



Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

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As this is our first newsletter, we should start by explaining who we are.

The Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network (SUWN) is an independent organisation that aims to be both a source of advice and information, and a vehicle for campaigning and organising.

If you are unemployed, or underemployed, or fear unemployment or know someone who is unemployed, and you care about all that this implies then please have a look at our newsletter, browse our website and contribute to the discussions on our forum. We need people to become actively involved: how useful this network will be will depend on what we can all make of it together.

Please find us on

www.scottishunemployedworkers.net

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NEWSLETTER 1
November 2011



Mike Arnott of *Dundee Trades Council* writes about

TRADE UNIONS AND THE UNEMPLOYED

Historically, there has been an inescapable logic in the Trades Union movement seeking to work with the unemployed. Some of this logic could be interpreted as self interest; the unemployed might have been utilised as a pool of cheap labour by employers to potentially undercut the wages and conditions of employed trades unionists; but maintaining links has always been important. Many may have been union members when previously employed or would become union members when they, hopefully, obtained work.

When unemployment hit tight, working-class communities, such as during the Depression, they traditionally closed around those without work. Attempts to disparage or scapegoat them were resisted, as were attempts, such as through the Unemployed Assistance Board, to inflict punitive benefit regimes.

In the 1920s, the creation of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement helped give organisation and voice to the demands of the unemployed. (*See [history page on SUWN website](#).*) Initially, this met a positive response from organised labour and opened up opportunities for joint working with the TUC and its affiliated trades unions. As they began to see the NUWM as too political and militant, co-operation was withdrawn, leading to instructions to local union organisations not to co-operate with the NUWM, particularly on its famous National Hunger Marches of 1930, 1934 and 1936 as they trekked across country to London. In many cases these instructions, to local Trades Councils and union branches along the march routes, were ignored by those on the ground, whose traditional ethos of solidarity was a stronger motivator than edicts from establishment bureaucrats.

An additional benefit of the NUWM was its combative attitude to fascist ideas. The Blackshirts in Britain, aping Mussolini and Hitler, advocated fascist solutions to unemployment which, in areas like East London, focussed on the demonisation of minorities such as the Jews. Their impact would have been incalculably greater had it not been for the mass character and politics of the NUWM.

Organised fascism was to rear its ugly head again in the 1970s and, together with the job devastation reaped by Thatcherism, created concern at the dangers of a rift being created between the employed and unemployed. The response by the Scottish TUC was a policy including the creation of unemployed workers' centres, mainly across the central belt, with trade union involvement and funded by the Government's Urban Aid programme. These thrived for a period of about seven years, from 1982 to 1989, until funding ran out, with only a few going on to survive under the budgetary umbrella of supportive local authorities. The STUC, in an echo of the NUWM, was also behind two successful marches to London, in 1981 and 1983, under the banner of The People's March for Jobs.



The People's March for Jobs leaves George Square, Glasgow 1983

Today, as unemployment rises again above double figure percentages, and to 1 in 5 among young people, we see a concerted Government and media campaign to demonise, scapegoat and punish the unemployed and those on benefits, in echoes of the 30s and the 80s. We also see a return of vicious benefit cuts, a weapon also used in earlier times. Opposition to unemployment and to benefit cuts is undoubtedly a component of the 'Better Way' campaign in Scotland, and the STUC is supporting the establishment of the Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network. What is now essential is for that message to be taken out into our communities and particularly to the unemployed youth of Scotland and for common cause to be cemented between those in and those out of work

With the cuts biting ever deeper, and more and more people asking what they can do, Sean Clerkin of *Citizens United against Cuts to Public Services* discusses

HOW DIRECT ACTION WORKS

Citizens United was formed in a Glasgow pub in August 2010. We met to plan opposition to Tory spending cuts, and we came to the conclusion that non-violent direct action was an effective tool to highlight the Tories' ideological attacks on the welfare state and their use of the financial deficit as an excuse to destroy public services.

The truth is that the bankers, hedge-fund speculators and other rich parasites, such as many of our leading companies, are evading or avoiding paying taxes to the extent of £120 billion a year. These are the fraudsters who have financially raped Britain for years.



Protestors shut down a Glasgow bank with some anti-capitalist carol singing



and occupy RBS in Dundee

We targeted banks, businesses – including the accountants Deloitte's (who advise companies such as Vodafone how to avoid billions in tax) – and their sycophantic

political allies to show that it is possible to fight back and not be helpless victims. This was no better demonstrated than when 12 of us occupied Lloyds Bank in Glasgow on the 21st October 2010. This was the first direct action after George Osborne's announcement of £83 billion worth of cuts. We helped ensure that the press reported that there was an alternative to the neoliberal cuts.

In March and April 2011 we used direct action to confront the mainstream political parties: the Liberal Democrats in Inverness, the Tories in Edinburgh and the Labour Party in Glasgow. (See <http://news.stv.tv/election-2011/242107-iain-gray-cuts-station-visit-short-after-organised-protest-for-a-much-watched-escape-to-a-sandwich-shop>.) As a result, we helped put public spending cuts at the top of political debate in the Scottish election, showing how working-class people can help set the agenda in fighting back against the cuts to the welfare state. Because of our actions we were able to have two meetings with Alex Salmond about the cuts. At these meetings Salmond did listen. He agreed to our requests: to do a survey into the quality of the upgrading work done by the Glasgow Housing Association; to provide a like for like day-care centre for people with severe learning difficulties in the East End of Glasgow (whose current centre is due to close to make way for the Commonwealth Games); and to get all people in Scotland who are suffering from Pompei disease clinically assessed for effective treatment. So far, the First Minister has continued to show willing to deliver the above, demonstrating that there are positive outcomes from doing direct action. We will make sure that he keeps his promise and remain ready to protest against all parties and organisations who promote or support cuts to our public services.

I believe direct action has a very important role to play in the struggle against neoliberal attacks on working-class communities. Citizens United sets out a template for any number of citizens to get together to act collectively to fight and defeat the corporate greed, corruption and neoliberal dogma that are aiming to destroy the welfare state.

Sean Cudden of *Right to Work* discusses

WHY WE NEED AN UNEMPLOYED WORKERS' CHARTER

Scotland and the rest of the UK are currently experiencing the highest levels of unemployment in a generation. Officially, UK unemployment stands at nearly 2.6 million, but the reality of joblessness is that at least twice as many are out of work: in other words we have depression levels of unemployment. More women are unemployed than at any point in the last 23 years and youth unemployment is approaching 1 million while avenues into further and higher education are being closed; and alongside these unemployed workers there are an untold number of underemployed people. The government's response has been to cut benefits and attack people who are out of work, while the media has cheered them on. Scapegoating unemployed workers is hardly the constructive response needed to deal with mass unemployment that is the result of an economic crisis created by irresponsible bankers who continue to line their pockets.

In the 1920s, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement and the TUC, faced with a situation of high unemployment and government and media attacks on unemployed people, put forward an Unemployed Worker's Charter as a programme to improve the lives of unemployed workers and as a platform to campaign on. It called for government creation of properly paid jobs, improved

levels of 'maintenance' or benefits, real training for unemployed workers, a shorter working week, and social housing with rent at affordable levels. The Charter proved to be a spur to action and it provided activists with a ready list of demands that seemed both reasonable and practical to many people.

Today unemployed workers lack a voice, and when mainstream political parties turn their attention to unemployment it is usually to denounce its victims rather than to present solutions. A similar charter to that of the 1920s, with a demand for jobs at its heart, could act as a rallying cry for unemployed workers. It is surely not unreasonable for unemployed people to demand jobs, real training opportunities work-schemes with proper rates of pay, benefits that reflect the cost of living, and affordable housing? An Unemployed Worker's Charter is something that all the campaigns, groups and parties to which unemployed activists belong or that support unemployed workers can back and campaign around.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE
IN AN UNEMPLOYED WORKERS'
CHARTER?

PLEASE JOIN THE DISCUSSION
ON OUR FORUM



Employed and unemployed marching against the cuts, Glasgow, October 2011