

PUBLIC SERVICE WORKERS' NETWORK

CHAOS IN THE COMMUNITY

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TORY VISION

The effects of the Tory vision are clearly taking shape. Social services are pressurised to buy the cheapest service. Each privatised service competes, to provide the most knock-down price, or to corner a specialised section of the market, very much like the NHS internal market. The Government's nightmare of having to provide decent care for the increased population of old people is thus avoided, as those without a place are literally made homeless.

The buck for making cuts is also passed down closer to workers and users. Managers are already coming to union reps, expecting them to help decide where to make cuts. If a user needs a particular service, for example someone with Cerebral Palsy needing physiotherapy once a week, it is now a matter of money up front. If a user doesn't have money of their own, or if they don't have a social worker to purchase it on their behalf, or if it's near the end of the financial year and the department's budget is spent up - then it's tough shit, you don't get your physiotherapy. NHS workers and patients will recognise the parallels. Maybe

day centres will start offering "Buy now, pay April" or "send TWO clients, get one FREE" deals to social workers. Perhaps McDonalds could sponsor a particular quaint-sounding service, in return for advertising. The possibilities for free marketeers are endless. Apart from the private sector, social services projects will also find themselves in opposition to voluntary sector organisations. Such organisations could quickly undercut other services by running on a shoestring budget, few or no full time workers and a host of quick turnover, untrained volunteers. The Voluntary sector would eventually be just that - voluntary!

The Government's recent statements about their intention to slash the social services budget, betray their worry that two many working class people are living longer and therefore needing some sort of care. If they achieve their objectives, of which the Community Care Act is central, they will solve the problem by completely destroying access to free, good quality support and care for people who need it.

WHO WE ARE

Network is published by a group of militant public service workers to promote the idea of workers' self-management, and of revolutionary change in society. It is also an open forum for all public service workers to share, discuss and analyse our experiences, and to develop solutions to the problems we face. We welcome your letters, comments, articles, photos and graphics, although we cannot guarantee to publish them.

We are also seeking to network as widely as possible with like-minded workers.

We see no point in wasting our time and energy in trying to reform the existing unions, or in trying to elect more left wing leaders. We want to see workers' organisation which is not divided by union affiliations, bureaucracy or political parties, and which embraces all public service workers whether they are employed by Local Government, Health Institutions, Voluntary Organisations, or Private Contractors, on the basis of practical solidarity.

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Free

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NALGO BLEW £7M

"MOST EXPENSIVE STRIKE EVER" ENDED IN DEFEAT

At the beginning of February the NALGO strike by around 800 Newham Council workers over compulsory redundancies ended in defeat. After a year on strike the National Union leaders withdrew full strike pay effectively ending the strike. Perhaps the most costly strike ever - between £6 and £7 million - has ended with an unconditional return to work. With no back to work agreement morale is low. In every section in the Council that came out workers are almost defenceless against management's whims.

These events bring into sharp relief the seriously irresponsible behaviour of the NALGO leadership, in throwing millions of pounds at a dispute that ended in a humiliating and unnecessary defeat. It is important that we look at what went wrong so that we do not let this happen again. This is particularly important when the signs are that UNISON will probably take this approach in the future.

It is only too clear that chucking money at a dispute is not the answer. There is no substitute for solidarity at work place level.

TERRIFIED

NALGO's national leaders' agreement to full strike pay was seen as a positive show of support by many workers - at the beginning. Yet,

where did it get the dispute? Yes, the strikers were financially secure during the strike, but there were serious problems with this which actually led to the defeat.

Despite a strikers' committee meeting every day, and regular full strikers' meetings taking place, where negotiators were elected, real control of the strike was clearly in the hands of NALGO's national leaders. When their control was threatened, they used the State to defend them from the workers. At one point, police were used to "protect" the leaders at NALGO HQ.

NALGO were completely terrified that they would have their funds sequestered. When, in October, Newham Council took the union to court over the action, strikers were ordered back to work until the court case was over. In November, when workers were instructed to come out again, some refused - and scabbed - angry at how they felt manipulated and controlled by their union leaders.

VICTIMISED

Despite the full strike pay, some workers still refused to go on strike and some left the union.

Former strikers across the Council are now being victimised; appraisals are not getting done and workers are being turned down from "acting-up" posts. Scabs are being actively encouraged and promoted by management. The union

leaders bear full responsibility for this disaster. In the pursuit of defending their own rights to sit at high level negotiations, the two "commercial organisations", NALGO and Newham Council, poured millions of pounds in to a dispute that lost its direction as soon as NALGO leaders got involved on a national level.

SABOTAGE

Their priorities - defending their own negotiating rights whilst avoiding sequestration at all costs - were different from those of the strikers, who were fighting sackings and redundancies - also at all costs.

In disputes, whether strikes, boycotts, occupations, or working to rule, money can be important but is not the main priority. The year long miners strike took place without any official strike pay. The strike fund however, controlled by the strikers, became an integral part of strike support groups, but not a substitute for militant direct action and involvement of rank and file workers.

Our strength is not in how much money we can use in a dispute, it is in the strength of workers to take effective action. The teachers' boycott of tests this summer, the biggest successful mass non co-operation since the Anti-Poll Tax Campaign, is an example of complete sabotage of a dictatorial management imposition, without costing workers a penny. This form of worker - controlled, creative action is the way forward.

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SAFE IN THE STATE'S HANDS?

It is very easy to feel that public services are in a hopeless position. Everyone who works in public services by choice cares about the Service, and the prospect of further massive spending cuts and tax increases next year and after is a pretty depressing prospect.

As well as demoralising staff in their work, this has a demoralising effect on workers' confidence in our ability to defend pay and conditions as well as jobs and services.

It is no good just blaming all of this on the Conservative Government. Nor to let the Labour Party's prolonged absence from Government fool us that the end of Tory rule would herald a new era.

If public services are to have a future, we the workers who provide them must face up to the root of the problem, and not leave it up to the politicians.

Public services have been brought to crisis by cumulative effects of underfunding that go back to the last Labour Government of the 70's. We know that, apart from Health Care, the public services are not about expensive equipment but about people.

With millions on the dole it is tragic that people go uncared for, for want of staff.

Clearly we are only in this mess because of the price put on everything by the society we live in. This is not just a question of money, however. We cannot see where adequate finance for public services would come from within the present system.

When politicians talk about the state of the economy they mean the total monetary value of turnover and profits from industry, from trade and from the money markets. The higher the turnover, the higher the Government's income from taxes. The underlying cause of the austerity measures first introduced by the last Labour government under Callaghan, and made the bedrock of Government policy by the Tories, has been the decline of manufacturing industry in Britain. This decline has come about because the money markets are international, and they invest where there will be the biggest return on investment. Obviously, the biggest profits are made by investing in Third World countries

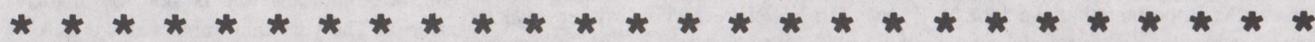
where costs, particularly labour costs, are cheapest.

There is no longer any economic base to support the welfare state. Therefore, in order to survive and develop, public services need to escape the insane straight jacket of capitalist finances.

This is why we believe that public service workers, indeed all workers, should adopt forms of organisation that seek to change society and not to merely bargain for better pay and conditions.

This may appear unrealistic but it is more realistic than believing that there is any long term future for the welfare state within present society.

If public services based on need, and not on making money, are to survive the end of large-scale state provision we have to look forward and not backward. As we say elsewhere in this issue, we advocate workers self-management of society. We believe that all workers must develop organisations that reflect the society we want to live in. We must organise without hierarchies. We must unite all workers in decision making and action, and assert the sole right of workers to determine how services can be provided, and under what conditions.



CCT - AN ISSUE FOR ALL HOUSING WORKERS

Within the next 5 years, almost all Local Authority (LA) housing workers will see their jobs go out to tender. The effects of this can already be seen, as management "get tough" in order to cut costs. Some authorities are contemplating wholesale transfers to Housing Associations (HA), for example Bromley transferred their entire stock to Bromleigh Housing Association. CCT has already been discredited as a means of lowering costs in such areas as refuse collection. So we need to dig a little deeper for the reasons it is being introduced. If we look at CCT's

effects, it is clear they are twofold. A further fragmentation of social housing provision, and an attack on housing workers' pay and conditions. The lack of any opposition from Labour councils means the former is a foregone conclusion. But what about our pay and conditions?

Make no mistake, it is not just council workers' terms at stake. HAs will be expected to make realistic bids for running LA stock if they are to continue to get government funding. HA management costs per unit are a lot higher than councils', and there will

inevitably be pressure on them to cut costs. And who pays for that? - us workers, regardless of who we work for.

But if we can survive the run-up to the tendering process, CCT can potentially put us in a more powerful position. Small contracts, whether functional, like rent accounting, or geographical, like estate management, will all have penalty clauses in them. Action around, say, rent collection, which is likely to have steep penalties levied by the Local Authority "client", will soon bring any "contractor" to heel, whether that contractor is the council, a HA or a spiv from the local estate agents.

PRIVATE HEALTH — 18,000 MANAGERS CAN'T BE WRONG!

We are all only too aware of the effects of government "reforms" on the NHS. Thousands of health service and nursing jobs are being lost, wards are closing and specialist units disappearing as the NHS internal market takes it toll. No matter what Virginia Bottomley would have us believe, NHS funding is being slashed and the trust hospitals' finances are in a mess. All of which has left many of us working in the NHS wondering what the 18,000 managers employed on the Trusts are up to!

BLEAK

The situation for nurses in NHS hospitals has been bleak, to say the least, for the last few years. Newly qualifying nurses are finding no jobs available and many others are leaving the NHS because of poor morale and low wages. The 1.5% pay offer made to all public service workers is a sick joke but what is worse is the Royal College Of Nursing's acceptance of the offer "under protest". The RCN's impotency in such matters is legendary. (How long will it be before the membership give up the idea that RCN's no strike policy can defend their interests?)

PROJECT 2000

Finances are so bad that some hospitals are asking staff to contribute their 1.5% pay rise to help bail them out of crisis. For student nurses there is to be

no wage rise at all for the foreseeable future. Under the project 2000 system of nurse training students get a fixed bursary (grant) for all 3 years of of their training and get nothing extra for working unsocial hours. Trusts strapped for cash are imposing huge rent increases on students and nurses in their residences. Some trusts are also looking at the possibility of selling off their nurses' accommodation altogether, or of renting out the rooms privately, leaving the student nurses to fend for themselves. In high rent areas such as London this will make it impossible for student nurses to survive on their present bursary.

SPRINGING UP

There is a real need for nurses to have an active role in shaping the NHS. Campaigns are springing up in hospitals all over the country and nurses put in intolerable situations are saying enough is enough.

With the advent now of the Community Care Act and its woeful underfunding, the future of community nursing is now under serious threat. The Tories' "plans" for the NHS are so confusing and contradictory as to be impossible to predict what is going to happen next. In terms of community nursing, their idea of choice is to give total control to GP's and fundholding practices. For district nurses and health visitors this is a disaster as they are finding their jobs disappearing. What with fundholding GP's having the option

of 'purchasing' health visiting services or doing it themselves and district health authorities cutting district nursing jobs and downgrading remaining staff. The Tories say they have a commitment to primary health care, and the role of health visitors and district nurses (that's their official policy in the 'Health of the Nation' document) yet they have also said they wish to cut by 50% and district nurses (that's their official policy in the 'Health of the Nation' document) yet they have also said they wish to cut by 50% the number of nurses working in the community. It isn't hard to see the real reason behind the NHS and Community Care reforms. No matter how they put it *the NHS is being privatised.*

ACUTE

We have lost any semblance of control that we may have had over the NHS. It is ironic that they use the word "Trust" to try and hide the fact that our NHS is slipping away. Community nursing services are even becoming Trusts with the result that lower paid, less qualified staff will be looking after you. We cannot afford to lose the experience that exists in our communities; our hospitals won't be able to cope with the numbers of patients having to be admitted because a community based nurse wasn't there to see a problem in time. And this when we are losing acute beds in general and psychiatric hospitals. We must protect our Health Service. Our jobs and our health are at stake.



CHAOS IN THE COMMUNITY

Like many residential workers I served my apprenticeship on a Community Programme Scheme during the last big recession of the 80s. I remember being told what an excellent profession this was to get into since care work - particularly with the elderly - was the boom industry of the future. It was argued that the number of elderly was yet to increase at an astonishing rate towards the end of the century, and somebody was going to have to look after them. People could see that Manufacturing Industry was on the decline - that was the reason we were all on Government Schemes - instead we would become a nation of carers.

INCREASED NEED

However, we were reckoning without the logic of Capitalism. And we were not the only people aware of the demographic changes that were to occur. How was a government committed to keeping public spending low going to cope with the increase in the number of people needing care?

The answer to this question was the 1989 White Paper - "Caring for people" - which resulted in the implementation of the Community Care Act this year.

FILLED TO BURSTING

In the run up to the Community Care Act, on April 1st, workers bore the brunt of the panic and indecision that managers faced. In order to ensure guaranteed funding, residential resources in the Independent Sector were filled to bursting point with clients often rushed in, bypassing referral procedures, often inappropriately placed and increasing the workload of residential workers.

COSH

The Community Care Act has also been used as a cosh to hit workers with, keeping wage demands down by threatening homes with closure.

As the effects of the Act continue to be felt, it is important that workers in both the statutory and independent sector share our experience.

In this first of a series of articles on Community Care, we hope to begin this process. Only by communicating, can we share our experiences of the Act, how to survive it and how to go on to fight the effects it has on both workers and users.



ACT STICKS THE BOOT IN

The government is relentlessly attacking the public sector, undermining our ability to provide decent person-centred services. The Community Care Act, which came into force in April, hits every part of the care industry and sticks the boot right in to workers and users of services. Below we look at the current chaos in community care. We also start to outline a strategy to build workers' resistance.

SWINGING CUTS

The new rules under the Act stipulate that 85% of the funding from social services must be spent in the independent (private or voluntary) sector. A survey, in May, by the Privatisation Research Unit run by public sector unions, gives an indication of the immediate effects of this. It found that over 500

old people's homes had been closed or privatised in the run up to the changes. Before April, social service departments made unprecedented swingeing cuts in their budgets. A Guardian survey concluded recently that in the run up to the Act, old people's homes were being hived off or closed, day nurseries shut, and charges for home helps and meals on wheels introduced or increased sharply - all in response to the Act. Many departments admitted that they were cutting direct provision for people with learning disabilities and that grants to voluntary groups were being massively reduced.

Now that the Act has been in force for a few months, we can see the disastrous direction in which it is forcing community care.

The main cause of the chaos now reigning in community care is the uncontrolled panic by managers, at the financial implications of the Act; that each project will compete financially in a "deregulated" market-place environment. Cost-cutting is now the only aim for every care service manager. The penalty for failing to make cuts could be that the project collapses and a cheaper employer takes over. This is already a reality. In May, the National Care Homes Association concluded that elderly and disabled people are not being referred to private homes, and many are facing bankruptcy. The cheapest (i.e. most badly run) places are raking in the profits, threatening to put everything else "out of business". In fact, at the moment, there is something of a boom in low-rate profit making projects. This shows clearly the immediate agenda - to cut back on wages and conditions and on the level of care available.

MARKETING THE CARE INDUSTRY

Nicholas Ridley well known as an enemy of the welfare state said that town councils should meet twice a year - to allocate contracts. Shortly before he popped off and significantly, shortly before the Community Care Act came into force, he confirmed that he was not joking. This Thatcherite vision of hundreds of small businesses competing, undercutting and fighting each other for contracts to provide "care", is certainly no joke. The immediate effects of the Act show that the radical Tory Right are perfectly serious.

Many of us working in care projects - whether run by social services, charities or housing associations - have experienced major changes in the political climate at the workplace level. As well as the constant implementation of cuts, there is a new ruthlessness towards those who speak out. With powerless and almost completely ineffective trade unions, managers have steamrollered an approach closely resembling that of running a workhouse.

NEW JOBS AND NEW JARGON

Many social workers are being re-titled "Care managers", and a large part of their job will be to "purchase" a "package" of Care from "provider units" on behalf of customers.

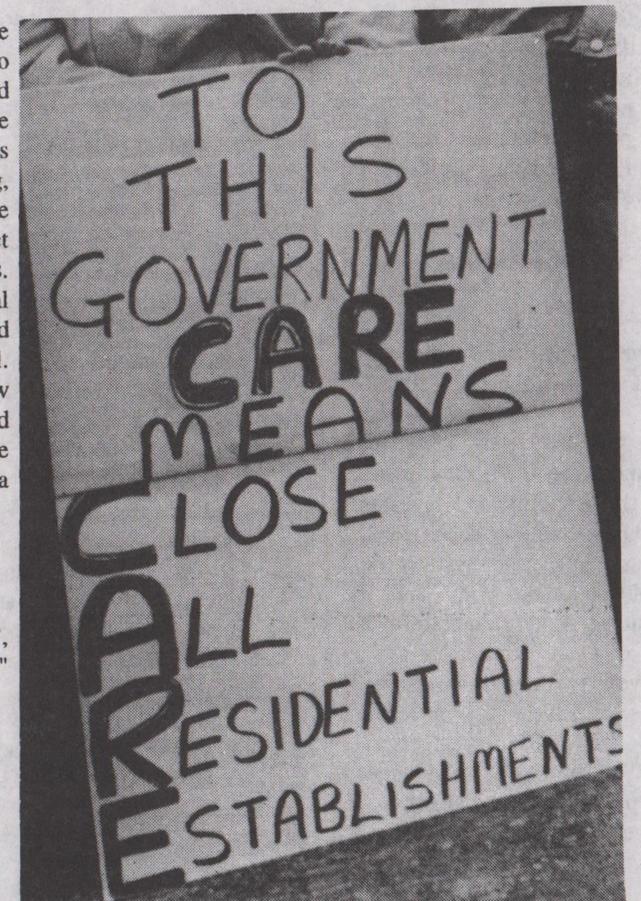
RESISTING THE MARKETTEERS
In the next issue, we'll look at how workers can resist the attacks brought about by the Community Care Act.

Confused? You will be. This new profit-orientated community care-speak reflects the new role of social workers, and the expectation that they will put money before needs, in their decisions.

LESS CHOICE FOR USERS

Far from empowering users, as the Government argues, decision-making and choice is actually taken further out of their hands. Legal challenges by users, many, people with learning difficulties, have highlighted the conflict between profit and needs. A case which recently went to the High Court involved a man with a learning disability disputing Avon County Council's decision not to pay for him to live in a hostel that had been recommended by a review panel, and to send him to one that was £3000 cheaper. This was shortly after the much criticised Whitehall circular to authorities advising them not to tell people what their assessed needs are, in case they cannot meet them financially. Local authorities are falling in line, in this prioritising of finance over people's needs. Tower Hamlets Social Services Department, in East London, have produced a draft application form for people seeking community care, stating that the council sees itself as being under no obligation to provide care for those of whom there is a "likely risk of harm in the future". Neither will they commit themselves to caring for a person (who) is unable to care for themselves most of the time.

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RECLAIMING POLITICS FROM THE POLITICIANS

We note that earlier this year the Labour Party refused to support one-day strikes by rail, London bus, and mine workers. When pressed by the Tories to condemn or support the strikes, the Labour leadership said nothing, hoping no-one would notice. Behind the scenes, however, they informed the unions involved that they were not pleased because the strikes might alienate "public opinion".

Such an attitude from the Labour Party should shock few trade unionists. NALGO, the largest of the three founders of the massive UNISON, was not affiliated to Labour - partly because of its peculiar origins as a staff association, partly because the Labour Party is very often the boss in Local Government, and frequently scapegoats its white-collar members as "middle-class" as part of the divide-and-rule strategy used to defeat unions in this sector. When the question of the Labour Party affiliation and Political Funds for the new UNISON is put to a ballot, an independent Political Fund is the most likely outcome.

INCAPABLE

Most people who might in the past have supported or joined the Labour Party - in the heady days of the GLC and the fight against rate-capping, say - have now lapsed into apathy and a sense of powerlessness over the political questions surrounding public services. (A tiny minority might see the Marxist sects who orbit the Labour Party and the trade unions, denouncing reformists, bureaucrats and "traitors", as an alternative). We regard no political party as capable of representing workers' interests whether as workers or as those who need and use public services, but we see public service worker's

organisation as having a political dimension.

We regard the trades unions' practice of leaving "politics" to political parties (even NALGO subscribed to a version of Labour's social democracy) as weakening their response to attacks on our services and our organisation. Disputes about pay and conditions at work usually have a political undercurrent, or take on political overtones. A "simple" dispute about break times may turn out to be about "management's right to manage"; the miners' strike of 1984-85 rapidly became not just a fight against pit closures, but a fight against the state's attempt to smash the miners as the cornerstone of the trade union movement. Similarly, the 1989 Local Government pay strike was really about the threatened introduction of individual contracts, performance-related pay, the right to hire and fire, and the end of collective bargaining over pay and conditions.

CLASS STRUGGLE

By limiting themselves to pay and conditions, and leaving politics to the Labour Party, the trade unions have not only made the mistake of not regarding these issues as part of a wider class struggle, but have also limited their own power and ability to defend themselves. Hence, instead of responding to the widely recognised Tory strategy of taking on the trade unions industry by industry with a movement-wide campaign they limited themselves to defending jobs in each individual industry attacked since 1979. These attacks are continuing with the spread of compulsory tendering and privatisation. Where is the united response to the similar attacks on Education, Local Government and the Health Service?



Our aim in the Public Service Workers' Network is to lay the foundations, and establish the idea, of a workers' movement where political issues affecting workers both in the workplace and outside are tackled in the workplace, and across the wider working class movement in the case of the broader issues. We are independent of all political parties because we see the separation of the "political" issues from the traditional concerns of workers' organisations as weakening our response in both areas of concern.

The answer does not lie in waiting in vain for a Labour Government committed to rescuing public services, but the questions of how we defend our working conditions and the services we work in, and how we make the latter responsive to the needs of working people remain to be answered. We believe the answers lie in workers' self-management and a society organised from the bottom up, without hierarchies and power structures geared to the interests of privileged classes. If you agree with, or are sympathetic to these aims then we want to hear from you.

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT EMPIRE BUILDING AGAINST ALL ODDS

Ever heard of "Quality Improvement", also known as "Total Quality Management" (TQM)? If you haven't, you probably will soon. This is the latest hyped-up management fad, originally imported to British manufacturing in the '80's, now picked up by management in public services for their own use.

The core idea is "get it right first time, every time", and avoid costly mistakes, and the cost of correcting mistakes. A superficially appealing idea, especially to those of us plagued by idiot managers who have no idea what a service involves, dream up grandiose schemes to "improve" services for their own glorification, and dismiss constructive criticism as "negative", or even, in my experience, "subversive". Unfortunately, it is the very same idiots who are advocating this - the incompetents devising "solutions" to the problems caused by their incompetence.

It boils down to a public relations exercise, the propaganda offensive that "quality" of service is improving even though the dastardly Tory government is cutting funding, necessitating reductions in "quantity" of service. This "less is more" doublethink celebrates a supposedly improved service, even though it is miles away from most of the people who need it, and vastly over-subscribed to the point of inaccessibility. TQM fits into this pattern by allowing the Virginia Bottomley clones to point to a programme and expenditure devoted to "improving quality". Only negative-minded subversives could be against improved quality, after all.

TQM has been around long enough in industry for its impact to be assessed, so anyone seduced by the idea can actually look at the results. Last year the Economist Intelligence Unit published a survey called "Making Quality Work - Lessons From Europe's Leading Companies", which concluded that "Total Quality programmes..... are, at best, ineffective. At worst they inoculate against real change." The programmes

involve making targets which have to be met - remember the object is to make no mistakes, that is an article of faith. Since targets are going to be ones managers are pretty certain of meeting, they are not going to be particularly ambitious. TQM will not be applied to difficult, risky, improved targets, but to more easily met existing, or even reduced targets. The "inoculation" referred to is the illusion that merely meeting targets represents an improvement in "quality".

"For the workers who provide and use services this is just the latest means of denying the validity of our experience."

In my experience, in a local authority where £300,000 is now to be devoted to applying TQM to all departments, and to adapting it from the American-business original to something more in tune with local government in Britain, any and every "improvement" will be attributed to TQM. This included a starting point of complete chaos following a disastrous restructuring where, for once, things really could only get better; the restructuring created a unit to develop the service which had no connection with TQM, and which had been conceived of years before, which was responsible for any improvements; programmes unrelated to TQM and still in progress were treated as if already successful and credited to it; the results of surveys of limited numbers of unspecified staff (i.e. Senior Management) on the impact of TQM, which were mixed or negative, were presented as positive and "inconclusive". Where workers sat down and "used TQM techniques" to

assess the problems of our actual work situation, which meant common sense dressed up in approved terminology, we identified problems and solutions easily enough. Nothing has actually been done about the problems which were soluble without spending lots more money, let alone the ones that need finance. TQM has remained an expensive irrelevance to service provision, in spite of staff suppressing their cynicism about it, but has been declared a success by those in whose interests it is to do so.

Chief Officers in local government, and their equivalents elsewhere, owe their fat, expanding, salaries and perks to the illusion that they are responsible for providing services. In the present climate of declining and collapsing services, "successes" have to be found for them to take credit for and justify their existence. Politicians also need something to con the voters with, and for Labour-controlled local authorities the problems are particularly acute. Years of simply blaming the government for everything (whilst meekly doing the Tories' dirty work) have left them with a desperate need to take credit for something, to be "positive", "responsible", "electable". TQM could be an invaluable tool in this quest, something with which to impress existing or prospective employers, or the party hierarchy. For one individual at least in the authority I work for it could be the foundation of a new empire.

For the workers who actually provide and use public services, rather than the classes who live off our efforts, this is just the latest means of denying the validity of our experience. NETWORK is a forum for public service workers to share and analyse our experiences, and to come up with ideas and methods of fighting the domination of our services, and of society, by parasites. We are not willing slaves to our exploitation, but if we want to be free we have to identify our chains and throw them off.