

INTRODUCTION

 * "Our problem is to maintain an adequate living in-*
 * come (whether working or not), whether they make *
 * us redundant, put us on short time or use inflat-*
 * ion to make our wages, pensions, social security *
 * or dole buy less." *

Unemployment, short time working and layoffs are now common. The need to work out what to do about all this is urgent. This short pamphlet contains four Sections. The first Section is the National Federation of Claimants Unions statement on what CUs are. This was to go with the first of two articles (Sections 2 & 3) written for Nottingham Voice (a), trying to learn from the experience of CUs and find a way forward. The second of the two articles never appeared in Nottingham Voice. A storm had blown up about what is and what isn't a 'proper' CU - sadly shifting the discussion away from how claimants, housewives and workers can get together and fight - and the Editors decided to write a compromise article. Both of these articles, plus a letter on the subject written to Nottingham Voice are included here in the hope that they encourage a better discussion of CUs and lead to some worthwhile action.

Nottingham CU, like many others across the country, was an effective local force for some time, bringing together a lot of claimants, taking part in the miners' and other strikes, starting off squatt-ing in the city and helping tenants fight the Council. It meant a lot to a lot of people. When the CU as a self-managed group, holding regular meetings, folded in 1973 it was missed. (b)

Unemployment is now higher than at any time since the 1930s. This is just one part of the world-wide capitalist crisis. To answer this with just a Right to Work campaign (as many Trade Unionists and political activists do) is to miss the point.

It is to ignore some of the most far-reaching actions of the working class, such as the demand at Ford (Dagenham) recently for Full Pay - Work or No Work, when faced with a layoff. This demand, backed by a militant occupation of the plant (and later taken up by the Shop Stewards and Union), is not for the Right to Work but for a living income, no matter what crisis the employers say they are in. (see Big Flame Journal 1)

It is to ignore the way the Employers and State try to shift workers around to suit their plans for the more profitable parts of the economy.

It is to ignore the part most unions play in this, acting as partners with the State and CBI to force defeat on the working class. See, for example, National Union of Hosiery And Knitwear Workers' and Nottingham Trades Council policy towards import controls as a way to solve the decline of the Hosiery Industry.

It is to ignore the effects in the family where the fight against 'demoralisation' is also sometimes the fight to retain male dominance. (that is, a reactionary fight)

It is to ignore the freedom from work achieved by many people who use temporary work and social security against capitalism. (Race Today)

November 1975

(a) Nottingham Voice came from Grass Roots a paper of the Council of Social Services trying to get closer to their 'clients'. Nottm's Independent Monthly Paper'.

(b) Other CU documents include 'Report of the National Working Party' Women and Social Security and Pensioners Handbook. All available from Keith c/o 36 Kenilworth Terrace, Off Portland Rd., Nottm.

The front cover is taken from Solidarity pamphlet, 'Redefining Revolution' Paul Cardan.

NO SMOKING NO SMILING NO ENJOYING YOURSELF



CLAIMANTS UNIONS ARE GROUPS OF PEOPLE on social security who have got together to help each other and to fight collectively around the four demands known as the Claimants Charter.

THE CLAIMANTS CHARTER

1. The right to an adequate income without means test for all people.
2. A socialist society in which all necessities are provided free and which is managed and controlled directly by the people.
3. No secrets and the right to full information.
4. No distinction between so-called "deserving" and "undeserving".

HOW DO INDIVIDUAL CLAIMANTS UNIONS WORK?

Each Claimants Union is self-governing and cannot be mandated outside the Charter. The essence of Claimants Unions is rank and file control, which means that members make their own decisions at a local level at the weekly meetings of the Union. Consequently, Claimants Unions are not branches of a national organisation and they differ in character and tactics. In doing so they reflect their individual localities, their particular communities, and the personalities of their members. Different emphasis is placed from one Union to another on the political, social, and fighting claims aspects of CU work.

WEEKLY MEETINGS

Here all major decisions are taken collectively by the members present. Together we pool our knowledge, ideas and experience, and decide on future action. New members who join at these meetings may be shocked at the lack of confidentiality and the friendly informality of the group. They may have come half expecting some sort of emergency social work organisation only interested in sorting their claim out. Instead we expect every member to get involved . . . no indispensable activists, no "casework" by specialists, no permanent experts, etc.

There are three aspects to Claimants Union work:

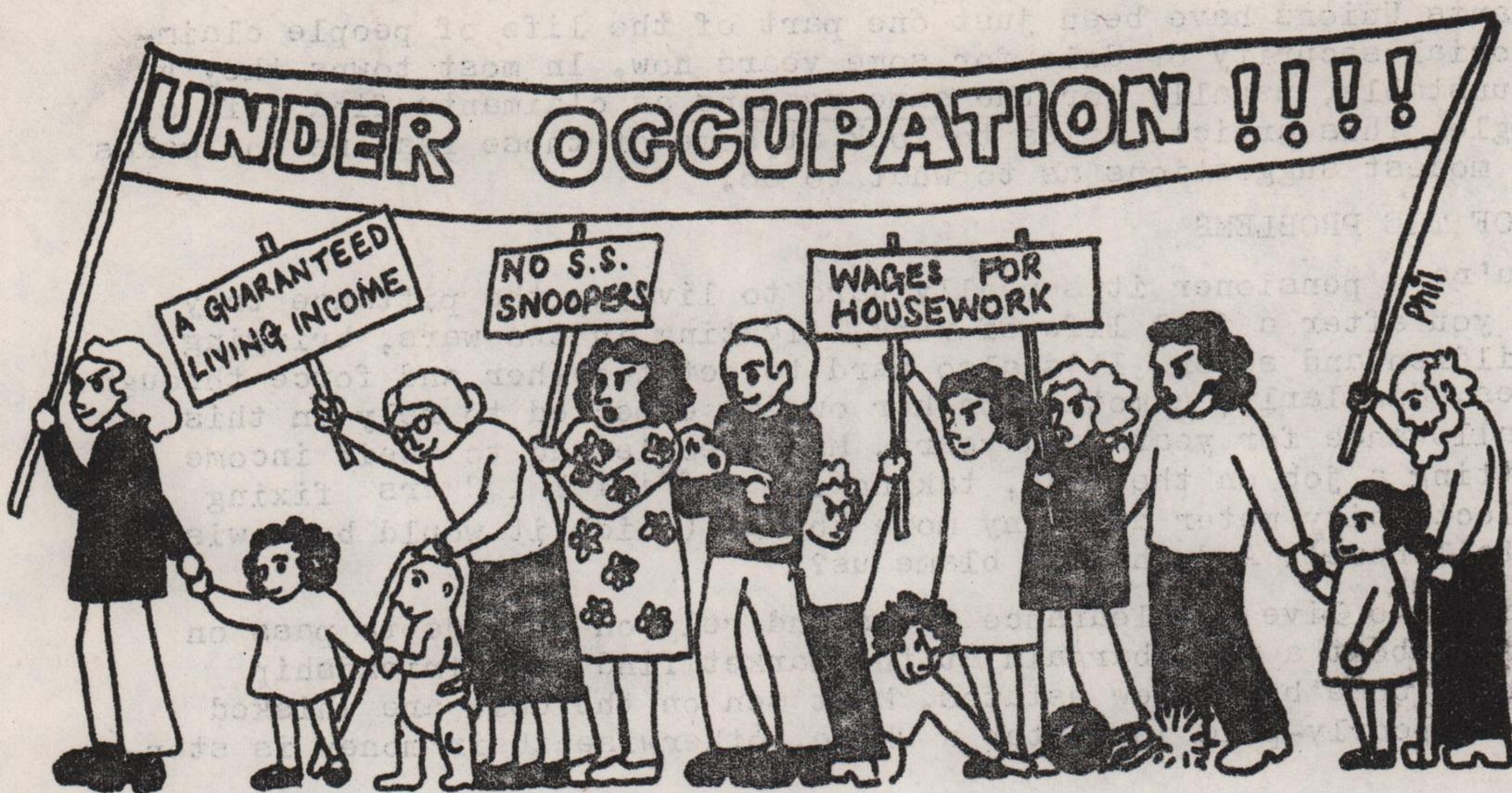
1. Fighting claims at Labour Exchanges, Social Security offices, Appeal Tribunals and sometimes through the courts.
2. Political - producing literature such as the newspaper and handbooks, also leaflets, etc., organising demonstrations and specialist conferences, schools, etc.
3. Social - most CU members get a lot of support through the organisation of playgroups, food co-ops, squatting, trips and outings, the summer camp, etc.

THE NATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE CLAIMANTS UNION MOVEMENT

We have no national executive or national headquarters. We are in daily conflict with an enormous, centralised state bureaucracy, i.e. the Social Security Section of the Department of Health and Social Security. We want a movement which does not reflect this. A hierarchical structure with a national headquarters would mean discipline and regulation from above with the strong possibility of state co-optation or control. Local Unions would soon lose their spontaneity and militancy and power would be removed from the grassroots. "Officials" in secure, well-paid posts would be far removed from the harsh realities of claiming, and would probably fall into the role of arbitrators, conciliators and mediators.

THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF CLAIMANTS UNIONS

is merely a network of all those Claimants Unions which have affiliated together. To affiliate, a Claimants Union must be bona-fide; support the four points of the Charter; and hold weekly meetings which are open to all Claimants. The aim of the NFCU is to communicate and co-ordinate activities between Claimants Unions. To facilitate this there are regional and national co-ordinating meetings, in addition to the Quarterly National Federation Meetings.



SEVEN OF US HAD GONE ALONG TO DAVID LANE Social Security Office to make three claims for clothing and bedding grants. We had waited in the queue and gone to the counter in twos and asked politely.

No! came the reply. We spoke to the supervisor: No chance! The manager would not see us.

This was the moment of decision. Were we going to back down - or stand up against the Social Security system with its intentional confusions and harassment? WE DECIDED TO OCCUPY. The original group soon expanded to include several people who, like us, were pissed off with the treatment they had received.

One part I particularly remember was the first time the police came in. When the Sergeant asked who our spokesman was he got a loud unanimous reply: "There's not one - we have no leader". SS offices are public places until they close so we couldn't be asked to leave. Since they couldn't pin that on us they threatened to do someone for bad language, then left.

Later on, local radio and Midlands TV reported that our occupation had been a success. The manager backed down and giroes amounting to over £117 were sent to the three claimants.

This occupation and others like it were part of the style of action developed through months of struggle and discussion by claimants which led to the Claimants Union becoming an effective local force. Militant collective action, weekly democratic discussion and informative leaflets were fundamental, but more of this next time.

The Claimants Union no longer exists in Nottingham (although there is a social security advice service at the People's Centre). As the crisis deepens, thousands of school leavers find themselves without a job (the Army is frantically trying to recruit them). The factories are "shaking out" surplus employees: the first to go are often women. Hundreds of thousands of single mothers, pensioners and disabled on "allowances" are finding it difficult to make ends meet with rising prices and rents. In an attempt to rationalise itself capitalism is closing down thousands of workplaces and nationalising others while the trade unions co-operate with management in widespread redundancies. In this situation, some sort of organisation of people on social security or unemployment benefit seems necessary.

Apart from proving a determination to fight, that occupation displayed a belief in the RIGHT OF CLAIMANTS TO ORGANISE. Many would say how dare these "dossers", these "workshy", these "women living off the state" demand anything? They should all be at work!

Work is the burden of most people not because we produce valuable and necessary things but because unless we work we don't get paid. A lot of jobs are socially useless (advertising) or harmful (making weapons). On the other hand, caring for the elderly or organising a playgroup rarely counts as work.

With work so meaningless, the struggle against work has become vital. In the factories, schools, hospitals, there is a growing opposition - claimants organising is just one small part of this.

Next issue Women. Strikers. Pensioners. Welfare State. Practical points. What happened to the C.U.?

INTRODUCTION

Claimants Unions have been just one part of the life of people claiming social security or dole for some years now. In most towns they've been unstable, usually for the same reasons as claimants find life a struggle. This article tries to look at some of those reasons and makes a few modest suggestions as to what to do.

SOME OF THE PROBLEMS

If you're a pensioner it's really hard to live on the pittance they allow you after a full life of work, fighting in two wars, bringing up children and so on. It's also hard to get together and force through changes. Similarly, a mother on her own is expected to rely on this tiny allowance for years and years. Many people add to their income by getting a job on the side, taking in unofficial lodgers fixing the electricity meter and many more things (which it would be unwise to detail here). And who can blame us?

Families who live in clearance areas and rely on friends to pass on the word about a good bargain at the market find such friendship harder to come by on new estates. Most men on the dole are whisked off to a poorly-paid job after a while, otherwise their money is stopped.

Not everyone is pushed out of work. Many choose the dole as a rejection of work, a way of getting freedom, just like in many factories when 'little accidents' sometimes give everyone a breather.

EXTENDING THE FIGHT

Long before CUs existed, claimants were getting stoppy at the offices and asking friends to back them up. CUs just tried to make this fight more effective. All of the above reasons hint at why that's been difficult. (Nottingham CU suffered from exactly these problems). Failing to face up to these problems is why many CUs have been weak. Why is it that most activists are men when most claimants are women? Even though the officials behind the counter are 'ordinary people' they have sometimes taken militant action against claimants. Very few or black people have taken part in CUs. Why? (school-leavers)

On the other hand, CUs made many positive contributions. Successful collective action usually develops after regular meetings since these encourage friendship and trust and allow information to be shared and tactics to be worked out. On home visits, officials often have to face not the fearful claimant they expected but several confident claimants knowing exactly what they want and believing it right they should get it. Social security offices are usually dreary places with a lot of fed up people waiting and a blazing row going on at the counter now and then. CUs occasionally liven things up a bit, forcing much more from the DHSS and helping every claimant into a better mood.

Social Security Sex Snoopers (sniffing for Cohabitation) had their noses put out of joint by a CU campaign against them a few years ago. Single and married strikers can benefit from CU knowledge of claiming whilst on strike. Many more claimants now know that clothing grants and other 'exceptional needs' grants can be claimed as often as you need them.

HOW DID THIS ALL BEGIN....?

As long ago as 1598, the State took a hand in keeping a check on the poor and unemployed. The 'Act for the Relief of the Poor' followed riots which threatened the 'peace': that is, the system's plans for forcing people from the land into the towns. 'The Act' was to prevent 'beggary and theft'. Since then, the amount of State interference has increased enormously so that after the Second World War a huge 'Welfare State' came in. The Welfare State has never been for the welfare of the people. It was introduced to try and iron out crises like the 1930s, regulating the labour market, guiding families into new housing estates, maintaining pensioners, the disabled and unemployed at a low level.

Churchill explained it: "There is no better investment than pumping milk into new-born babies". The State invented Social Security for its own security. To stop 'riots' they give 'rights'.

FACING UP TO THE CRISIS

Now the whole system is in crisis and despite what the employers, State and 'orthodox trade unions' tell us, it can only be solved at their expense OR at ours. Their strategy is to give us less money and to shift 'their' money from lame ducks (like the hosiery industry) to 'winners' (like Oil-related industry) Our problem is to maintain an adequate living income whether they make us redundant, put us on short time or use inflation to make our wages, pensions, social security and dole buy less. Any sort of claimants organisation will have to face up to this.

For example, the dole can force someone to accept a badly-paid job by the threat of cutting off their money. Then, they can keep them in that job by the Industrial Misconduct Rule which means you lose the first six weeks dole if you walk out of work. In Southend, the CU and workers from a local factory occupied the Employment Exchange and had a poorly paid job taken off the books. It was a victory for everyone because the claimants couldn't be forced into that job and the workers were able to keep their wage level up. How can there be more active contact between claimants and workers like this?

Many women do two jobs, housework and out-at-work. The second job brings more money into the household and some personal and financial independence for the women. Redundancies often push women out first. At the same time cutbacks are taking place in schools, hospitals, housing and so on, while prices continue to rise. This all makes the housewives job harder. Any claimants organisation will need to pay particular attention to this problem.

One particular campaign which needs to be launched in Nottingham is over Exceptional Needs Grants. The DHSS have recently been insisting that these payments become loans, and so have been cutting down the weekly allowance until it's paid back. Perhaps, all those who realise that this is everybodys problem can get together and do something about it.

Keith Venables OCTOBER 1975

SECTION 4 A LETTER TO NOTTINGHAM VOICE (NOVEMBER 1975)

"Dear Nottingham Voice,

There does indeed seem to be some dispute whether a Claimants Union actually exists in Nottingham at the moment, and as a claimant who was active at the inception of the CU some four years ago, perhaps I can clear up some basic points that even now some people still seem unclear on.

CUs took a positive step towards organising unemployed workers. Organised and run by the unemployed workers themselves, the CU took up the fight at the most basic level. By providing representation for claimants, by making claimants aware of their rights and conducting a struggle against many injustices, they filled an essential role.

This 'unionisation' of the unemployed is an important factor in combatting demoralisation of the unemployed. However, a CU must not restrict itself to fighting the cases of individual claimants, important as that may be. Unemployment cannot be defeated without political action and that means that the CU must explain not only the causes of unemployment to its members but actively involve them in all the political and industrial struggles against all unemployment policies. This clearly highlights the need for united action with the employed. But to talk of unity of the employed and the unemployed is meaningless unless there is an actual organisation of the unemployed that the organised labour movement can unite with. And this is precisely the role filled by the CU in Nottingham in the early 70s. The 1972 miners' strike is perhaps the best example of this: for the duration of the strike meetings were 60-70 strong, with mass claims being organised jointly by the CU and the strikers. So successful was this action that not only did the CU receive large donations from the miners, but when the next miners' strike occurred the miners were not slow in contacting the CU.

