

Aims and principles of the Direct Action Movement

- (1) The Direct Action Movement is a working class organisation,
- (2) Our aim is the creation of a free and classless society.
- (3) We are fighting to abolish the state, capitalism and wage slavery in all their forms and replace them by self-managed production for need not profit.
- (4) In order to bring about the new social order, the workers must take over the means of production and distribution. We are the sworn enemies of those who would take over on behalf of the workers.
- (5) We believe that the only way for the working class to achieve this is for independent organisation in the workplace and community and federation with others in the same industry and locality, independent of, and opposed to all political parties and trade union bureaucracies. All such workers organisations must be controlled by the workers themselves and must unite rather than divide the workers movement. Any and all delegates and representatives of such workers organisations must be subject to immediate recall by the workers.
- (6) We are opposed to all States and State institutions. The working class has no country. The class struggle is worldwide and recognises no artificial boundaries. The armies and police of all States do not exist to protect the workers of those States, they exist only as the repressive arm of the ruling class.
- (7) We oppose racism, sexism, militarism and all attitudes and institutions that stand in the way of equality and the right of all people everywhere to control their own lives and the environment.

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"WHEN YOU COME IN YOU WANT TO JOIN A UNION BECAUSE YOU NEED PROTECTION: YOU MUST HAVE SOMETHING BEHIND YOU. IT'S AN INSURANCE."

Those words, by a woman shop steward in NUPE, sum up what many people feel about union membership - that it can safeguard jobs and working conditions and preserve, or even improve, workers' standards of living through action on wages and other benefits. It is argued that women, whose jobs are so often the first to go when redundancies are called for and whose wages and conditions (despite Equal Pay legislation) are among the poorest, are in special need of the protection Trade Union membership is supposed to offer and should be encouraged to be active in their unions.

In fact, compared to men, women are less likely to be union members and very much less likely to take an active part in union affairs. Women, it seems, have special problems which combine to prevent their participation. Because of this they lack the influence within unions to do something about their problems and thus a vicious circle is formed, with both sides growing apathetic if not actually hostile. The question usually asked is, how can women overcome the obstacles excluding them from playing a full role in TUs. A more relevant one might be, is it in fact worth their while.

BRITISH TRADE UNIONS TODAY

Out of a workforce of 20 million people, the TUC has a membership of approximately 13 million. This seems like a position of immense strength but what have the unions achieved by it? Every year wage rises lag behind price increases. Every year the intolerable level of unemployment rises further. At present the government and the bosses are carrying out a savage assault on working-class living standards: as wage increases diminish and the threat of the dole queue looms nearer, spending on services that many people find vital is remorselessly axed. Yet many firms make record profits while the government certainly isn't short of cash

when it comes to spending on weaponry or giving tax reductions to big business. What has the 13 million strong TUC done about that?

They have aaid, wait for an election and work for a Labour victory and they have used considerable sums of their members' money to that end (Unions are the biggest source of Labour Party finance) and yet when the Labour Party is in power, where does it get us? We see exactly the same attack on living standards, the same growing unemployment and cuts in services, for the simple reason that (as Labour politicians would be the first to admit, if they were honest enough) putting the Labour Party into parliament makes no difference at all to what really happens in the real world, where the bosses continue to make the biggest possible profit out of other people's labour.

The union leaders know that there's only one way to put a stop to this situation and that is to eliminate the bosses and their foul system altogether but this can only come about through united action by working people themselves and there is no room in that kind of struggle for the greedy bureaucrat seeking advancement of her/his own career. Hence the union leadership carry on, alternately bolstering up the present system (whoever plays host to them in No 10) or, when pressure from below grows too great, reluctantly giving half-hearted support to workplace struggles.

SEXISM WITHIN TRADE UNIONS

If we take a closer look, from a woman's point of view, at the unions, we see evidence of a mass of sexist practice. At TUC level, there is the TUC Charter, a 10-point document aimed at giving women an equal voice in their unions. This seems very praiseworthy but much of it reads like bureaucratic waffle. Where practical matters are mentioned (eg paid time off for branch meetings, good childcare arrangements) the Charter contains good common-sense but what a pity that so often only lip-service is paid to these recommendations. The same

applies to point 10, which emphasises that union publications should avoid sexist presentation - while the NUM uses pin-up girls to advertise its papers.

Lower down the union hierarchy evidence that some form of sexism operates lies in the figures for female membership of union executives. For example, APEX has 51% female membership but only 7% of the executive are women; in USDAW - 63% women members - only 19% of the executive are female. Of course it is possible to argue that women simply don't want to be union careerists but more realistic to assume that they don't get the chance, since they participate far less at branch level.

The policies of unions towards women on even such purely T U issues as wages leaves a lot to be desired. Did you know, for instance, that between 1970 and '75, when the Equal Pay Act was being phased in, one survey reported that in 60% of all cases unions were actually helping managements devise job evaluation schemes to prevent equal pay? What about union pressure to make part-time workers redundant before full-timers? Everyone knows the vast majority of part-timers is female. If TUs are as anit-sexist as they's have us believe, why do they negotiate pay rises on a percentage basis, maintaining or increasing differentials so as to leave low-paid (mostly female) workers stuck at the bottom of the ladder? Why do we still hear talk of the "family wage" and suggestions that when jobs are scarce the married women should be sacked first?

All this reflects women's lack of influence in unions. One survey found that at branch level fewer women attend meetings, men are twice as likely to vote in union elections or go on strike, 3 times as likely to make a proposal at a meeting or become a local official, 4 times as likely to serve as a shop steward or stand on a picket line.

Reasons for this aren't hard to find. When asked, women union members in Hull gave 3 main types of problem as reasons for lack of participation: to start with their

domestic responsibilities - the heavy unpaid workload many women return home to when men are putting their feet up - often make it impossible to attend meetings outside working hours, sometimes inconvenient places and usually without childcare facilities.

Secondly, was a feeling that the way unions are run, with their remote and complex power structures, is difficult to understand; not enough information about unions is available. They can be hard to identify with, especially for women isolated in small workplaces.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, many women feel excluded from union affairs by the male members and don't have the confidence to challenge this. Men in unions can be patronising or hostile to women, especially newcomers. Sometimes meetings or the important discussions after them are held in pubs and bars, places where women can be made to feel awkward and unwelcome. It's often harder for a woman to get up and have her say in front of others simply because of the way women are brought up, the way we are expected to behave. It doesn't seem feminine to be militant and femininity is something we are taught from the cradle to value.

All these factors can be alleviated by action within the unions, such as baby-sitting rotas, educational courses and special women's committees. But this sort of action cannot solve the problem encountered by women because it doesn't aim at the root of it all - the fact that the society we live in is ruthlessly divisive: to protect capitalism from a united onslaught by exploited workers it will always present them with a false conflict of interest - whether between black and white, skilled and unskilled or men and women. If the unions are ultimately committed to maintaining this system, surely it is expecting too much to ask them to do such a revolutionary thing as to challenge their own sexism and that of their members.

SPECIAL PROBLEMS OR SPECIAL INSIGHTS?

All this sounds so far as if women workers are merely victims of special problems - "women's issues". In some ways this is true - low pay, poor job security, the 2nd "40 hours" are definitely problems. But another way of looking at this is to see women as people with certain differences which in fact give them a clearer view of problems, which are not theirs alone but everyone's. For example, women bear the main burden of responsibility for childcare; it generally means long hours of unpaid, unrecognised work. This is everyone's problem not just women's, because children are the most precious resource held by society - its present and future members. Similarly, the care of the old which increasingly falls on the shoulders of unpaid women at home - after all we will all grow old eventually. These aspects of women's role affect both their careers and their pattern of union membership because they often mean women are not in paid employment while they undertake them. Thus they are neglected by TUs as not being workers.

Not only does this attitude ignore the needs both of women and other workers, it also ignores the huge contribution they could make and leaves their experience and skills undiscovered. An example of this is the idea that many women in jobs involving the care of others (a traditionally female sphere) lack militancy because they are reluctant to strike when this might affect the well-being of patients, clients etc. Yet these people can, given the chance, devise other, equally effective, forms of industrial action (eg offering free treatment or drugs, which hurts the employer not the patient) which we could all learn from.

REVOLUTIONARY UNIONISM

For everyone's sake, women need recognition of these concerns by organisations which have the industrial power available to strongly organised workers. The strength of organised labour as a whole class, whether in the workplace or the community outside, can best be expressed by a single movement embracing everyone's interests - not

just people with one particular job or skill in competition with other workers (as do present-day unions). At the same time it is vital to avoid elaborate power structures and monolithic bureaucracy - decisions must be taken directly by those affected by them: everyone should have a voice. Only an organisation with a revolutionary perspective can combat the oppression encountered (particularly by women) outside the workplace as well as the exploitation within it. Only this kind of movement can link problems like dangerous or unavailable contraception, low wages, poor safety standards at work, unemployment etc and unite workers to bring down the entire system and replace it with something better. A rather different aim from that of the TUC perhaps but the only one that can remedy our oppression as women and as workers, along with all other forms of oppression.

This kind of unionism, aiming not to take over the power of the bosses and the state but to abolish them totally and employing direct action (eg strikes, work-ins, refusals to collect fares, are only a few of the forms this can take) rather than handing over power to any political party (however "revolutionary") is called anarcho-syndicalism. It seeks to establish a classless society, with no need of a repressive state apparatus (eg government, police, armed forces) but organised instead without leaders, through self-management in the workplace and the community. In such a society production would fulfill human need instead of the demand of capital for endless profit. The true value of work would be recognised and we would have freedom - real economic freedom - to choose how we run our own lives.

Over the last 60 years anarcho-syndicalist movements have organised internationally in the International Workers' Association. The British section of the IWA is the Direct Action Movement. You will find our aims and principles on the back of this pamphlet. We welcome enquiries from any women or men interested in finding out more about the DAM and our local branch can be contacted via the address below.

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