

KEY WORKERS UNITED

KWU no 20 September/October 2023, Norwich

SLOW YOU DOWN... BUT THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES! THE ANATOMY OF THE STRIKE MOVEMENT



WHERE IS the strike movement today? And let's be clear, it *is* a movement that has been built and sustained by public service workers. Centred on pay, this has triggered a new rank and file willingness to engage in repeated strikes where none had happened before, and given heart to those in the private gig-economy like Amazon. This willingness has come out of the knowledge that most workplaces are tyrannised by the onslaught of *profit-centred services* rather than *social services*. Time and time again, workers have said 'this is not just about pay' and having returned to work, they find that nothing has basically changed. The RMT strikes continue because the rail companies are as determined as ever to worsen conditions, cut jobs (as in ticket office closures) and tear up agreements.

What have we learned? There's been a lack of co-ordination across unions for example with national or regional mobilisations on strike days. The campaign 'Enough is Enough' started to bring the public into active support, particularly drawing on picket line experience where community support has been massive, but it has not developed as hoped. The government's policy of attrition has worn people down, that's why teachers, nurses and posties have voted to accept offers and this has slowed the action. Union leaders clearly knew that the strikes posed two political questions:

'who runs the country' and 'what will really have changed when we return to work?'

Nevertheless, the strike movement has left a legacy that won't melt away. There will be many ways in which this can be built on in the coming months. During this slow-down we need a thorough and wide-ranging discussion of the situation. As the historian Edward Thompson said: 'we don't want to tell anyone how to write history. They must find out in their own way'.

CAPITALOCENE OR SOCIALOCENE?

When Rosa Luxemburg used the phrase 'Socialism or Barbarism' in 1915, she was referring to the alternatives facing humanity during World War One. The four years of war witnessed capitalism 'red in tooth and claw' with unparalleled barbarity. Now, what has been called the capitalocene- the era in which the capitalist system is wrecking the planet- upholds Luxemburg's prophetic words. Her key insight was that the costs of war would be inflicted on the working class and they were by fascism. The same will happen with the climate crisis as the ruling elites will hide behind 'fire walls' whilst the majority will face rising sea levels, fires, devastating storms and social havoc. There is an alternative: the socialism that will inaugurate the socialocene era.

Unrest and strikes in Cardiff and Paris

By John Sillett

WHAT DO the riot and protests following the death of two lads riding an e-scooter tell us about the mood of a neglected and forsaken Cardiff neighbourhood? And then the riots that followed the fatal shooting of a youth in Paris that engulfed many French cities?

Given a cost of living crisis, can we compare these riots with the food riots of the 18th century or perhaps of the Luddites in the 19th century or 1930's protests against the poor laws and means test?

The backdrop to both the Cardiff and French events was police behaviour, but the bigger picture must be the destruction of public services and regular jobs and incomes by neo-liberalism. Here, there has been the biggest and widest strike wave for 40 years. France has seen big strike waves too, against raising the state pension age and not long ago massive "yellow jacket" protests against rising fuel and other prices.

Riots are sudden violent outbursts of disorganised behaviour, participants blindly hitting out. Strikes and marches are organised behaviour with participants consciously seeking demands. Even wildcat strikes have organisation and purpose. Clearly the Cardiff and French riots show us a discontent, even although some, or many, participants are simply against the police trying to crack down on car crime or unsocial use of e-bikes or of drug dealing, a criminality given space from the closure of youth facilities and other services.

The task has to be for the workers movement to show there can be a better and brighter alternative to the gig economy and deprived neighbourhoods. The danger is that contained within the rioters is lumpen elements who could be used to oppose the workers movement. However the funerals for the two in Cardiff were peaceful, organised and saw a massive 2,000 mourners. In France there were organised marches against police violence and the family of the shot youth were appalled at the destruction of the rioting. We must take hope that there is a deepening of class consciousness from the strike wave and with this that we can neutralise reactionary criminal elements.

Gig workers are key workers

By John Sillett

FRIDAY 4TH AUGUST saw a large solidarity picket outside of the massive Amazon warehouse in Coventry with coaches bringing trade unionists including some from Suffolk. What's happening here with workers organising in this sector could be seminal. Whilst not in the "Saltly Gates" league, the solidarity action closed the place down and workers were paid to take the day off, so desperate were management that they'd do this to avoid workers coming in contact with pickets. These large warehouses/distribution depots bring hundreds of workers together, reminiscent of Victorian times and the cradle of Trade Unionism. There are good prospects for organising as the workers are treated so badly. However, Amazon is a master of dirty tricks and is quite prepared to shut sites down simply to defeat a union.

Similar dirty tricks are used to disrupt organising in the retail and hospitality sectors. Often these workplaces are small scale, even if the employer is a large nationwide chain like McDonalds, and with high staff turnover and young staff like school leavers, unions like the Bakers or Unite Hospitality sector do sterling work. The fact that recently at McDonalds, so many young workers courageously came forward to say they had been abused or bullied by bosses, shows both their vulnerability and the need or trade union rights.

Memoirs of an ex-shelf stacker

By Attila the shelf stacker

TEN YEARS as a shop-worker was a valuable experience. I suppose the biggest change I saw was the increasing intensity of work. In the beginning the focus was customer care, older staff were valued, things had a friendly feel and there was a good team spirit. If a customer asked for an item you took them to its location and chatted about the range available, obviously closing it off with a sale if you could. At the end of 10 years you were more or less expected to just tell that customer the aisle number for that item and carry on working stock or dressing shelves because you were being timed or your work rate was under review. This never rung right with me. I stuck to the old way and got a lot of grief from new or young managers.

Over time the number of tasks and activities expected of you increased but pay declined to the minimum wage. For example, at the start, I was told I didn't need to do tills and the company boasted it paid over the minimum wage. In fact, workers then were divided into "shop floor", "tills" and "replenishment". After some years everybody had to learn tills and "replen" fell to all staff. We still had a "help" desk at the time which did returns. When that went, returns were handled on tills. Returning items required some customer security checks, a skill a notch up, but there was no extra money. Added to that a Key Cutting machine appeared next to the tills. There was no extra money for working that. Then we became a "post office", accepting and handing over parcels and you've guessed it, there was no extra money for that either.

Then all regular till staff were expected to work in the cash office. This had been a specialist job, with lots of cross checks to flush out any discrepancies and a precise recording system that needed a manual to learn. It seemed as if the company wanted to dispense with specialist staff. I suspect these staff had historically been awarded pay increments which the company wanted to end. Also, staff had to learn how to open tills first thing in the morning and how to do a close. Things like sorting out a float and locking away cash. Chairs were taken away from tills. We had to argue the case for their retention for disabled or pregnant workers. CCTV was used continually to monitor staff, without any agreement in place. Disciplinaries were nasty trumped up affairs to scare people. At the end it was not a nice place to work.

Stories from the frontline: solidarity, support and co-ordination

NORWICH TRADES UNION COUNCIL, like all local trades union councils, is known simply as the trades council (TC). TCs promote effective solidarity in disputes, joint campaigns on issues such as health, education, welfare and transport, and, in general, provide the vital link between the workplace and the wider working-class community. We are currently supporting Aslef, CWU, NEU, RCN, RMT and UCU in their strikes in Norwich.

Trade unions are the central organizations of wage earners. Without strong trade unions, struggles for social justice, democracy in business and society and for a socio-ecological restructuring of production, transport and consumption will not be successful. They are guided within capitalism and at the same time point beyond it. Dealing with past and present, program and strategy discussions of the trade unions plays an important role in the work of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation. Important topics are questions and projects of the trade union revitalization debate, economic democracy, the change in the world of work and economic structures as well as conversion. The focus on work and trade unions is located in the Institute for Social Analysis and is realized in cooperation with other areas and the foundation network. About the trade unions discussion group activists from trade unions and companies as well as scientists close to the trade union should be involved in the work of the foundation.

RMT and NEU have really broadened the struggle with Mick Lynch (RMT) demanding for all what RMT are fighting for and Kevin Courtney (NEU) saying people are “alive today” due to teacher’s action during pandemic.

Ian Duckett, Education officer Norwich & District TUC

Cromer town Council has voted to support the reopening of the reablement services at Benjamin Court. Local MP Duncan Baker will call a public meeting! We will ask Mr Baker to



Benjamin Court Fight

approach the Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board (the commissioners of health and care in our area) about it, so look forward to getting his response.

There were powerful contributions from members of the public at the meeting, as well as from Town Councillors themselves, about the important role of Benjamin Court in supporting those leaving hospital. North Norfolk District Council members, including NNDC leader Tim Adams, plan to refer the matter to the Norfolk County Council Health Oversight and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) when more information is received, which paves the way for the closure decision to be referred to the Secretary of State.

ROYAL MAIL: report from a local CWU official

ROYAL MAIL were out to destroy workers terms and conditions and their trade union and any pay rise was to be self-funding which meant redundancies. They wanted total flexibility which meant that sometimes fewer hours per week would be worked with the rest “banked” and used at busy times. They wanted to provoke a strike where they could defeat the union. However the prolonged period of one and two day strikes, while well backed, did lead to attrition but the union is still in the workplace. The deal finally agreed, with a 75% yes vote and the biggest vote turnout ever within the union, has some disappointing concessions and many members are very unhappy about it. Royal Mail also wanted complete control over the 200 or so dismissal and disciplinary appeals but the union won an independently chaired panel to hear these. The one-off lump sum payments also helped with the acceptance vote. Royal Mail are now seeking to end the Universal Service Obligation and are reducing the hours customer counters are open at mail delivery offices.

Kings Lynn and West Norfolk’s largest social housing provider faces strike action at Freebridge Community Housing

*FREEBRIDGE COMMUNITY HOUSING is paying poverty wages despite a £3.6m surplus. Nearly 60 Freebridge Community Housing workers at Juniper Lodge will strike over poverty pay. Many of the workers, who perform a variety of roles, including in cleaning and maintenance, are paid little more than the national minimum wage and many are struggling to pay their bills. They are angry that Freebridge has offered them a five per cent increase and a £500 non-consolidated payment, despite the association’s robust financial health. This is a significant, real terms pay cut when the real rate of inflation, RPI, stands at 10.7 per cent. Freebridge had a total turnover of £32 million and a surplus of £3.57 million in 2022 and increased its rents by seven per cent this year. The workers will strike on **21, 29, 30 and 31 August** and on **4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 September**. The strike action will severely impact Freebridge’s cleaning and maintenance services and will intensify if the dispute is not resolved. Unite regional officer Steve Harley said: “**The disruption that will be caused to tenants is entirely the fault of the association. It can absolutely afford to pay our members, who are struggling financially, a reasonable pay rise. That is what needs to happen.**”*

JOIN THE FIGHT FOR A SOCIAL RAILWAY – NO TO THE PROFIT-CENTRED RAILWAY!

**SLASH AND STANDARDISE FARES! FREE TRAVEL FOR
UNEMPLOYED AND DISABLED PASSENGERS!**

**NATIONALISE THE RAILWAYS! FOR A DEMOCRATIC,
ACCOUNTABLE & ACCESSIBLE RAILWAY!**

SAVE OUR TICKET OFFICES!

RMT STRIKES ON GREATER ANGLIA AUGUST 26 & SEPTEMBER 2

PASSENGER WATCHDOGS have reported a massive increase in consultation responses. RMT general secretary Mick Lynch said: “These damaging plans are not just about ticket office closures; they are a smokescreen for a widespread dehumanising of our railways. Our railway stations are at the heart of communities around the country and if these closures

go ahead the Tories will pay a heavy political price at the next election with boarded up ticket offices and de-staffed stations being a permanent reminder of the government’s vandalism of our railways.”

The history books tell us that ticket office staff could face danger and we should remember that railway work is dangerous work. Booking clerk Emma Eastway, aged

23, worked on the North Eastern Railway at Lemington station. In 1922 she went to collect tickets on the down platform and when jumping down from the platform, sprained her knee. Booking clerk Joseph Southward (17), who was working at Furness Abbey station in 1922, ran towards the up platform to collect tickets. As he crossed the track, he didn’t check that the line was clear and was hit and killed by a goods train. The investigation found lack of care on his part but noted that it was usual practise to cross the line. Southern Railway booking clerk T. Noble (19) at Betchworth in 1922 crossed the track and was hit. It was concluded that the station didn’t meet requirements for structural clearance and equipment. In 1919, booking clerk H. H. Bullock died at Mossend station on the



RMT picket line at Norwich station on 20.7.23. Photo: Richard Chilvers

Caledonian Railway. The NUR was present at the enquiry but it was not clear how he came to fall between the platform and some wagons. In 1937 Garfield Smith was employed at Cardiff on the GWR and was carrying tickets and cash in a case, fell foul of the rail and his hand and leg were run over: the fact that this route was beside a busy route was pointed out to the GWR. Redeployed ticket office staff sent to several stations would face similar dangers.

With thanks to Railway Work, Life & Death.



NOR4NOR protest over ticket office closures at Norwich station on 18.7.2023

Tory vandals to axe adult education centre in Norwich

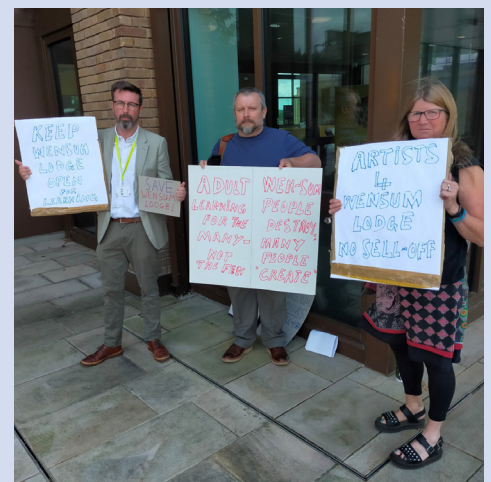
**PROTEST LOBBY AT NORWICH COUNTY HALL ON
26th SEPTEMBER FROM 8.30AM- BRING YOUR BANNERS**

WENSUM LODGE, a much-loved adult learning centre, faces closure and sell-off by Tory-controlled Norfolk County Council (NCC).

The site has been a haven for generations of learners with courses ranging from art and sculpture to languages. The County Council has a plan to close the site by the end of the year and list it for sale as it is, in their view, ‘surplus to requirements’.

There is clearly no regard for the health and wellbeing of all adult learners who value and need the community aspect of these creative courses.

This is an act of sheer vandalism but it can be stopped. Artists 4 Wensum Lodge supports the campaign to make the site a community hub where adults of all ages and backgrounds can come to study with renowned local artists and specialist tutors using resources that can only be properly accessed in dedicated classrooms.



Wensum Lodge protest at County Hall on 3.7.2023. Photo: D. Welsh