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# **SolFed**

**an introduction**

**to solidarity federation**

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**SolFed - an introduction  
SolFed Booklets, 1998**



## Foreword

The world is in a mess.

The starting point for sorting this out is to **get to the root of the problem.**

Once we have a good idea of what this is, we can develop an idea of how **things can be better.**

But this isn't enough. Things will not magically improve just because we know what's wrong and how things could be better. It is going to take a lot of hard work and effort to bring about the necessary changes, before we can **all** have a **decent quality of life.**

A lot of hard work has already gone into various social movements over the years – to little avail in many cases. The pitfalls are many and the opportunities often seem few.

In this briefest of introductions, it is argued that the single most important key to the door of a better society is **solidarity.**

Clearly, it is not as simple as getting on better with each other – but our coming together for a common cause is a **crucial start.**



## Failure of the system?

For much of the world's population, the failure of the current system is self-evident. 800 million people go hungry on a daily basis. Common illnesses such as measles claim millions of children's lives. Disease, poverty and war are a way of life for over half of the world's population.

Here in Britain, the picture is not exactly rosy either. Gross inequality is rife – 8% of people control 80% of the country's assets. Our social ills – unemployment and low pay, poor health, homelessness and bad housing, all of which steadily declined after the Second World War, are back with a vengeance as the turn of the century approaches.

Even for those in work, the ever-present threat of redundancy looms. Job security is a thing of the past. Free access to education and health is also rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Meanwhile, to be elderly, a single parent, unemployed or impoverished is to be stigmatised as a 'burden' on the rest of society.

The politicians, who are supposed to represent us, are increasingly looking after the interests of the rich. They tell us it is the natural order of things. There is no alternative. We must live with the 'reality' of competing in the global market place.

Constantly being told there is no alternative, and faced with numerous problems, an overwhelming sense of powerlessness has taken hold. With this powerlessness comes a sense of insecurity. The combination of job insecurity and social insecurity combines with an ever-increasing fear of crime, leading to a breakdown of mutual trust and community spirit. We retreat into our homes.

We increasingly look to short term solutions, securing our

immediate needs with TV, shopping and other passive 'quick fixes'. What all this amounts to is a general decline in our quality of life. We no longer enjoy, we survive.

## *The heart of the problem*

What has led us into this mess? Is it 'our failing as human beings'? Is it inevitable? Clearly, we weren't always passive consumers. Clearly, we once had a sense of community and of belonging to a wider society. We once felt we were going somewhere – each generation was better off than the last. But instead of developing our sense of community and solidarity further and helping each other, we now find ourselves in a situation where we have less and less community and solidarity.

The heart of the problem is not us as individuals, but the system we are forced to live in.

Capitalism, where profit takes precedence over everything else, is the heart of the problem. It is profoundly undemocratic. A tiny number of capitalists exert real power through their ownership and control of the economy. Our basic rights to a decent life are dependent on our ability to generate an income.

It is the few who decide who gets to work for these basic rights and who doesn't. It is the few who do the hiring and firing, and determine the conditions in which we are forced to work. It is the few who decide what we do and are responsible for what is produced. It is capitalism that dictates our level of income. It dictates our working life, which in turn dictates our way of life.

With the excess profits they get from our work, capitalists have undisputed economic power. It is their needs which the media, the



politicians and the state must bow to, not ours.

However, it is not simply that we have some selfish types at the top. A few changes to key people and we'll be OK? No, it is the nature of capitalism which makes people 'have to' act in their interest and against others' and the environment. It's not a few bad people, it's a bad system. Capitalism concentrates power – in political parties, in company and state hierarchies. All this leads inevitably to misuse, mistrust and abuse.

Capitalism actually draws strength from mistrust. It relies on divide and rule tactics. False divisions are used in such circumstances to further mistrust and abuse. There is profit to be made from creating distrust and disunity. So oppression is an intrinsic part of capitalism— be it in the form of sexism, racism, homophobia, or any other.

Why do we put up with it? We are told it is the only system which is 'efficient' and which can satisfy our needs. Yet this is clearly untrue. Capitalism has historically gone through an unstable cycle of boom and bust. In the last 200 years, the longest relatively stable period was from the end of the Second World War, up to the early 1970s. Any credibility capitalism has today is based on this short period of stability and relative wealth. Even this only happened in a few areas- the less developed world remained poverty-stricken and unstable throughout.

The post-war period has now undoubtedly come to an abrupt end. The myth of social democracy, that capitalism can somehow be stabilised by the intervention of politicians for the mutual good, is now well and truly disproved. The real face of boom and bust capitalism is back, and we will now continue to pay the price. However, contrary to what we are told over and over again, there is an alternative.

## How could we live?

The capitalist belief that we are all motivated by self-interest, without consideration for others, is completely untrue. It is this fallacy above all, which sustains the system and ensures we progressively lose our sense of solidarity with each other.

In fact, humans have always co-operated and worked together. The whole of human development is based on co-operation. It was co-operation which brought about language and communication in the first place, which is the cornerstone of our civilisation. Even capitalism relies on co-operation. Workers co-operate with each other. Wage-earners co-operate with non-wage-earners. Nothing would be produced, children wouldn't be raised, if it were not for co-operation. If the capitalist ideal of self-interest were actually to replace co-operation, life would indeed be nasty, brutish and short.

Nevertheless, capitalism attacks and undermines our natural sense of solidarity. We co-operate and trust less, and this is why we have lost our sense of community, and mutual well-being. This loss is a great one. It is responsible for our feelings of powerlessness, isolation, mistrust and insecurity. It prevents us from getting together and collectively solving our problems. To do this, we must first replace capitalism with a new co-operative system based on the principle of solidarity.

This means more than just having a general feeling of unity with others. It means having a sense of being part of something bigger – the wider human race, and our surrounding environment, including where we live and the natural world. Our individual satisfaction can only be maximised by our collective co-operation in solidarity. It is only by pooling our collective resources that we can really improve our quality of



life.

We cannot predict the future – but we can start to plan and think about what this future society based on solidarity would be like. An important starting point is recognising that people are well capable of getting together and deciding what their needs are, and how the economy should be structured to meet those needs. In short, the economy will be owned and controlled by us, the producers and consumers, rather than by a handful of profiteers. This will be a vast improvement on the world we now live in, where millions are spent on soft drink adverts while people die for lack of food and basic health.

### ***Organising for the future now***

Solidarity must not remain an abstract notion, to be implemented at some future date. We must start putting it into practice now. It is only by practising solidarity NOW that we can develop the necessary CULTURE OF SOLIDARITY. Without this culture, we cannot expect our future society to materialise. In short, we must develop our new society now, inside the present one.

We start by getting together in our community, into local groups of like-minded individuals. Each group and each individual practise the principles of solidarity through their actions and their lifestyles. In these groups, there is a sense of common purpose – to build a movement to replace capitalism with a society based on our culture of solidarity. Through this movement, we will reclaim the community from its current state of decline. In short, we will develop a new and powerful sense of community through the practice of solidarity.

## **Solidarity Federation**

The above discussion illustrates the need for a movement, both to start putting the principle of solidarity into practice now, and to fight for and defend the improvements in our quality of life that this will bring. Solidarity Federation is dedicated to this end.

Solidarity Federation was formed in March 1994. Small but active and growing, it currently consists of a federation of groups and individuals across England, Scotland and Wales.

### ***Locals...***

The groups and individuals of Solidarity Federation are organised in Locals. A Local is made up of all Solidarity Federation members in their local area. In time, each Local will have a premises as a base for action in the local community. The Local is the basic building block of the Solidarity Federation. It is as simple as that.

Locals put solidarity into practice in a number of ways. Invariably, this means organising or getting involved in local campaigns across a wide range of issues – both in the community and in workplaces. Issues are wide-ranging: defending our environment and health; opposing racism, sexism and homophobia; in fact anything which defends or contributes to our mutual quality of life. All forms part and parcel of the building of a solidarity movement.

Direct Action is the tool which Locals use in all their work. At a basic level, this can be simply the spreading of information through leaflets, local bulletins and public meetings to raise awareness and involvement locally. However, Direct Action is not limited to spreading



information. It means a physical presence in defending and promoting our campaigns in communities and workplaces – anywhere where capitalists attempt to undermine our struggle for a better quality of life.

We must recognise that capitalists will not give up their hold over us easily. As we develop our new movement based on the culture of solidarity, we will inevitably come into conflict with capitalists seeking to defend their interests. We must be prepared to defend our movement.

Furthermore, fundamental to Direct Action is the reality that we can only rely on ourselves to achieve our goals. Capitalists and the state machinery (politicians, police, law courts, etc.) have an agenda to preserve the status quo, whereas we want fundamental change to it. They can therefore never act on our behalf. While we reserve the right to take opportunities to demand improvements to our quality of life now, our solidarity movement must always remain independent from those we are demanding from. If Solidarity Federation were to get involved in negotiating the agenda of those in power, we would all be furthering the very hierarchies that we are looking to replace. So we will accept neither leadership, charity, nor guidance from any external party – instead, we must couple our principle of solidarity with the practice of self-reliance.

## **Networks**

Solidarity Federation Local members who are in the same industry meet to discuss and organise around specific issues related to their industry. They also do the same with members from other Locals who are in the same industry. Through this process, members organise nationally in Networks, which include all Solidarity Federation members in the same industry. The purpose of Networks is to promote solidarity

amongst workers.

Networks also use all the tools of Direct Action at their disposal, to fight for better pay and conditions now. Network members, where applicable, may be members of Trade Unions, promoting the basic principle of solidarity within the Trade Union movement. However, the Trade Unions do not share the ultimate aim of the Networks, which is to develop a new solidarity movement. Therefore, the Networks will remain completely independent of the Trade Unions. In the longer term, Networks will promote and practise workers' self-management. Industries will be run by producers and consumers. In other words, by workers (the Networks) and people in the wider community (Locals) who want the goods and services they provide.

## **Global Solidarity**

Capitalism is international, so we need to be organised globally to oppose it and build a viable alternative. Nationalism and patriotism leads to pointless and false divisions, used as tools to fuel economic and bloody wars. Solidarity Federation opposes these in favour of a movement built on global solidarity.

Solidarity Federation is the British section of the International Workers' Association (IWA), the anarcho-syndicalist international. This gives it essential international solidarity and experience from much larger sections such as the CNT (Spain) and USI (Italy).

Founded in 1922, the IWA has sections across all continents (except Antarctica!) It has a long history of solidarity in action; by the 2nd World War over 5 million people worldwide were affiliated to the revolutionary unions. A combination of war, fascism, and soviet 'communism' all but



destroyed the movement, but after the Spanish CNT re-emerged in the late 70's, the IWA had a new lease of life. Today, there are sections ranging from a few dozen to thousands of members, and growth is rapid. At the 20th IWA Congress in Madrid in December 1996, another 7 new sections were affiliated from South America, Africa, Ireland, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

"We have always lived in slums and holes in the wall. We will know how to accommodate ourselves for a time. For, you must not forget that we can also build these palaces and cities, here in Spain and in America and everywhere. We, the workers. We can build others to take their place. And better ones. We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world here, in our hearts, and that world is growing in this minute."

Buenaventura Durruti, member of the Spanish CNT, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1936.

## Getting Involved

A global solidarity movement can only gather strength as many more people who share the same aims get involved. Joining Solidarity Federation offers the possibility of contributing to this growing momentum. It is not like joining a club or a political party – rather, it is an opportunity to channel your efforts for change and at the same time benefit yourself from the experience.

### *What joining means*

Joining Solidarity Federation means the start of a two way process. As a new member, you immediately benefit the movement by adding your support and effort to it. Experience? No previous experience necessary but activists are just as welcome as anyone else! With or without experience or deep political knowledge, everyone has something to contribute.

You will also benefit - from the experience of groups of active members across Solidarity Federation and beyond. The rich history of the IWA means there will be help, advice and solidarity on offer freely, from dedicated groups and individuals across the globe. You can practise collective skills. You can develop your view of the world and how it can be changed, by meeting people with the same aim. From this will come new perspectives and new opportunities for expressing solidarity through thought and action. It might just be worth it.

Write for details:

Solidarity Federation, PO Box 29,  
SouthWest PDO, Manchester, M15 5HW



## Further Reading

This taster booklet is brief and may leave you wanting to know more. What is anarcho-syndicalism? What is the IWA? What are Solidarity Federation doing now and where do the groups exist? For more in depth answers, read a few more tasters. Why not try out Direct Action, the Solidarity Federation Quarterly magazine, and get put in contact with your nearest group?



### *Direct Action*

- ☐ Please send me the current issue of Direct Action. £1.50
- ☐ Please sub me to 4 issues of Direct Action as a supporter. £12 (£6 low waged)

### *Contact/joining Solidarity Federation*

- ☐ Please send me more details about joining Solidarity Federation and put me in contact with my local group.

### *Tasters*

- ☐ Solidarity Federation – an outline of ideas about organisation and what we are fighting for today. Free leaflet
- ☐ Anarcho-syndicalism in Puerto Real – from shipyard resistance to direct democracy control. Contemporary struggles of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT in the Puerto Real dockyards. £1
- ☐ Anarchist Economics – an alternative for a world in crisis. Some useful pointers for a future economy based on examples from Spain in 1936-39. £1
- ☐ Anarcho-syndicalism (Rudolph Rocker). A classic introduction to the subject – written in 1938. £2.50



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