

# Flexploitation Strategies: UK Lessons for Europe

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'There is nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading. It is mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure...'

— Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*

## 1. Introduction: whose flexibility?

Labour 'flexibility' is always a relation of class struggle. Historically, such flexibility' has sometimes provided a bargaining weapon against capitalist work-discipline. Since the 1980s, however, labour has been newly flexibilized to intensify its exploitation. Often called casual labour or *precarité*, this flexploitation imposes insecurity, indignity and greater discipline (Gray, 1995).

Flexploitation also intensifies inequalities along race and gender lines. Ethnic-minority workers suffer great unemployment and greater cyclical fluctuations in employment; they are marginalized into the more insecure, subordinate jobs. So are women, especially those who need part-time work, which gives them inferior status, lower pay and less security.

A neoliberal form of flexibility has been officially justified as necessary to protect employment from competitive threats. When governments deregulate labour markets, e.g. by weakening legislation that once protected job security, employers can more readily eliminate jobs or replace workers with others on less secure contracts. They can more readily throw workers into competition with each other, thus extracting more labour at times and places more convenient for the production process, perhaps paying less wages overall than before. Such precarious 'employment' provides a strategy for intensifying work discipline and extracting more work from everyone.

Multinational companies (MNCs) have a double-edged role in flexploitation strategies. On the one hand, their size can facilitate worker resistance and so set limits on exploitation. On the other hand, their geo-political scope can facilitate the transfer of work across the globe and/or to subcontractors, thus throwing their workforce and suppliers into greater competition. Thus small-sized companies too become instruments of these pressures, e.g. as competitors or subcontractors.

Such pressures and threats are used strategically in order to discipline wage-labour. Of course, governments cite national dependence upon foreign investment as an imperative for offering incentives such as tax breaks, subsidies and deregulation of labour-market or environmental protection. Such policies have been well documented for Third World countries (e.g. Biel, 2000; Jones, 1998). Yet they operate within Western countries too, though not mainly in order to accommodate external pressures, as officially claimed.

Competition for investment or trade is not a plausible motive for labour-market deregulation, especially at the European level. In the early 1990s OECD reports accepted the link between job loss and labour-market rigidities, but later reports cast doubt on that link: 'Many labour market institutions that conventionally come under the heading of rigidities have no

observable impact on unemployment' (Nickell, 1997: 73; cited in Went, 2000: 3-5). Only approx. 10% of the European economy involves external trade (CEC, 1997a). Contrary to official policy statements, trade liberalisation is promoted in order to intensify competitive pressures, discipline labour, extract more work and thus increase profitability (De Angelis, 2000; DoD, 1999).

The real motives for labour flexibilisation can be seen by analysing the European Union and the United Kingdom in particular. This essay will argue the following points:

- EU integration has been bound up with flexploitation agendas;
- the UK has provided a Europe-wide impetus and model for them;
- some trade unions have internalised and enforced flexploitation agendas;
- resistance has in some ways gone beyond demands for waged-labour;
- a Europe-wide resistance can learn from the UK experience, and vice versa.

## **2. European Policies and Partnership**

The overall neoliberal agenda has been formulated specially by industry lobbyists from the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT), founded in 1983. The ERT promoted European Monetary Union (EMU) as a means to impose neoliberal policies. The 1991 Maastricht Treaty incorporated convergence criteria for budget deficits and inflation — limits which could be achieved only by cutting social welfare budgets, and by labour flexibilization to restrict wages and reduce unit labour costs.

To accommodate social-democratic critics of EMU, the Social Chapter offered some protection. It mandated rights regarding maternity pay, parental leave, part-time work and redundancy consultation. Even if fully implemented, however, the Social Chapter could not be used to protect overall job security.

Through the 1990s, moreover, EU labour-market policies were virtually written by industry lobbyists. The ERT had blamed labour-market rigidities for limiting European economic competitiveness and thus jeopardizing employment. It promoted deregulation as essential means to promote growth and thus expand employment.

As President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors basically accepted a neoliberal diagnosis in his 1993 White Paper on 'Growth, Competitiveness, Employment'. It counselled adaptation to inexorable competitive pressures: 'The pressure of the market-place is spreading and growing, obliging businesses to exploit every opportunity available to increase productivity and efficiency', especially through information technology. At the same time, the necessary changes could cause problems of 'exclusion', due to inadequate skills or qualifications (CEC, 1993: 92-93). The need for compensatory measures opened the way for social-democracy to collude with programmes which define social inclusion as remunerative work of any kind.

In 1995 the European Commission set up a Competitiveness Advisory Group (CAG), which included leading figures from the ERT. In 1996 its third report, *Enhancing European Competitiveness*, called for 'modernizing' the labour market through greater flexibility in working hours, wage moderation and greater labour mobility (cited in Balanyá et al., 2000).

Accordingly, EU member states sought to deregulate labour markets, partly in order to achieve the convergence criteria for EMU. Portugal's Socialist government adopted policies for annualized hours, temporary contracts and multi-skilling. The French government weakened the job security of public-sector workers.

Moreover, workfare-type measures have undermined labour protection in several EU countries, especially the UK (discussed below). France raised the proportion of welfare recipients who are required to seek work; such 'job-seekers' must attend counselling interviews and have less scope for rejecting unsuitable jobs. Germany has been creating new jobs at sub-normal wages for the unemployed, who must accept them or else lose benefit. By the late 1990s, most new employment in Spain was on fixed-term contracts, partly encouraged by subsidies for hiring the unemployed. In Italy the unemployed have been pressed to work as 'socially useful workers' on temporary contracts, often being used to privatize public services; in response, protests have demanded permanent public-sector contracts at normal pay rates.

These measures can be understood as creating 'a new social workhouse', sometimes even incorporating critics into labour intensification schemes (Aufheben, 2000). At the same time, Europe-wide social movements have sought inclusion in civil society on their own terms. In practice, they remain antagonistic towards the institutional forms of the EU and its neoliberal policies at national level (Mathers and Taylor, 1999).

The flexibilisation agenda became contentious at EU level, especially after workers' revolts in Germany and France during 1996-97. In the run-up to the June 1997 Amsterdam Summit, trade unions and Left parties proposed that the new EU treaty should include an Employment Chapter, formalizing demands for full employment. Industry lobbying weakened that proposal, so that ultimately the Employment Chapter undermined the aims of its original proponents. EU governments agreed 'to work towards developing a coordinated strategy for employment and particularly for promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce and labour markets responsive to economic change' (Amsterdam Treaty, Article 109n).

Thus the Employment Chapter incorporated the same neoliberal agenda as in other policy documents from the Amsterdam Summit. There the national governments undertook to promote 'flexible labour markets', so that the EU can 'remain globally competitive'. Accordingly, the EU recommended 'a restrictive restructuring of public expenditures... to encourage investment in human capital, research and development, innovation and the infrastructure essential to competitiveness' (Presidency, 1997; cited in Balanyá, 2000: 64-65).

In those ways, European integration measures have accepted the putative link between job creation and competitiveness, in turn dependent upon labour-market deregulation and liberalization. Such an agenda cites external threats as imperatives for internal change. For example a further report portrays the world economy as generating economic insecurity, 'with an irresistible flow of newer, better or cheaper goods or services that is constantly making older products uneconomic or obsolete — along with the jobs attached to them' (ERT, 1998; cited in Balanyá, 2000: 31). According to this diagnosis, public expenditure must be used to enhance labour-market flexibility and innovation.

A central slogan has been 'employability'. This means individual responsibility to be continuously trained and adapted to labour-market needs, thus attributing unemployment to individual deficiencies. The 1997 Luxembourg Jobs Summit adopted 'European Employment Guidelines', stating principles of employability, adaptability, entrepreneurship and equal opportunities. Also in 1997 the EU published 'Modernising and Improving Social Protection in the EU', which argued for making 'social protection more employment-friendly' and for changing 'unemployment insurance into employability insurance'. Another document posed the question, 'how to reconcile security for workers with the flexibility which firms need?', while proposing mainly that workers adapt (CEC, 1997b).

In response to trade-union pressures, eventually the European Commission drafted a Directive on Fixed-Term Contracts (FTCs), which provides parity of conditions for temporary workers. Their conditions would be compared to the bulk of workers on more secure contracts issued by the same company. Such a comparator would be missing, however, if FTCs are the norm or if they are issued by another company, e.g. a subcontractor. In such ways, the effects of rule-changes always depend upon the strategies and relations of class forces.

For all these issues, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has largely accommodated the neoliberal agenda rather than challenge it. ETUC has sought to play the role of a responsible 'social partner' with industry, as mandated by the Maastricht Treaty. Both also play a role in economic policy with the European Central Bank; together they undertake to promote monetary stability, market flexibility and employment, as mandated by the Amsterdam Council. In the face of a cross-national dispute, e.g. 1997 Renault-Vilvoorde redundancies, ETUC simply argued about legalities and codes of conduct — rather than defend the right to employment. (For more detail on these struggles, see Mathers and Taylor, 2000.)

In most EU countries, governments and employers have opted for such strategies, incorporating trade unions into consultation structures. In the UK, by contrast, the neoliberal strategy has been mainly to confront trade unions and attack their independence. Next let us examine how the UK has served as a European vanguard for flexploitation.

### **3. UK as Flexploitation Model**

As a vanguard of neoliberalism in Europe since the mid-1970s, the British state defeated, disorganized and decomposed the industrial working class which had characterized the Fordist-Keynesian era. It imposed that defeat by wielding several weapons — e.g. decentralization, privatization, flexibilisation, criminalization, etc. During the 1980s large centres of unionized workers were broken up and/or weakened, e.g. by reducing state subsidies, closing plants, privatizing state-owned industries or parts of public services, etc.

Public expenditure was given new priorities. Previously it had helped to provide relatively secure employment, even including unskilled jobs; this expenditure was reduced in the name of controlling the national debt and reducing inflation. Eligibility rules for unemployment benefit were changed in order to push people into low-paid work. Casual labour became more common by using subcontractors or employment agencies, which are often owned by multinational companies.

UK neoliberalism originated in 1976-77. Back then the Labour government entered a phase of anti-worker policies, e.g. by enacting repressive laws and cutting expenditure on public expenditure. After the government faced working-class revolt, it lost the 1979 election to the Conservative (Tory) Party, which resumed the task during its rule through 1997.

Since then the New Labour government has continued that legacy of low costs for employers and legal limits on trade-union activity, as means to achieve national competitiveness. In its 1997 election campaign, New Labour undertook to retain key elements of the Tory legislation. According to the future Prime Minister, any changes would still 'leave British law the most restrictive on trade unions in the Western world' (*The Times*, 31.03.97). Indeed, accepting the UK's role as the sweatshop of Europe, the New Labour government has promoted its neoliberal policies as models for Europe and the EMU convergence criteria (Gray, 1998).

#### **3.1 Deregulating the labour market**

Labour-market deregulation was driven by legislative changes. Prior to 1985, a worker could demand compensation for unfair dismissal after holding a job for 6 months. The Tory government changed this minimum period to two years, during which a worker could be dismissed for no reason and without the right of appeal to an industrial tribunal. The new rule gave employers an extra incentive to dismiss new workers within the two-year limit, thus avoiding redundancy payments and industrial tribunal cases.

The consequent insecurity affects far more people than those who have fixed-term contracts. The 'two-year rule', providing freedom for employers to create insecure jobs, affected unemployed people in particular: more than half who find a job lose it again within a year. In 1999 the New Labour government changed the two-year limit to one year for claiming unfair dismissal, but this may give employers an incentive to dismiss people within one year.

Such pressures have led workers to do more unpaid labour, especially through overtime. Although some overtime is paid at premium rates, often it is not, especially for casual or part-time workers. Moreover, much overtime goes entirely unpaid. Employers impose increased workloads by various means, e.g. by reducing the workforce but not the workload. According to one estimate, UK employers benefit annually from £23bn worth of unpaid labour, i.e. approx. 1k euros per employee.

Other Tory legislation imposed constraints and penalties upon class solidarity. Trade unions became liable to court actions by employers seeking to recover income lost due to strikes. Trade unions were required to hold a secret ballot [vote] before any strike action. Employers became legally entitled to sack all strikers en masse. New Labour's 1999 legislation reversed this to some extent, by protecting strikers for the first eight weeks from the start of a legally permitted or 'protected' strike.

Moreover, under Tory legislation it became illegal for workers to take 'secondary action' — i.e. against a company that is not their own employer. This prohibition remains in UK law. Consequently, employers split up their own companies and/or subcontracted their workforce, so that any solidarity action could be labelled 'secondary'. In various ways, some employers have phased out long-established unionised workers (or their posts), and replaced them with casualised ones. In some cases, employers recognise a trade union on condition that a proportion of the workforce remains on temporary contracts, so that the latter are excluded from collective bargaining procedures; this arrangement internalises the 'reserve army' within the company.

Together these weapons disorganised and fragmented the class resistance within trade unions. Shop stewards' organisations were severely hampered by Tory laws which forbid strike action without advance notice and written ballots. Such organisations have often lost their independence as well as their power.

In its effects, the restrictive legislation has been more 'anti-solidarity' than 'anti-union'. Trade unions have often cited or used the restrictive legislation to police their own members. For example, after Tory laws restricted the numbers who could legally picket a workplace, some trade unions issued armbands to a few 'official' pickets; thus the police could more readily arrest the unofficial ones. Some trade unions have denied local requests for ballots, thus putting workers' actions outside the law.

Many trade unions have accommodated and even reinforced the class defeat. Under the 'New Realism', they play the role of would-be 'partners' with management in order to recruit members on whatever terms possible (McIlroy, 2000). Although this partnership policy has

been opposed by many Left activists, it has been supported by most national leaders of trade unions, regardless of whether their politics is Left-wing or Right-wing.

Fundamentally, trade unions face two conflicting options. They can either support resistance, especially after workers are collectively sacked, or else recruit casualised workers who replace them. Pursuing the latter option, some unions have actively undermined workers' resistance.

### 3.2 Making work for the unemployed

To discipline the workforce, the state has sought to flexibilise the unemployed too. They are kept busy in work-like activities, as a requirement for receiving unemployment benefits. From 1989 benefits were withdrawn from anyone who refuses certain official 'training' schemes or a 'reasonable job'.

In particular, since 1996 unemployment benefit was re-named the JobSeekers' Allowance (JSA), with lower benefit levels for people under 25 years old and means-testing after six months, rather than after twelve as before. Eligibility rules now require people to accept any job in any field at any legal wage, after three months of unemployment. They can also be denied benefit if they study on courses (chosen by them) for more than 16 hours per week; this rule denies many unemployed youth the opportunity to improve their qualifications. A more extreme attack, Project Work is a 'work-for-benefit' scheme, dating from 1996. Similar schemes form parts of the New Deal introduced by the New Labour government.

Although the Labour Party had criticized the Tory programme, the New Labour government extended it. Explicitly imitating US-style workfare measures, the government launched the 'New Deal' in 1998. Henceforth, unemployed people under 25 can claim benefit for only six months before undergoing intensive counselling, designed to push them into low-paid work. Often employers prefer them to older, better-paid workers, because the UK minimum wage law (also introduced in 1999) has lower rates for trainees and those under 21. If counselling fails, 'New Dealers' are offered a notional choice between subsidised waged work, usually in the private sector, low-level training, or a voluntary sector 'placement' paid at benefit level plus a small extra payment. A similar system is gradually being extended to the long term unemployed over 25.

Thus under the 1990s benefit system, unemployed people face greater responsibilities and less rights (or eligibility). They are deterred from claiming benefits, and find themselves pushed towards McJobs, i.e. low-paid, temporary and part-time employment. Training and work schemes have served to impose discipline, to cheapen their labour, and to lower their expectations.

Such changes further abandon the Keynesian model of social insurance and welfare, while adopting the US model of 'workfare'. These changes intensify the work of 'job-seeking', intensify competition among 'job-seekers', and so reduce their bargaining power. Until the late 1990s lone parents had a right to a basic income without any work requirement, yet now they must attend compulsory 'work-focused interviews' to validate their benefit claim, once their youngest child is in school. This system is undergoing trial in selected areas, prior to national implementation by 2002. Both the Tories and then New Labour have increasingly narrowed the eligibility for disability payments, so that many people with disabilities must now seek paid employment. The 'work-focused interview' system now extends to them

Like the New Labour leadership, trade-union officials too reversed their policy on benefits issues. Previously they had distanced themselves from the Tory workfare programmes; they

had campaigned against the benefit cuts and rule changes associated with the Jobseekers' Allowance. After the 1997 election, however, they accepted New Labour claims that its version would provide social inclusion through 'the right to work'. Many national unions have co-sponsored the New Deal. Thus the government and trade unions have colluded in weakening workers' protection against exploitation.

Unemployed people under attack have organised resistance. Protest has deterred some charities from offering workfare-type 'placements' in Brighton, Hull and Edinburgh. In summer 1997 the Euromarch organised some occupations of job centres. (For accounts of local resistance, see the article by Andy Mathers in this book).

Political responses by unemployed groups have varied. Most UK supporters of the European Marches demand the 'right to work' or 'full employment'. Others instead demand income, seeing no reason to demand their own exploitation.

#### **4. Collective Resistance by the Precariously Employed**

Many employers have attacked and casualised their workforce with the help of neoliberal policies (described above). They found replacement workers to accept insecure and fixed-term contracts, thanks to the stricter conditions on seeking and accepting work imposed on the unemployed. Sooner or later, trade unions have sought to accommodate the casualisation regimes rather than resist them.<sup>1</sup> Yet the consequences for employers have proven more costly than anticipated, partly because of worker resistance.

Since the mid-1990s, more and more workers have revolted against the degrading conditions, intensity, indignity and/or lower wages which characterize flexploitation. London Underground train drivers struck in summer 1996 over the employer's failure to implement a shorter working week — which had been promised a year earlier. Post Office workers struck for shorter hours and against employers' plans to intensify workloads and impose new 'work teams' to replace the existing ones. Food manufacturing and garment workers, especially from migrant groups (e.g. Turkish or Kurdish), held strikes in northeast London during 1996; the strikers opposed unpaid and compulsory overtime, while demanding written contracts and union recognition.

Even when workers are sacked *en masse*, some have successfully continued their disputes by subsisting on strike pay, donations, unofficial work, etc. They often elude political control by their own unions. Although demanding the right to regain their former jobs, these ex-workers seek a dignity which has been lost from flexibilized jobs.

Such activity marks a cultural change from earlier periods of mass redundancies. Then ex-workers had related mainly to fellow trade-union members or to Unemployed Workers Centres, e.g. in order to demand welfare rights or to organize co-ops. By contrast, when workers resisted casualisation and were sacked *en masse* in the late 1990s, many became full-time political activists who related not only to similar disputes but to wider struggles beyond jobs and benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> Anti-solidarity legislation provides a convenient pretext, or even a tool — but not the *reason* why trade unions ultimately ally with management against strikers. When academics say that union leaders distance themselves from strikers who infringe the Conservatives' employment legislation (e.g. McIlroy, 2000: 26), this implicit explanation is misleading, since the political logic is just the reverse.

Such strikers have been supported by a Left core within the trade unions, as well as by various groups outside, e.g. anarchists, autonomists, and environmentalists. Although the latter activists may have jobs and perhaps hold trade-union membership, their political identities lie in developing resistance and alternatives to waged-labour discipline. Many of them have no long-term attachment to particular jobs or trade unions. Together they resist efforts to re-integrate them into more subordinated, more disciplined and lower-paid jobs.

In the mid/late 1990s these new collectivities were recomposing class antagonism beyond waged-labour. Such activity drew together people on the margins of the labour force. With an eye towards continental European struggles, some activists have used the term 'precarity' to link the related categories of unemployed, insecurely employed, part-time un/employed, workfare-conscripts and ex-workers demanding back their jobs. Such networks gave support to sacked workers in several disputes — e.g. at Hillingdon Hospital, Magnet Kitchens and the Liverpool docks — who also forged links with each other.

The background to the Hillingdon dispute lies in the early 1980s, when the Tory government introduced 'compulsory competitive tendering'. CCT forces public-sector institutions to call for tenders for the running of specific services. The CCT requirement encourages such bodies to throw their workforce into competition with external bidders, to casualise their terms, and/or to replace them via subcontractors. The National Health Service has done so on a national scale, generally without much resistance.

A major exception was Hillingdon Hospital, where long-established, unionized workers rejected the new terms. They were soon replaced by cheaper, non-union staff on short-term contracts from an employment agency. As mainly Asian (Punjabi) women, they were treated in racist ways, yet their community links helped to give them the will to persevere. The strikers obtained support from the local Asian communities, from many local branches of their union, and strike pay from their national trade union. But eventually they were abandoned and even attacked by their national trade-union leadership, especially after the employment agency sought to 'normalize relations' with the union. (For more detail, see the article by Malkiat Bilkhu in this book.)

In 1996 the Magnet Kitchens factory in Darlington (northeast England) sacked all 350 furniture workers after they went on strike. After the lock-out, the company spent more money on security guards than it would have cost to satisfy the pay rise which workers had demanded over the previous decade. For the company, to disorganize workers' solidarity was more important than to save money.

The management replaced the Magnet workers with low-paid strike-breakers, who soon became socially ostracized in the local area. Later they were given new contracts on even worse terms than before. Despite a national campaign and a consumer boycott, the sacked workers did not regain their jobs.

Through all those disputes, supporters carried out the following activities: occupying or picketing the employment agencies which had recruited strikebreakers; picketing the AGM of Magnet Kitchens and its local showrooms, especially to promote a consumer boycott; occupying the Labour Party headquarters to highlight the Hillingdon dispute, which was consequently featured on a TV news programme; and soliciting funds from local union branches and other organizations.

Solidarity activists came from two political cultures with different views of the disputes. For autonomist networks of the precariously employed, the disputes exemplified general struggles



against wage-labour exploitation and capitalist work. From this view, the Campaign Linking Against Waged Labour (CLAWS) also built resistance to workfare programmes. For members of Left parties, by contrast, the disputes exemplified the general struggle against casualisation. From this view, the London Support Group for the Liverpool Dockers appealed mainly to fellow trade-union activists (see below). Although people from the two political cultures sometimes acted together, any cooperation was limited by their differences; these tensions were largely ignored rather than discussed.

## **5. Liverpool Dockers**

During their 1995-98 dispute, sacked Liverpool dockers made great advances in generalizing class solidarity. They inspired wider struggles against casualisation, both in Britain and abroad. The dockers' families revived local traditions of community support, especially through Women of the Waterfront (WoW), which raised the political profile of the dispute nationwide. (For more detail, see the Mersey Docks webpage in References.)

### 5.1 Flexibilised workforce

The Liverpool dispute originated in 1989 Tory legislation which abolished the National Dock Labour Scheme. Previously this scheme had protected British dockers from casual terms of employment. Once that protection was removed, dockers' jobs were casualised at ports nation-wide.

Casualisation met organised resistance only from dockers in Liverpool, led by the Merseyside Port Shop Stewards Committee. On the threat they all would be dismissed, the dockers nevertheless accepted new contracts with longer, more flexible shifts which could include weekends. They were required to be available for work on short notice, at times convenient for management.

Liverpool port had high stakes as a political showcase because the management, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC), was partly owned by the government. Together the owners reduced and casualised the workforce. The government provided large subsidies for 'local economic development plans'. By redeveloping parts of the docks area, the MDHC became eligible to receive funding from the European Commission, thus using 'anti-poverty' funds to create poverty; this arrangement was stopped only after protests by a local Labour MEP.

In the early 1990s many dockers' jobs were casualised through an employment agency, Torside — really a creation of the MDHC. Under this arrangement, the MDHC could declare, 'We do not employ casual labour', because the new agency instead handled the employment contracts. Meanwhile the MDHC de-recognized the shop stewards elected by the long-standing workforce.

From 1989 onwards, the shop stewards repeatedly asked the national Transport & General Workers Union (TGWU) to arrange a ballot for strike action, as required by the Tory laws. However, the union always refused their request. Moreover, as the MDHC lied about its future plans, the trade-union officials accepted the company's story (MPSSC, 1996). By denying a ballot, then, the leadership used the law to control the dockers and to put any strike action outside the law.

The dispute finally erupted in September 1995, when Torside workers struck against compulsory overtime for an inadequate rate of pay. They were instantly dismissed. MDHC

employees refused to cross the picket line and were themselves dismissed. When the dockers sought to return to work, they found that their jobs had been taken by casual workers at much lower wages. Later, some of the sacked workers were offered new individual contracts on worse conditions than before, which they rejected. They were also offered large redundancy payments, which they also rejected.

In many ways, the sacked dockers faced a management-government-union alliance, determined to break their resistance. Although their own trade union (TGWU) provided facilities and financial assistance, it refused to support actions against the MDHC. Such support would be illegal under the Tory laws which prohibit 'secondary' action, i.e. against an employer other than one's own. Yet these laws provided a convenient pretext for the union to collude with management.

The TGWU treated the dispute as a threat to its authority. Like the MDHC, the union publicly criticized the sacked dockers for rejecting 'reasonable' negotiations, and regarded the ex-Torside workers as irrelevant because they had not been MDHC employees. Behind the scenes, moreover, TGWU leaders sought to undermine the solidarity actions by dockers worldwide.

Eventually the sacked dockers came under greater pressure to settle the dispute — e.g. by accepting redundancy payments or by returning to work as casual labour. From late 1996 onwards, there was much discussion about how to establish a 'labour-hiring' system, in which the union would play the role of employment agency. The MDHC and union paid financial consultants (KPMG) to devise a specific plan for an agency which could re-employ some dockers on 'self-employed', insecure terms. This plan was rejected by the workers because it would further institutionalize and legitimize casualisation, with the TGWU acting as a sponsor.

The sacked dockers inspired and rallied actions by others who likewise faced threats of casualisation. They held international dockers' conferences in Liverpool and sent representatives to ports abroad. As a result, dockers worldwide delayed ships en-route from Liverpool in January and September 1997. (These actions helped the Australian dockers to prepare defences against the casualisation strategy which later hit them.)

However, in late 1997 they proved unable to make further headway and suffered acute financial difficulties. A rebuff came in December 1997, when the TGWU leadership refused to support their solidarity call to the International Transport Workers' Federation. In early 1998 the sacked dockers accepted a settlement with redundancy payments similar to those which the MDHC had offered much earlier.

## 5.2 Solidarity links

Within Britain, solidarity efforts were coordinated by the London Support Group for the Liverpool Dockers. It published a monthly newspaper, *Dockers' Charter*, which included reports on other struggles in Britain and worldwide. It also organized national demonstrations in London in December 1996 and April 1997.

The Liverpool dockers attracted widespread support from direct-action movements for several reasons. These ex-workers challenged the anti-solidarity laws, pursued their struggle independently of trade-union officials, and had previously prevented the import of toxic waste. In September 1996 'Reclaim the Streets' (RTS) mobilized its supporters to join a Liverpool demonstration by the sacked dockers there. Previously RTS had held impromptu

carnivals on major London roads, as a means to resist the commercial enclosure of public space.

As the next major event for the Liverpool dockers, the London Support Group called a People's March for Social Justice in April 1997. RTS helped to attract the 20,000 people who marched and danced through central London, thus turning the Whitehall government district into a carnival space. At the end of the march, an RTS vehicle (with a hidden sound system) overcame a police blockade, leading a festival in Trafalgar Square for several hours before police finally stopped it.

At the April 1997 event, trade unions were represented mainly by members with no job or whose jobs were relatively low-paid and insecure. Heading the march were groups of sacked workers — from the Liverpool docks, Hillingdon Hospital, Magnet Kitchens, etc. Further back, the best supported trade-union banners were those of Turkish or Kurdish workers' branches, from poorly paid sectors such as the garment industry.

For this network of ex-workers and precariously-employed people, their political identity came more from solidarity activity than from any actual 'employment' or 'dignity of work'. Connections were made with many other struggles. The London Support Group was initiated partly by London-based Turkish workers, who encouraged some dockers to visit Turkey, who in turn reported back on government repression there.

In January 1997, dockers at ports worldwide blocked or delayed ships from Liverpool. Occupying a crane in the Liverpool port that day, Greenpeace activists highlighted the shipments of Monsanto's genetically modified soybeans arriving in the UK and Europe. Dockers' leaders publicly emphasized the environmentalist support and the issues about our food supply.

During their dispute, the sacked dockers expressed visions of what future of work is possible or desirable. According to the shop stewards, management needs a 'professional' labour force, which can be provided only by experienced (i.e. sacked) dockers, who therefore should be reinstated in secure jobs. This argument defends 'our jobs which we fought for' (i.e. against the casual labour system), so that secure jobs may be handed on to their sons. At the same time, some suggested a more open-ended future than the past: 'Not many human beings would choose freely to spend their lives in the tumult of meaningless, unfulfilling and alienated work.... The struggle of the dockers in Liverpool is not to maintain the past but to protect the future', according to a shop steward, Mike Carden.

At a public meeting for their supporters, dockers' leaders drew lessons from the dispute. They emphasized that the struggle itself had been a victory for class and community solidarity. One shop steward questioned whether it made sense to demand 'the right to work' — in a period when capitalism would no longer provide the sorts of industrial jobs on which the labour movement had been built.

After the Liverpool dispute ended, some London activists formed a Strike Support Committee and published a series of bulletins. Among many other disputes, the Committee targeted government proposals to privatize the London underground (Metro) system. Such privatization would weaken worker involvement in health and safety issues. It could also casualise the staff and fragment the labour force between different companies, thus impeding workers' organisation and solidarity.

## **6. Future Strategies?**

European integration has been bound up with agendas for flexibilising labour in order to intensify its exploitation. Neoliberalism seeks to maximize the labour supply for capital, rather than create jobs which would accommodate workers' needs for income, dignity and security. Regardless of the various statutory and policy changes involved, their material effects will depend upon the capitalist power to impose work discipline and upon the counter-power to resist. For that reason, it is important to analyze neoliberal strategies and counter-strategies. What can be learned from the UK experience for Europe-wide struggles?

As a vanguard of neoliberal attacks, the UK has provided a Europe-wide impetus and model for flexploitation. Neoliberal strategies have weakened employment security, worker solidarity and the shop-steward organizations which formerly defended workers' autonomy from capitalist work discipline. Moreover, some UK trade unions have internalized this agenda; even when the leadership is Left wing, they have used anti-solidarity legislation to isolate those who resist, for the sake of partnership with management.

As jobs become flexibilized, so do the unemployed. Workfare-type schemes blur the distinction between employment and unemployment. Even more public money is spent to 'train' and police the unemployed. These pressures undermine worker solidarity and the capacity to resist flexibilisation, especially when trade unions collude in such schemes.

Although sacked workers demand reinstatement on dignified terms, they seek 'jobs' of a sort which have been abolished. In particular the Liverpool dockers fought to preserve jobs that appeared as community assets — jobs with security, pride, and some degree of workers' autonomy established through shop steward power. Paradoxically, in pursuing such demands, they create dignified political work which they do unpaid, whilst lacking an adequate political language to describe it.

Their resistance has catalysed and attracted new activist networks. Many such people alternate between precarity and unemployment, often rejecting or de-prioritising paid capitalist work in their lives. By contrast to the traditional Left demand for 'full employment', they promote a vision of collective activity (paid or unpaid) necessary to meet social needs. Many would argue that everyone has *too much* capitalist work, e.g. through overtime, workfare schemes, training courses to obtain qualifications, etc. As an international gathering stated, 'dignity is taken away from us when the capitalist work machine uses us for its purposes' (Encuentro, 1998).

The threat of boundless capitalist work has been intensified by the significant shift in employment and welfare policy in the UK in particular. State expenditure is redirected to subsidize insecure, low-paid work — aimed not only at the 'unemployed', but potentially anyone who suffers from 'social exclusion'. Through various carrots and sticks, the state attempts to draw mothers of young children, people with disabilities and the early-retired back into the labour force for capital — often at the expense of parenting, rest and recuperation. Some feminist agendas (more childcare provision, more financial independence for women) are easily coopted into this labour maximization discourse, while neoliberal policies fail to address the significant gender gap in pay.

As the neoliberal project seeks to maximize the labour supply for capital, traditional Left demands for 'full employment' fall into a trap. Such demands inadvertently accommodate the neoliberal agenda of relentless work discipline, defining 'employment' as any work — however badly paid, insecure or socially meaningless. By characterizing casual employment and even workfare as 'jobs', trade unions treat any job as a gift from capital, rather than oppose exploitation as the major issue.

All those tensions arose in the European Marches 'against unemployment, precarity and social exclusion'. The campaign opposed workfare-type schemes, while leaving vague the terms for social inclusion. On the one hand, its demands for 'full employment' were important for obtaining trade-union support. On the other hand, its demands for a 'guaranteed minimum income' were important for unemployed groups (Mathers, 1999).

Unemployed activists eventually pushed the EuroMarch campaign to reject 'full employment', on grounds that it could only mean an 'over-full employment of low-paid precarious jobs'. Moreover, demanding a guaranteed minimum income, the campaign linked this with free collective provision of basic services, health, education, etc. In a similar spirit, protest groups have demanded free transport, e.g. in order to reach demonstrations elsewhere in Europe (Mathers and Taylor, 2000). Thus demands for income serve to legitimize the collective appropriation of resources, beyond simply proposing what the state should give to individuals.

If a movement is going to expand such efforts, then a new political language is needed to express aspirations for a different ways of living and working. On what collective basis to oppose flexploitation, link the various resistances, appropriate resources for people's needs, and create our own dignified work?

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\* For information on the journal *Capital & Class*, see <http://www.cseweb.org.uk>

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