kids after school hours. If we're going to have to come in on Sundays as well, it looks like it's either good-bye social life or good-bye to my career.'

The idea of responsibility is not only appealing to workers traditionally regarded as professionals. I worked for awhile as a buying clerk in the NHS. When a new manager arrived, fresh out of management school, my job was renamed 'purchasing manager', and I was told I was responsible for 'developing' the two clerical assistants I worked with.

At first I thought 'Hey, great, I've been promoted', and carefully retyped my CV to reflect my management credentials. I was sent on a management training course, which had no managers on it, only junior staff like me. We were taught all about 'leadership' and how to involve our staff, who might be experiencing 'motivational problems' and lacking 'job satisfaction'. The tutor pointed out that people will be more satisfied in their job if they see that they are getting results.

So, from being a clerical officer with little motivation or job satisfaction myself, I was not only made responsible for the motivation and job satisfaction of the two people I worked with but, as the 'manager', I was responsible for them seeing that they were getting results. I pointed out to my boss that this was awkward because they were my friends. 'Yes', he replied, 'but you're a manager now. It can be lonely at the top'.

As professionals our work is continually being assessed to see if it meets with professional standards. In the health service, everything that moves is subjected to rigorous audit. Medical audit, clinical audit, multi-disciplinary audit and patient-satisfaction audit constantly inform health workers where standards of care are not up to scratch. Although constantly being told to shape up is irritating, as a professional it is impossible to object, because it is all being done in the name of patient care, for which you are responsible.

Another method for intensifying work is performance appraisal. Performance-related pay (PRP), once the preserve of corporate executive hot-shots, is very trendy in the public sector these days. Already introduced in local authorities, it won't be long before nurses and teachers are also paid by performance. We are told that the extensive appraisal systems used to assess performance make PRP fair. But what is fair about the intangible qualities that are being assessed, such as 'team-working', 'communication', 'valuing people', 'customer awareness' and, most vague of all, 'responsiveness to change'? What is an objective measure of 'responsiveness to change'? Perhaps it would involve putting the employee in a room, blindfolding them, and then moving all the furniture around to see how they react? Responses could be measured on a scale of one to 10, ranging from 'far too laid back, fire him' to 'completely freaked out, seek psychiatric help'.

AS SELF-STARTERS

The idea that these subjective qualities are based on objective measurement is patent nonsense; the only criteria managers can use to assess something like 'valuing people' or 'customer awareness' is whether they like you or not. To rebut these criticisms, 'peer appraisal' and 'self-appraisal' have been introduced. Mary found another hated aspect of her new responsibility as staff nurse was to appraise her fellow nurses, while an appraisal scheme used by the Children's Society suggests that candidates seek the views of colleagues on their performance before going into the interview.

Underlying the supposed objectivity of appraisal, a very insidious process is at work. Increasing pressure on the job makes it tempting to look and see who isn't pulling their weight. Self-appraisal and peer appraisal reinforce this outlook. We reach a situation where everyone watches the clock, not because they are waiting to go home, but to see who always leaves first every night. It gets to the stage where you feel guilty for only putting in nine to five and taking an hour for lunch, because you're not taking your share of responsibility.

In adopting the outlook that we are all professionals or managers, pressure at work

is internalised. We coerce ourselves to put in the extra hour at work, and take the responsibility if things go wrong. Of course, if we are faced with a situation at work where departments are threatened with closure and jobs are on the line, putting in some extra effort seems to make sense. When collective action to save jobs looks increasingly difficult and unrewarding, it seems that acting as an individual to counteract these pressures is the best option. But the experience of work in the nineties also shows that taking individual responsibility does not equal taking control at the end of the day.

The forces dictating that units must close, wages must freeze and productivity must increase operate on a regional, national and even international scale; they are not susceptible to our control as individuals. However, we increasingly experience these problems as individual 'professionals', and we try to deal with them by improving our own individual work. But no matter how hard individuals may try, the process of cuts and rationalisation continues with relentless certainty. When we attempt to counteract it by taking personal responsibility for things, our overwhelming experience is one of frustration. The harder we try to change by our

own personal efforts something we can't make any impact on as individuals, the further out of control our working lives seem to become.

But the trend for individuals to take on more responsibility should not be cause for despair. The idea that if we work hard we might get somewhere reflects aspirations which are important; believing that we deserve a bit better than what is on offer is a very useful attitude to have. While it may seem that taking on the status and responsibilities of a manager or a professional is the way to improve things, there are limits to motivating people to work like executives for a clerk's wages. Nonetheless the potential is there to transform people's aspirations into a demand for more than merely a plaque on the door saying manager, or a sense of professional pride to be enjoyed when they finally get home at night.

Through the ethos of responsibility, the experience of coaxing ourselves into working harder for the same or less is presented as being in our interests. The task for Fightback is to work out a response which can connect people's aspirations to have more of a stake in things and more control over our working lives to the possibilities of collective action and resistance. ■

SO ONCE AGAIN, IN THE LONELY GLOOM OF HIS STUDIO, CHARLES BENTLEY PUT HIS IMAGINATION TO WORK...



Illustration from *Tales to Astonish* No20 by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Dick Ayers

Management in industry and the public sector is using a whole new language. Workers should have nothing to do with it argues a college lecturer

THE QUALITY OF

● Which of these are the buzz words in your workplace?

Customer satisfaction ● empowerment
customer focus ● communication
management leadership ● teamwork
employee participation ● sharing
flexibility ● fitness for purpose
diversity ● quality assurance
problem solving ● Investors in People
benchmarking ● quality circles
standards ● bottom-up management
value-added ● continuous change
appraisal ● total quality management
quality audits ● lean workplace
high-performance workplace ● BS5750
ISO 9000

Now ask yourself: 'Why is it that managers everywhere from Railtrack to the universities are talking about quality?' One simple reason is that a lot of money is being put into promoting such talk.

In education a Higher Education Quality Council has been established at a cost of £3.2m pounds to maintain and contribute to 'quality' processes in the universities. A recent survey found that 79 per cent of further education colleges were committed to Investors in People (IIP) a 'staff development' scheme which educated everyone from lecturers to car park attendants in the aims of the organisation. Another 38 per cent of colleges had adopted Total Quality Management (TQM) concepts. Launching a recent series of articles about 'quality and diversity' *The Higher* (22 July 1994) commented that these are 'catch-all words' that 'embrace all good things' but asked 'What do they mean?'. Even the experts have to admit that 'quality' talk is not very coherent or meaningful. Helga Drummond in her seminal book, *The Quality Movement*, confesses that 'despite all the hype and publicity it is difficult to discover what the quality movement is all about'.

So why is it that managers thrust concepts like 'quality and flexibility', 'quality and efficiency', or 'quality and diversity' down workers' throats? Helga Drummond argues that such talk is an attempt to build a new 'quality culture' to make businesses more competitive by empowering workers. The key change necessary to bring about such improvement is a shift from 'the concept of labour as a commodity to the recognition that labour is the organisation'. Put another way, 'quality culture' is a way of getting workers to regard their work from the point of view of management and work harder as a result.

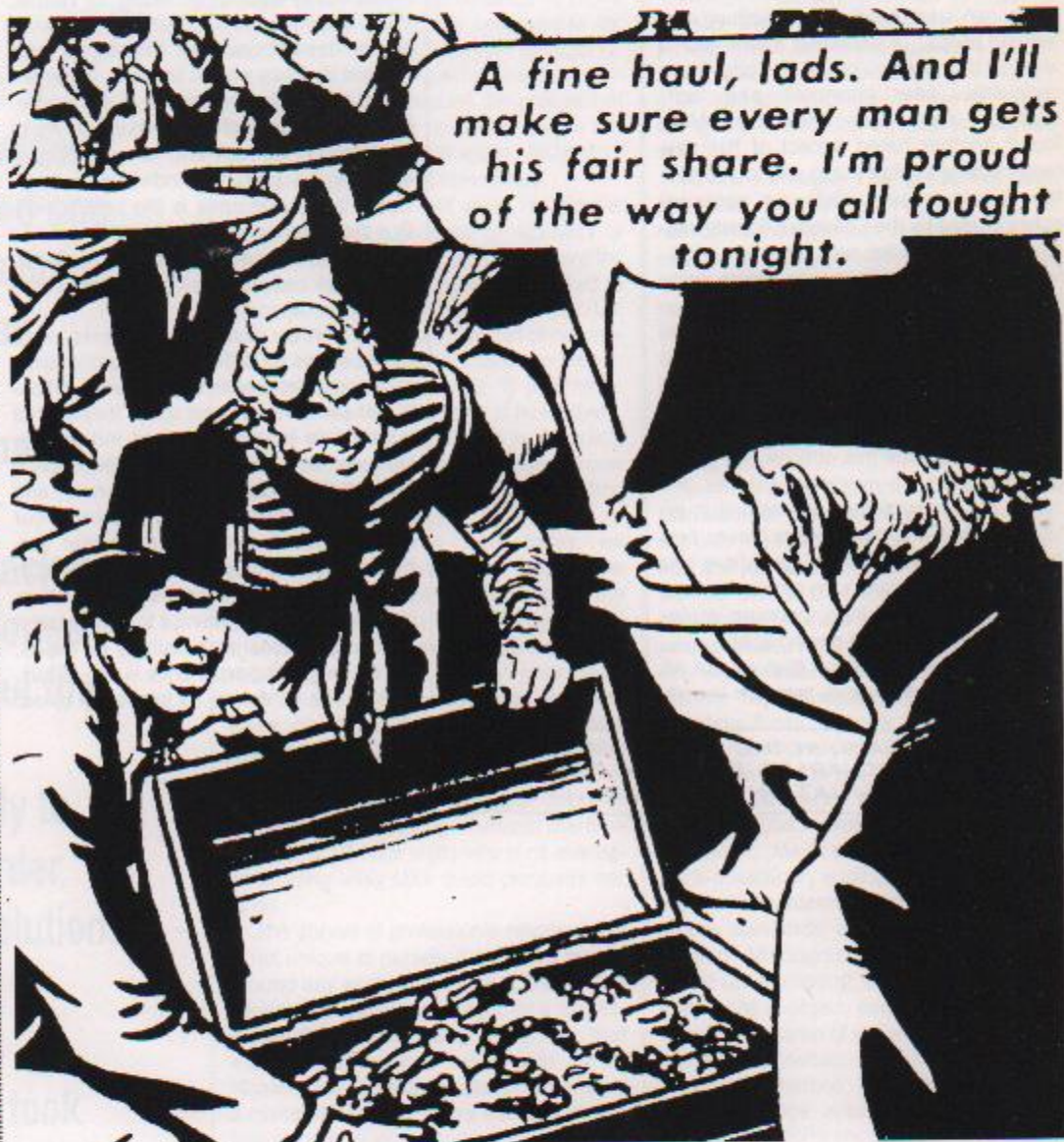


Illustration from
Warford for boys
annual, 1977

Quality means quantity

The 'quality movement' took off in the early eighties when companies such as Florida Power, Madicon, Xerox, Volvo and others responded to Japanese competition by adopting its managerial methods. As Drummond puts it: 'Creating a new organisational culture is the Western world's opportunity to beat Japanese competition.'

Despite the belated recognition of the relatively dynamic nature of Japanese industry, there are problems that make it hard for academics to promote the Japanese model as the paragon of quality management. It has been estimated, for example, that one Japanese worker commits suicide every 20 minutes! This alone makes TQM a hard package to sell to the workforce. More importantly, it can't work

simply because Western capitalism is less dynamic. For Japanese firms, Japanese management techniques come together with Japanese levels of investment in technology—levels that British and American firms are not profitable enough to match.

Today, many commentators admit that these experiments in management have largely failed. Still, floundering around for new ways of revitalising declining economic performance, management theorists have proposed everything from 'chaos theory' to the latest trend, 'flexible mass production'. Today it is recognised that much of the 'quality revolution' was nothing more than a series of fads or, as the *Economist* pointed out, 'the trendiest workplaces are old-fashioned factories in disguise' (9 April 1994).

WORK

So why, when 'quality' is being declared a fad in industry, is the government promoting it in the public sector? Here, the discussion about quality is a thinly disguised attempt to introduce cuts. When they talk about quality, they mean quantity. How many patients are treated? How many students are enrolled? The buzzword 'value-added' shows this clearly. A 'value added' service provides the same thing in less time. If a degree can be taken in two years instead of three with as many or more good quality passes then value has been added, for the employer. The introduction of 'quality' notions is essentially about how we can do more or better within the existing budget.

Quality gets us working harder

In the public sector, customer and producer meet directly; nurses meet patients, benefits workers meet dissatisfied claimants. Notions of providing a 'quality' service mask cuts and provide a Big Idea which can win over workers and the recipients of services. Workers know they could run things better and are willing to work for quality and be empowered.

Taking responsibility for quality means taking more and more responsibility for every aspect of your work and that of your workmates. It all starts with having to attend meetings and conferences on 'The Challenge of Quality'. Then follows extra staff development which takes up evenings weekends and holidays. Then there will be a 'quality committee' set up with representatives from all departments. This breeds smaller committees and breakfast meetings. This leads to more and more small team meetings. One lecturer in a college reported that he was on 14 different committees and teams!

These are just some of the hundred and one variations on the old 'quality circles'. Every worker ends up doing extra work. A research worker for a large foundation agreed that he was working day and night at his job but he was a 'workaholic' and enjoyed it. It's not just your time but your intellectual energy that gets wasted in trying to produce a 'better product'.

Quality processes and audits cause masses of paperwork to be collected to prove that you are monitoring all aspects of the production and marketing systems in the name of quality. When you can't cope with the extra responsibility they give you a laptop and mobile phone so that you can work at home! All conversation at work and at home becomes devoted to aspects of your job. The end result of all of this is that we lose any notion of ourselves as workers with very different interests at work

from management. In this situation even workplace disputes take on a new form. Where I work, the most furious row I've heard was one where members of staff were denouncing senior management as not up to the job of ensuring quality!

This is the dangerous reality of 'quality culture'. Behind all the human resource development-speak about empowerment, behind Helga Drummond's elevation of labour from a commodity to being recognised as 'the organisation' itself, lies the obliteration of the separate interests of the worker in favour of the boss's. Most of us have become used to talking the language of management because in the present climate we all confront our working lives as individuals, keen to get on and with little collective sense of ourselves as workers exploited by management. We've forgotten how to look at things from the point of view of the worker.

Of course, it is nonsense to talk, as Drummond does, about labour ceasing to be a commodity in capitalist society. Karl Marx put the worker's point of view quite distinctly:

'Labour power is, therefore, a commodity which its possessor, the wage-worker, sells to the capitalist. Why does he sell it? In order to live. But the exercise of labour power, labour, is the worker's own life-activity, the manifestation of his own life....He does not even reckon labour as part of his life, it is rather a sacrifice of his life...life begins for him where this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed' (*Wage Labour and Capital*, 1849).

The quality movement constitutes an ideological attack on all workers. It is an attempt to substitute a fantastic illusion for the reality of work. As workers we all have a life outside of the factory or the firm. We work to sustain that life, the wages we are paid and the conditions in which we work are vital concerns for us, and quite separate from management's. But what is being proposed is a new way of thinking about ourselves as workers, that is not as workers at all. A 'quality culture' is one in which we accept that we are only alive at work and our private lives are an imposition, something that gets in the way of work. In the present climate such nonsense can get a hold, unless we can point out why it is in our self-interest to have nothing to do with quality movements, however 'empowering' they may seem.

Never mind the quality

Quality management is an aggressive management style and there are plenty of

signs that more directly coercive methods of controlling workers are returning along with the 'trendy' factories. The employers have realised that they cannot successfully restructure industry, but in today's climate of acquiescence they can save money at the expense of the workforce. Going along with the discussion about quality opens us up to these attacks.

The employers' ideological assault on the reality of our existence as workers needs to be combated. We need to get back to thinking and talking like workers. This is a basic but very difficult task. Talking 'quality talk' is the politically correct language of the workplace. It narrows our view of what we can achieve by limiting us to a management perspective. It is embarrassing to be critical and to talk about wages, resources and conditions when you are at work. But the very ideological nature of the attack provides us with unusual and different forums in which to politicise debate. Don't wait for the inquorate union meeting, try to use every meeting called by management to polarise debate and put across consistent and distinctive arguments which reflect what ordinary workers are thinking and dare not say.

- Staff development sessions and conferences can be turned into political debates.
- Meetings with inspectors and representatives of various official bodies can become forums for discussion of a wide range of needs.
- Annual appraisals can be the basis for a group discussion of concerns and problems. Work out a common approach.
- Discussions of 'quality statements', which have to be produced by all public sector bodies, provide useful opportunities for showing that as workers we have needs different to our bosses.
- Team meetings can be the basis for working out new forms of collective action.

These are new subversive arenas for political debate. When Fightback supporters have used them the response has been excellent. It's up to us to use these new opportunities. So be difficult, raise offensive issues in 'quality' discussions. Argue for real quality—decent wages, resources and conditions. Too much is at stake; if we lose the battle and end up thinking and talking like our bosses it will give them the authority they don't deserve while they run a system which fails to meet our needs. Worse than this, it will obscure our understanding of ourselves as workers and weaken our ability to fight for what we need. Supporters of Fightback should ensure that they don't let these opportunities pass and expose 'quality' talk for the PC claptrap it is. ■

The flexible British workforce of the nineties is bad news for workers. A Fightback supporter looks at the development of today's harsh climate in the workplace and at why the unions are no help in fighting it

JOB INSECURITY FOR

● 'Chokai' sessions mark the start of the day for 500 workers at the Japanese-owned OKI factory in Cumbernauld. All employees are required to attend the early morning meetings to receive the latest news on the plant's performance. According to David Ennis, the plant's director of personnel and corporate affairs, the meetings encourage employees to 'participate in the running of the company'.

Employee involvement schemes including 'Chokai' sessions, quality circles and team briefings are no longer exclusive to companies on 'greenfield' sites like Cumbernauld. They figure prominently in such 'traditional' manufacturing companies as Ford, Cadbury, Shell, BP and ICI. The new human resource management model emphasises securing the commitment of workers to improved quality and performance levels and aims at individualising employment relations in order to exact the highest effort from a company's 'human capital'.

The model is not confined to the private sector. It has been widely adopted in the public services too. But nowhere are workers taken in by these new management techniques. Scepticism is widespread even in those plants which have been widely publicised as exemplifying the success of the new management model. A recent publication on the Nissan plant in Sunderland revealed the underlying antagonism felt by many towards the company (P Garrahan and P Stewart, *The Nissan Enigma*, 1993). In a series of interviews with the authors, Nissan employees clearly expressed their cynicism towards management and its methods:

Question: When you say disillusioned do you mean that some people went in with the notion that Nissan may represent something new?

Tim (a worker at the plant): Well, I think they thought it would be a modern factory and a management who had some idea of what they are doing, whereas it's just not that way at all...at Nissan it is the same as anywhere else.'

Question: It makes you wonder what will happen when production really steps up if people are disillusioned now. What do you envisage happening in the future?

Tim: Oh within four or five years you are going to have a strike. It will happen because people realise that there is nothing special about the place really; and in the end people will say 'Oh stuff it', and people will just go on strike.'

It is not difficult to figure out why workers are unimpressed by the new management styles. In all areas of the economy employers have shed labour and forced those

who remain employed to accept new work practices. Behind euphemisms such as 'lean production', 'multi-tasking' and 'functional flexibility', the reality of these new work practices is that downtime is being reduced, surplus labour and materials eradicated and workers pressed into accepting responsibility for any delays in the production process.

Over the last decade management in the public sector has introduced a multitude of performance indicators designed to measure employees' productivity and efficiency. These have arrived hand-in-hand with large-scale restructuring, prompted mainly by competitive tendering and privatisation, redundancy programmes and the intensification of work. In the civil service alone over 1800 performance indicators have been introduced in recent years. Of necessity, workers have adopted survival techniques designed to fulfil their quotas without killing themselves. In the civil service, for example, management required workers to improve their turnaround time for responding to postal enquiries. Impossible targets were set and so workers in some local offices took to 'binning' mail before it was opened.

Low morale and disillusionment is widespread in the public services. In the NHS, management has sought to introduce internal markets, establish trusts and carry out its hospital closure programme. The result has been chaos. Employees have expressed their opposition, often to find themselves on disciplinary charges. Disputes have rumbled on for several years in schools, higher and further education and in local government over cuts in funding and privatisation.

Whatever the language used to describe it, aggressive management styles are here to stay. The problem is that there is no focus for discontent. Workers in Britain today have no effective means to express their concerns. The pace of work, the fragmentation of its organisation into smaller, separate business units and the growth of part-time and casualised contracts have contributed to the atomisation of the work experience. Most importantly, no independent forms of workplace organisation exist to counter these destructive trends. Trade unions no longer provide even basic levels of workplace organisation around which workers can express their opposition. The wholesale attack on the labour movement in the eighties and the unions' inability to resist it have left workers with no collective voice.

During the 1980s, nine pieces of anti-trade union legislation, including five employment acts, were implemented. In 1979 five million people worked in closed shops. Now these are outlawed. In 1979 three quarters of the workforce had their

pay and conditions agreed through collective bargaining, now it is less than half, and is continuing to decline. All the private sector's industry-wide negotiating bodies have been scrapped, being replaced by over 10 000 separate bargaining units in which negotiating rights have been drastically curtailed. Half of the non-manual workforce are employed in workplaces with no unions present at all and, of the manual workforce, 42 per cent work in non-union plants.

In manufacturing, nearly three million jobs have been lost and unions have faced varying degrees of derecognition as a result of single-union agreements and 'flexibility' deals through which collective bargaining rights have been curtailed. The public services have been drastically restructured with 800 000 jobs affected by privatisation and competitive tendering. Where unions have been 'successful' in keeping some services in-house, this has been at the direct expense of workers wages and conditions. In the newly privatised utilities—gas, electricity and water—unions have lost nearly half their membership and currently face total derecognition in some water companies.

These fundamental changes in the climate of workplace relations have been accompanied by drastic shifts in the composition of the workforce. Throughout the last decade, the new jobs created have virtually all been part-time and peripheral forms of employment which reinforce the atomisation of the labour market. The consequence has been the creation of a mass of low-skilled and low-paid jobs involving little or no employment security.

We can expect these trends to continue. The transformation of the UK labour market into one of the most 'flexible' in Western Europe has not contributed to a stronger or more productive economy. The UK has not, despite government claims, experienced an economic 'miracle'. The improvements in productivity achieved over the last decade have arisen primarily as a result of the intensification of work, through the extension of working hours (paid and unpaid overtime), changes in work organisation and increasing work effort.

The brief boom in the late eighties was primarily fuelled by improvements in output achieved as a result of changes in work organisation and a huge increase in overtime working. Department of Employment statistics for 1988 revealed that in April alone, 13.22m hours of overtime were worked in the manufacturing industry, with a larger proportion of the workforce working overtime than at any time since records began in 1950 (Incomes Data Services, 'Overtime', Study 413, July 1988).

Labour intensification has been the

Illustration from
V for Vendetta by
Alan Moore and David
Lloyd, 1982

FIGHTBACK CONFERENCE

LIFE

substitute for capital investment in the absence of which, the British economic 'miracle' was bound to be short-lived. This explains why the British economy was the first of the advanced capitalist nations to dip into recession in the early nineties. Manufacturing investment, the touchstone of an economy's real health, collapsed in the early eighties, recovering only briefly to its 1979 level before falling again as the 1990-92 recession took its toll (see M Healey, *Britain's Economic Miracle Myth or Reality*, 1993).

In other words, the British economy is set on a trajectory of continuous decline and it is workers who are increasingly expected to compensate for failing profitability by working harder, longer and in more insecure conditions—this is the real meaning of 'flexibility', 'employee involvement' and all the rest of the shopfloor Newspeak. No jobs are safe in the flexible nineties and the sacrifices of the past—in jobs, pay and conditions—are likely to be just a foretaste of what the employers have in store.

The bleak outlook for workers is not simply a consequence of these economic and political attacks on our position. The trade unions have contributed to the problems of demoralisation and fragmentation through their accommodation to the new management techniques.

Unions have, in countless cases, accepted new 'flexibility' deals, competitive tendering exercises and 'beauty contests'. They have done this in order to retain (often limited) recognition and negotiating rights for the officials at the direct expense of their members' employment contracts and working conditions. As a result, in less than a decade, trade union organisation at the workplace has been swept aside and the role of organised labour has been relegated from that of a 'fifth estate' to one that aspires to little more than the functions of a pressure group.

The concessions made by the trade unions over the last decade have been to no avail. There is no prospect for union organisation to be reconstructed around a smaller 'core' of key employees whose conditions are guaranteed by 'sweetheart' agreements made with the employers. The 'company unionism' first espoused by the electricians union, the EETPU, and now adopted by all unions, offers no prospects for union renewal. Irrespective of its divisive implications for the working class, its application is impossible in such a weak domestic economy. If the Japanese can no longer offer their employees a job for life, then British employers can no longer offer a job for a week.

The unions cannot revive their past and have no viable strategy for the future. Unions are currently preoccupied with

a process of mergers aimed at delaying rather than reversing decline. Unions carry little weight in the new industrial relations era. Organisation is still geared to the old order of industrial relations with officials servicing collective bargaining frameworks which are largely outmoded and irrelevant. Unions are unable to relate to the experiences of their members. In partial recognition of this fact, they have sought to provide an array of financial services as a cynical and pitiful substitute for any pretence of promoting collective organisation. If you are lucky enough to keep your job in the NHS internal market, your union can offer you cut-price professional indemnity insurance. If you're one of the unlucky ones, don't worry, their attractive life insurance policies will help to ease the blow of redundancy.

In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that attempts to revive membership through recruitment drives have been unsuccessful. Recruitment strategies tend to rely on appeals to the 'good will' of employers rather than on any real attempt to bring organisation to the thousands of workers who have found themselves in low-paid and insecure employment.

The practical irrelevance of the unions leaves workers in plants like Nissan and countless other workplaces with only the tea room or corridor to express their discontent rather than the union branch or workplace union meeting. Reconstructing a collective outlook on the shop-floor and in the office will be a painstaking task. The starting point lies in forming local opposition to the fragmentation of employment and the casualisation of work. This fragmentation takes many forms in different industries. In further education, permanent staff face the imposition of new contracts and part-timers are set to lose most of their basic employment rights. Local authorities are expanding the scope of short-term contracts and 'out-sourcing' of work, and in both public and private sectors, the creation of new 'business units' demands that staff reapply for their jobs and accept poorer working conditions.

The prospect is one of workers in small isolated units, agencies and plants with management fostering competition and division via the introduction of new performance measures and payment schemes. In the public sector, government policy aimed at funding pay rises through efficiency savings will inevitably lead to pay increases for some being funded out of the job losses experienced by others, as we have seen recently at the Bank of England. Since the unions continue to accommodate to these trends, we will have to make the tearoom and corridor into a starting point for those prepared to fight back.



FIGHTING RACISM IN

A Hackney council worker writes about how to fight racism in local authority services, and how not to

In April this year, new legislation relating to 'persons from abroad' came into force. The new laws deny people coming into the UK access to all benefits and council housing. Housing workers and benefit workers are now required by law to identify a person's immigration status through passport checks and liaison with the Home Office. Local government workers are now required to act as secondary immigration officers. In May managers in Hackney council pre-empted the Department of Social Security by issuing guidelines asking us to enforce the new legislation.

We immediately responded with a notice to all benefit workers asking them to boycott the new regulations and set about organising a workplace meeting to discuss the issue with our members. Management responded not only by disallowing a meeting in work time, but also by banning any meetings on council premises outside of work hours. They told us that government legislation overrode the local equal opportunities policy and that our job descriptions required us to assess benefit eligibility according to changing legislation. Any meeting called to discuss opposing the legislation's implementation would be deemed political and outside the remit of industrial relations disputes. They assured us, however, that if we had concerns about the manner of its implementation they would be happy to meet with the stewards themselves and discuss better ways of putting the new laws into practice.

We desperately needed a meeting with the rest of the workforce to win support for a boycott. We forced the Unison branch to call a worktime meeting of all workers affected by the legislation, including housing workers and council tax benefit workers. During the two weeks it took the branch to organise the meeting, however, the lack of a proper debate meant that some workers had abandoned the boycott under threats from management. By the time the meeting was held, there was already a great deal of confusion and demoralisation among benefit workers.

At the meeting itself, a left-wing steward presented a prepared motion which resolved to call on Unison nationally to campaign for the repeal of the legislation and to call on Hackney council to rethink its hasty implementation of this legislation and defy the government by refusing to implement.

A colleague from Fightback immediately raised a problem with this radical-sounding motion: it asks the workers to do absolutely nothing. Instead, we are expected to continue implementing a racist policy while waiting for the union leaders, who we know to be ineffectual, and the council management, who are so anti-racist they won't even let us organise a meeting to discuss racism, to fight this new law.

Having won the argument that it is up to us to fight the legislation, a debate ensued about what we should do to oppose it. Some people argued that we could implement just part of the legislation, such as sending out the self-declaration forms asking people if they had lived here for over five years, while not processing the forms when they arrived. Fightback supporters, however, argued that there was no skirting around the issue. Collaboration with any part of this racist legislation would compromise us, confuse the issue and so make it more difficult to oppose. As anti-racists, we must boycott all aspects of this legislation. Having polarised the debate in this way, we went on to win the vote for a total boycott. Obviously that was not the end of the fight; our battle with management on this issue is only just beginning.

While ordinary council workers are being put in the position of denying immigrants access to services in Britain, our ability to respond to this problem has been blunted by two problems: the dominance of anti-Nazi politics and our lack of independence from management.

Earlier this year, while Derek Beackon was still a BNP councillor on the Isle of Dogs, I was working with East London Workers Against Racism. In the middle of the hysteria surrounding the BNP, we were attempting to challenge the obsession with a tiny group of fascists and to focus attention on the real racist practices being implemented by Tower Hamlets council. Since May 1987, the council had been denying housing benefit to people who it claimed had made themselves 'intentionally homeless' by emigrating and hundreds of immigrant families had been evicted from their temporary accommodation. Passport checks on homeless applicants had been in operation for a year in advance of the new legislation and the reintroduction of the 'sons and daughters' housing policy meant systematic discrimination against black families in favour of whites.

In our union branch meeting at the time,

I raised a motion to be sent to the Unison national conference in May. The motion condemned the racist practices of Tower Hamlets council and called on Unison council workers to organise similar action should the same checks be introduced in their own councils. The motion was passed to go to the national conference.

A few weeks later, Hackney branch officials contacted me to say they had received a letter of complaint from Derek Ralph, Tower Hamlets Unison branch secretary and so I should withdraw my motion to the national conference. Derek Ralph complained that I had no right to criticise Tower Hamlets union members. He argued that he was an anti-racist and he supported the union's national policy of opposition to immigration controls. However, housing workers in the homeless persons' unit did not feel strongly about the passport checks. They felt it was preferable to liaising with the Home Office and immigration officers in deciding a person's immigration status. Furthermore, the public would not look kindly on officers giving housing to illegal immigrants. He also brought to my attention that he had organised a walk-out of all council workers against Derek Beackon taking a seat on the council and that action was a successful anti-racist initiative.

Here we have a situation where an issue of real racism, the practical denial of democratic rights by the council authorities, is ignored or, worse, not even recognised as a problem. Workers have accepted the government's criminalisation of immigrants, have accepted the right of the government and councils to decide who can and can't have access to resources and have actively collaborated with their employers to police black workers. On the other hand, a nonentity like Derek Beackon is elevated as a target for anti-racists.

Pointing the finger at Beackon not only offers no practical defence of black people's rights, worse, it lets the council leaders responsible for targeting blacks off the hook. In reality, Derek Beackon could learn some lessons from Tower Hamlets council's treatment of immigrant families.

The council workers' walk-out organised by Derek Ralph in Tower Hamlets was not for the extension of democratic rights to immigrants but for a demand on management to restrict the activities of the BNP. The problem with this approach is that it leaves the crucial decision of the allocation

Illustration from
Green Lantern No 76,
by Neil Adams and
Denny O'Neil, 1970

THE WORKPLACE

of rights and resources to the employers. Today they decide who can or can't have housing and benefits, who can and can't sit in the council chamber; and tomorrow they will be deciding whether we have the right to a job or not and whether we should be allowed to organise and protest in the workplace against their attacks on us.

By contrast, the action taken by benefit workers in Hackney demands the extension of democratic rights and equality to all sections of society in defiance of and in opposition to our employers. Our action strengthens the workforce in their opposition to management and challenges the employers' right to dictate the allocation of resources in society.

The importance of organising independently from management against the race checks in Hackney was brought home by the issue of equal opportunities. Many stewards and workers believed that the legislation could be challenged on the grounds that it contravenes the council's equal opportunities policy. A defence by workers of equal opportunities, however, contains a fundamental contradiction: 15 years after the policy was first introduced in Hackney, black people still occupy the lowest rungs of the council workforce as a whole, while those who have reached senior grades have tended to be in specifically race-related areas. In a period of budget crises and public sector cut-backs, it is precisely those areas that are now facing the chop. Equal opportunities policies are a sham and obscure the real racist practices of employers.

We have nothing to gain by upholding the employers' equal opportunities policies or fighting racism within their narrow constraints. Fighting racism is about fighting for democratic rights, not equal opportunities in a society where the opportunity to do anything is being curtailed. In these times equal opportunities can only mean equal opportunity to be sacked, disciplined and have benefits and services taken away.

Racism can be fought in the workplace as exemplified by benefits workers in Hackney. Fighting against the employer on this issue is no more easy or difficult than fighting against any other attack on workers today. The main lesson we have learned in Hackney is that we must be prepared to take the initiative and not rely on either the union bureaucracy or the employers to fight in our interests.



A civil servant argues that the trade unions have less than ever to offer their members



THE UNIONS— THINKING BIG, ACTING SMALL

The significance of this year's TUC conference was its insignificance. In a plea for its continuing relevance, the TUC suggests that in today's changing society, the unions can play a new and positive role in facilitating change. It has found an ally in Robert Taylor of the *Financial Times* who, in *The Future of the Trade Unions*, argues for the re-emergence of the unions as a powerful movement for the nineties.

Far from attempting to address the problems faced by workers, the new-found enthusiasm of TUC leader John Monks and

the likes of Robert Taylor represents a last-ditch attempt to salvage a future for the trade union leaders from the wreckage of the past. As a force for protecting the interests of ordinary workers, trade unionism is redundant. The very fact that TUC leaders feel the need to proclaim the unions' continuing relevance only reveals their irrelevance to the needs of their members. If anything, the strategies followed by today's unions actually have more success in dividing workers rather than bringing them together.

Disputes over the past 18 months clearly illustrate this. The civil service campaign

against market-testing, the Natfne dispute over contracts and the RMT signal workers' strike have one common feature: the undermining by union leaders of workers' initiatives to collectively defend their interests.

The stand taken by the civil service unions was national in name only. Throughout, the leadership followed a divisive strategy. This culminated in the one-day strike on 5 November 1993. Individual branches had to win individual ballots within their workplaces in order to take action on the day, regardless of the national result. In some cases, individual CPSA branches were refused permission to ballot because they were not in dispute with local management. Not surprisingly, the membership has grown increasingly cynical. The effect of pursuing a localised strategy has been that workers have become preoccupied with their particular concerns, to which a national union is seen as irrelevant.

Teachers in further education colleges have faced similar problems. During the Natfne strikes over the introduction of punitive new contracts, the priority of the union leadership was to retain a place at the negotiating table. Resolutions from the membership to escalate the action were disregarded and instead, branches were instructed to negotiate locally. The lack of a coherent national strategy left branches isolated and vulnerable to the whims of local college managers. The principle of collectivity and solidarity were abandoned in favour of slugging it out with management on a college-by-college basis.

The disorientating effect of this strategy on workers has been compounded by the unions' suggestion that these disputes were in some way successful. The workplace today is a place in which workers feel atomised and vulnerable. Engaging in disputes in which management appear to have the upper hand is demoralising and quickly reinforces this problem.

The signal workers' dispute is a clear illustration of this. The inability of the government and Railtrack to defeat the strikers and a degree of public support for the strike obscures the fact that the RMT is not capable of delivering a victory. There has been no coherent attempt within the RMT to win the wider support from other rail workers which is necessary to win. The only way other workers can express their support is through the collecting bucket. The meaning of solidarity has been reduced to the level of an act of charity, with 'all donations gratefully received'.

Given their inability to lead successful disputes, it is no wonder that the number of trade unionists in Britain is dwindling. TUC affiliate membership has fallen by 27.6 per cent in 10 years from 10.8m to 7.3m, the lowest figure since the war. Not only that, but today some 800 000 workers

a year turn to the Citizen's Advice Bureaux for assistance and advice concerning problems with their employers. This trend away from unions is reflected in members' reaction to national issues. In the 1994 pay ballot, the CPSA, the thirteenth largest TUC affiliate, could only motivate 46 per cent of members to participate, while in the national elections only 25 per cent of the membership voted. This poor turnout suggests that trade unionism has little base among those who are still members, let alone the workforce in general.

As a recent national newspaper put it, 'the plain fact is that people won't rush to rejoin a movement which can't win its disputes' (*Guardian*, 5 September 1994). Winning or losing disputes is a problem that the traditional labour movement dare not address, but one which is vital if we are to build new forms of resistance.

We should not become obsessed with a particular form of action such as the all-out national strike. The real problem is that unions want to use limited but non-threatening action as a pawn at the negotiating table. Turning trade union action into a series of fragmented symbolic protests in this way leaves union members in an isolated and passive position and creates a sense of impotence. And it flies in the face of capitalist reality. Individual groups of workers hold a position of weakness in relation to their bosses, because the bosses own or control the resources which workers need access to. A national union implies the ability to overcome this weakness by being able to mobilise workers (either through a national strike or some other tactic) to place the maximum pressure on employers.

In both the civil service and further education disputes, coordinated national action was abandoned, while the signalmen in the RMT were made into a special case. This, along with the on-off character of the signal strikes, turned the action into a series of show-pieces to impress the bosses rather than an attempt to bring Railtrack to its knees.

Localising and isolating groups of workers from their natural allies, namely other groups of workers, denies that workers throughout the country have problems in common with each other. In so doing, the unions have exposed their own irrelevance.

One response to this problem by some unions has been to beef up their national organisations. A year ago, the merging of Nalco, Cohse and Nupe led to 'Europe's biggest ever public sector union', Unison. Members were told that the new union would unite public sector workers and hence give more power to their elbow. Now, the merger between the CPSA and NUCPS is being presented as a great step forward. But members could be forgiven for asking, a step forward for whom?

From the leadership's perspective, mergers make perfect sense. With falling membership rates, unions are desperate to secure a financial future for themselves. At the same time, mergers are presented as a technical solution to the weakness of trade unions in the face of a concerted onslaught by bosses and the government. But experience shows this is far from the case. In the current public sector pay round, Unison has attempted to stifle any action against the ceiling on public sector pay increases, with the result that members have been left feeling abandoned and disillusioned. Unions are pursuing a two-pronged strategy of localising disputes, while building bigger national structures which are no more suited to our needs than the old ones.

Both Robert Taylor and John Monks argue that the unions have to make themselves relevant to members working in a polarised and increasingly insecure labour market. They both miss the point. Unions will not be able to make themselves relevant to workers whose declining terms and conditions are the result of trade union failure.

In fact Monks and Taylor gave away what they really mean by 'making themselves relevant' in a recent article in the *New Statesman*. There they argued that unions are relevant within the workplace as 'institutions invaluable to employers as well as employees, because they provide the stability that companies need as they carry through necessary change' (2 September 1994). The real reason for the promotion of trade unions is the need to find a new relationship with the government and the bosses at a time when their relevance is in question. The promotion of the positive role of unions in helping to restructure work is an admission of the labour movement's inability to protect the interests of ordinary workers—a job for life and a living wage.

The absence of collective resistance leaves workers atomised and worried. The experience of positive collective action is alien to the vast majority of workers. Calls by militants for a return to the past, and rhetorical statements by bureaucrats about a new-found relevance, both fall on deaf ears because they are not addressing the real problems that we face.

We have to recognise that building solidarity and taking collective action are the only ways we have of defending our interests against the interests of bosses and the government. But we must also recognise that first we have to transform phrases such as solidarity and collective action from an empty litany into something with a real existence in our workplaces. This requires us to challenge the idea that we have no common interests as workers and as a result can do nothing to deal collectively with the problems facing us. ■



Below we reprint the Joint Statement from the Fightback Natfhe Platform, issued in response to the growing fear and confusion among lecturers in further education who have been engaged in a long-running dispute with management

SLAVE CONDITIONS AND SLAVE CONTRACTS: DEMYSTIFYING



'Two weeks back and it's already a hell-hole'

'All people do is moan and moan all the time'

'What the **** are Natfhe doing?'

'We've had enough. When's the strike?'

'We thought we had a nice principal, but he's become Mr Nasty.'

'Everyone's really stressed out. Some people are seriously ill.'

'Well that's it. We might as well tear up our Natfhe cards.'

Before the summer many lecturers realised that this was it. This could be the last summer when they had a decent job with any sort of formal conditions of service. They were prepared to give it a go and fight in September. Two weeks into the term and Fightback members in the Natfhe Network report anger and confusion in every FE college. Many staff have had enough. Many want to strike back. Feelings are running high. Lecturers are voting for action in colleges from Blackburn to inner London. Even at colleges where the deals have been attractive lecturers have rejected them. At one college many lecturers turned down £1500 and two incremental points rather than accept new contracts. Some colleges are going to strike during FEFC inspections. In other colleges, however, absolutely nothing is going to happen.

The patchy picture is a result of political confusion that we can't hide from. The real problem we are facing is not whether there will be action, but understanding what the action is about. The target of the anger is sometimes Natfhe, sometimes a vicious principal, sometimes workloads, sometimes stress and working conditions in general or redundancies (40 redundancies are on the cards in one college). This anger must be given clear political direction. To do this you have to ask some basic questions.

Was it a victory when the CEF called for negotiations just before action was due to hit and hurt employers in 100 colleges during enrolment week?

No. Ordinary members of Natfhe knew what was going on. It was no surprise to them when Natfhe 'suspended' action or that, once action was suspended, the CEF upped

A DISPUTE

the stakes and demanded an extra 200 hours of teaching from lecturers. What else could we expect from a situation where the union had made concession after concession to the employers, offering them its own version of the new contract and increasing lecturers' hours to 800? Once you make concessions you are on the run.

Was this debacle a result of the union leadership being naive, malicious or stupid?

Probably all three, but the real problem stems from Natfhe's strategy since the beginning of the dispute. As ordinary lecturers, we wanted to defend our conditions but Natfhe was always willing to bargain them away in a desperate attempt to keep a seat at the negotiating table with the CEF. Lecturers have been used as pawns by the Natfhe leadership. Sue Berryman from Natfhe's FE Unit is quite open about this: 'the purpose of the concerted industrial action has been to return to national negotiations.'

Once we were Woolf's stage army, now we are the new general secretary John Akker's army, but the business of selling us out is the same. Akker put out a disgusting joint statement with CEF boss Roger Ward on 2 September declaring a joint goal to 'embrace flexibility, productivity...'. The overall result is that lecturers are confused and demoralised.

Some activists recognise that this is a 'setback'. But the mess we are in is one result of their argument that we should 'make the leadership fight'. This slogan misdirected effort and gave credibility to the leadership. It allowed them to succeed in the strategy of trading our conditions for their status and position as negotiators. Now these very same activists promote a virtual reality situation where 'all-out indefinite strike action' is an eleventh-hour solution to our problems. In knee-jerk fashion they are offering a tactic as a substitute for a workable political strategy. This is just militant posturing. In Fightback we have always argued against the union's strategy and in favour of organising independent forms of action, controlled by ordinary lecturers, either inside or outside of the old union structures.

Illustration from
'Sopa de Gran Pena' in
Love and Rockets No3
by Gilbert Hernandez

Are we in a hopelessly divided position because of the new contracts?

No. Whether we are on 'silver book' contracts, CEF contracts, or some halfway house type of contract we all face the same attacks. It is sectional and self-destructive to celebrate the 'main grade lecturer' on the old conditions. It can isolate people forced on to new contracts. That is a danger in the 'don't sign' campaign. It particularly affects new staff. It will individualise the response of workers. The best example of this is the way that some people pick personal disputes with colleagues on the so-called 'management spine'. People go on the management spine because they need the money. Don't be fooled by words. In lots of places caretakers have become 'domestic service managers'. Calling everyone 'managers' doesn't help to clarify who the enemy is. This use of language is deliberate. It promotes the sort of divisions between workers that suits the bosses.

From our point of view, management are the people who have the power of hiring and firing, the people who devise and impose worse conditions on us. We have to spell it out—it means heads of large departments, deans, vice-principals, associate principals and principals. We know who they are. If they are still Natfhe members, they come to Natfhe meetings to get ammunition for our enemies. We should deal with them publicly there and then.

Eighteen months into a protracted dispute are we back to local negotiations, local disputes and imposed contracts?

No. We cannot afford to waste any more time. We have always recognised that the fight over contracts was one form in which a general fight over flexibility would manifest itself. There are lots of disputes about whether 20 per cent or 50 per cent of lecturers are on new contracts. What does it matter? We have to find new mechanisms of opposing flexibility in all its guises. In reality we are all working more hours in worse conditions and the new contracts rubber stamp this. We don't have to get obsessed with the act of signing. We all have slave conditions and some of us have slave contracts. We need to start working out how we can get to

a position where we, and not the bosses, dictate the terms of our working lives.

Does the paralysis of the official union mean that management have got the upper hand? (This is the view of the educational press.)

No. We all know that management are like headless chickens. They are in a perpetual state of panic brought about by the constant changes since incorporation. They face a whole string of new problems such as low enrolment, endless inspections and 'quality audits'. They are trying to solve these problems by cutting jobs, by not replacing staff, by introducing more and more part-time posts, by policing us through the notion of 'quality', by increasing class sizes and administrative duties. We know what a mess they are in and can use our knowledge to really hit them where it hurts. We have to stop being the passive pawns of the union leaders and think up imaginative new collective responses to the attack we face.

- We have to hold meetings not to just call for action but to argue, in a collective and open forum, about what conditions we want
- We have to put these conditions to the bosses at all levels
- We should boycott FEFC inspections and cut off the bosses' blood money
- We must involve students
- We can picket parents' evenings and conferences
- We should build cross union support
- We can build support throughout colleges in each region and act together
- We need to share experiences through a new national network that will enable us to build an effective opposition.

We remain in dispute. Take the fight into our own hands and organise to win.

This is the Joint Statement from the Fightback Natfhe Platform.

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