

News from everywhere

120 catering and service workers at the Talk of the Town, an illustrious night spot for London's elite, have walked out after the management's refusal to recognise their union.

The management, Trust Houses Forte, are well known as bad employers and have been involved in several similar disputes.

The workers walked out on October 31 and have picketed the club every evening since then. The workers are seeking a 100 per cent trade union membership with the management who are arguing that this is not company policy, although other unions, like the theatre technicians, are operating under 100 per cent agreements at the Talk of the Town.

The workers, who are members of the international section of the

Transport and General Workers' Union, have managed to stop members of the theatre technicians' union crossing the picket line. Scab workers are presenting the stage show. The catering is merely pre-packed food brought in from outside on plastic trays.

The workers are firm on the issue and the picket each night has managed to turn away a few guests. —People's News Service

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AN ATTEMPT to hit black South African workers with a sharp increase in bus fares has been defeated by a month-long boycott and militant demonstrations involving tens of thousands of people.

The increase would have caused 130,000 impoverished blacks in the

Newcastle area to pay about one-third of their annual wages for transport alone.

The apartheid regime forces black workers to live in settlements far from their jobs, with buses as the only means of transport.

The people walked to work in massive numbers until the bus company gave up and withdrew the increases.

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A SECRET printing press capable of producing 3 million newspapers a day in the event of a strike closing down Fleet Street has been set up by the "Current Affairs Press".

The scheme is the brainchild of Ross McWhirter, better-known as the joint editor of the Guinness Book of Records, and an organisation called Self Help. They believe that the "overnightness" of the Trade Unions is the gravest menace to the well-being of our society.

The press was financed by hundreds of three and four-figure cheques, and two running into five-figures from the City and industry. The list of donors contains 29 members of the House of Lords, including one Labour Peer.

Self Help has begun work in Brighton to "take the sting out of many forms of strikes". And they hope to duplicate this type of action throughout the country.

For security reasons, Ross

McWhirter, Self Help, and the Current Affairs Press use a box number for correspondence — P.O. Box 4SH, London W1A 4SN.

Or if you really wish to speak to the man personally, ring 01 486 6827 giving your name and phone number, and he might call you back. —PNS

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REYKJAVIK (Iceland): Feminists called a one day general strike on October 24 that brought much of the country to a virtual halt. "This is not a festival but a serious day off," said strike spokeswoman Gerdur Steinhorsdottir.

"We want to show how indispensable we are to our country's economics and national life."

And show it they did, supported by the vast majority of women whether they worked in or outside the home. Newspapers, theatres, schools and shops were closed, industry slowed down, or in some cases came to a halt, and so many telephone exchanges went unattended that the government announced it was almost impossible to conduct official business.

Demanding equal opportunity and citing data on their "grossly undervalued" work, women left child-care housework and supportive activities to the men, some of whom spoke out in sympathy with the women. —PNS



ENVIRONMENT Secretary Anthony Crosland — the man who instigated the recent council rent rises — has solved his own housing problem.

He's just bought a five-bedroom "cottage" in the Cotswolds [above] for £40,000. He already owns a £70,000 home in London.

Crosland's cottage is in the constituency of Tory MP Neil Marten, who said: "Tony will be a useful addition to the local tennis club. We last played together in Bermuda." —Community Action.

Support for Lump campaign

LAST MONTH on this page Dave Lamb, a former building worker, raised doubts about the anti-Lump campaign. We invited readers to comment on the article.

We made it clear at the time that the article did not represent the views of the Free Press. In fact all the editorial group disagreed with it to a greater or lesser extent, but agreed unanimously that it should be published because it contained some uncomfortable facts and made points which ought to be answered.

The article provoked some strong reactions, but only two letters. Several building workers who normally sell the Free Press at work declined to sell our last issue. Others told us they would ignore the article rather than reply to it. Clearly the Lump is a very sensitive issue.

For those who only recently started reading the paper we should perhaps point out that the Free Press was among the first papers to draw attention to the plight of the Shrewsbury pickets and we have printed many articles criticising Lump building firms. Our attitude has not changed.

Some readers have suggested that printing Dave Lamb's article is no different from printing racialist or pro-National Front articles. We have no intention of providing a political platform for the extreme right, and such articles would obviously be at odds with the politics of this newspaper.

However, we think Dave Lamb's article raised some new, and previously undiscussed points on the Lump and deserved some consideration.

One of the two letters came from Mr Bill Wood of Harben Road, London NW6. He says he has been a building worker for 40 years — 20 of them self-employed. He agrees wholeheartedly with Dave Lamb's view. However we feel the letter does not add much to what has already been said, and it is not printed here.

The other letter, from Terry Austrin of Prescott Road, Liverpool 7, is a detailed reply to Dave Lamb's article, and we reprint it here in full...

THE RECENT attack by Dave Lamb on the anti-Lump campaign raises quite basic political issues which Mr Lamb chooses to ignore. His defence of the cynical use of the Lump seems to argue that somehow if the practice were extended then the working class would be that much better off. He seems to be arguing that workers have in the past and should now fight for the establishment of the Lump as a method of working. This can be the only conclusion we can form from an article that concludes that use of the Lump is "a manifestation of something new in British politics."

His justification is easy, the working class gets off its back both the trade union leaders and the employers. In his own words the Lump raises "the spectre of an entire industry out of control; beyond the control not only of the bosses, Inland Revenue, trade unions and Government, but outside control of those leftist parties whose aspirations to power are bound up with establishing control over the

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working class." Quite right the industry is out of control and the Lump is a consequence of that. The employers unable to organise the industry resort to the Lump in order to attempt to retain an element of control. It is not the other way round as Mr Lamb suggests.

The reality is that the Lump is specifically a management practice used to divide building workers. Its use varies according to the economic and political situation. In the 19th Century mine owners used the "butty system" to boost production in the pits. It involved everything that the Lump involves today, a ganger system taking work on a labour-only sub-contract basis. It was neither demanded nor praised by the miners. In fact the opposite, the struggle for unionism in the pits was a struggle against the "butty system". As a piece work system it was designed to create what all piece work systems are designed for, including the Lump in the building industry, to create more sweat and more profit

PAY SUCCESS

In the building industry the Lump has been used in the past to keep down wages and break building craftsmen's resistance to piece work. The use of the Lump in the thirties on housing contracts established such firms as Taylor-Woodrow. In that period it was mainly restricted to bricklayers since not all trades were open to the intense speed involved in the Lump. The rationalisation of work in the industry which has involved the breakdown of craft skills has enabled the employer to operate the Lump on a wider range of trades. It is not that workers have suddenly seized a new method but rather that their work is now more open to the practice. The shuttering carpenter of the 1960s is obviously more open to piece work practices than the joiner of the 1930s.

The spectacular growth of the Lump since the war is related to this rationalisation of skills being combined with a situation of full employment. In a situation of labour shortage the employer has been prepared to allow Lump rates to vastly outstrip the union negotiated rate. Mr Lamb appears to believe that building workers somehow fought for this. What actually happened was that the employers, desperate not to allow the unions to gain strength from full employment, actually openly resisted them whilst promoting the Lump. The Lump was praised in those terms frequently resorted to by employers and apparently upheld by Mr Lamb, "the freedom of a man to work where he wants and on his own terms."

In a boom period in the industry it is true that Lump workers were able to move from employer to employer. Competition among employers for labour forced them to push up wages. Lump payments were used to ease the employers' problems. They depended on the Lump as a method of boosting productivity, a method that fell easily into place with the

so-called "freedom of the worker." Freedom to play the market was granted to workers as long as they remained outside the unions. There is nothing new in this, nor is there anything new in the battle the employers waged against the unions in exactly the same period.

Whilst the union negotiated rate was held down the Lump rate escalated according to the local labour market. This was also true on any well unionised site, in Birmingham, Liverpool or London. Shop steward conducted bonus systems were able to equal Lump payments, but of course unlike the Lump they were resisted by the employers. In the 1972 national building strike the employers resisted a wage claim for £30 for 35 hours for three months. At the same time they were prepared to pay men on the Lump, money ranging from £60 to £150 per week.

The result of the national building workers' strike was twofold. On the one hand a union victory, building workers gained the largest pay claim of any in 1972, and on the other a defeat for the whole British working class movement. The jailing of the Shrewsbury building workers marked a significant development in the relationship between the trade unions and the state. The jailings recorded a defeat for the labour movement as a whole. Of course for Mr Lamb this could not be the case since trade unions and state fulfil the same role, they both exist to discipline the workers.

Lump payments being in excess of the union negotiated rate are of course the issue that Mr Lamb wishes to promote. The non-payment of tax is his essential point here. It is on this point that he claims the Lump workers have defeated both the state and the unions. He escalates the non-payment of tax to the supreme political act, workers "using the system to their own advantage." Of course the non-payment of tax involves the state in the Lump. Such an issue, the loss of £10m to £60m per year cannot but attract reprisals. But to argue from there that the trade union position on the Lump is exactly the same as that of the state is absurd.

FIFTH COLUMN

The issue for trade unionists is not the question of tax but the survival of unionism in the industry. The Lump brought the craft unions to an end and it also threatened to destroy any effectiveness arising from the formation of UCATT, the first industrial union to be established in the industry.

Socialists of course would support the formation of an industrial union as a step in the right direction. It overcomes the fragmentation that craft unionism maintains and hence strengthens trade unionism in the industry. Mr Lamb presumably sees it as a further extension of control over the workforce.

Unfortunately UCATT has argued on the platform that Mr Lamb suggests, they have supported the actions taken against tax evaders. On these grounds socialists would argue that UCATT are wrong but not abandon the union as is advocated, but all the more to fight for a correct policy. The idea of a tax amnesty for the Lump workers is a measure that unites building workers. For UCATT to argue for prosecutions is obviously to maintain the split in the workers' ranks. Mr Lamb should listen to the arguments of the Building Workers' Charter group on the issue of tax. This is important for as the industry has moved into recession, throwing out 200,000 building workers on the dole, the Lump has changed its nature. Instead of boosting wages it has been used to undermine the admittedly low union rate. In this situation to cut off from Lump workers an avenue to the union would be disastrous. Unorganised, standing outside the law, the real role of the Lump workers comes to the front. Their use as a fifth column in the industry becomes clear. They will be used increasingly to undermine union rates and conditions. Conditions and rates already far below what could have been achieved had trade unionism developed rather than declined in the industry.

It is here that the question of decasualisation under union control becomes important. In a casual industry the market mechanisms of employment and unemployment dominate the relationships between workers and employers. A casual industry means unemployment, means a weak union. In times when that relationship is disturbed as in the sixties through relatively full employment, then the employers adopt the Lump. At all costs the union must be defeated since union control in a casual industry inevitably threatens the employers' right to hire and fire. The employers then value the Lump. The very fact that unemployment in the industry can be allowed to rise to 200,000 without their being challenged is very useful to them.

REAL CONTROLS

Rather than being totally out of control as Mr Lamb suggests, the Lump represents both the anarchy of the building industry and the anarchy of the society we live in. The Lump allows the employers to maintain their control in periods such as today, a period of high unemployment. The black and white picture of trade union bureaucrats and the state machine walking hand in hand against the poor Lump worker is a naive version of events that attempts to promote the idea that somehow the Lump is a new political innovation. In fact the Lump represents the oldest of employers' methods, it is taken up and used by them as the situation demands. It can never be the case that workers could fight on a programme for the Lump, but it is evident from the actions of the NFBTE that employers will always resort to it as a method to control unionism in the industry.

"OFFENSIVE" will be back again with a new topic in our next issue. Any more discussion on the Lump will be continued in our letters column.

If you would like to write an article for readers to debate, please let us know. DO NOT send completed articles but write or phone first and tell us briefly what your article would be about.