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Scottish Unemployed Workers' Network

Mass demonstrations and grassroots campaigns

October's national march for 'A Future that Works' prompts us to look at the role of major demonstrations and the need to combine these with ongoing grassroots campaigns. Our second article looks at one such campaign, and our third explores the absurdities of the Work Programme.

We hope that by the time of the march, Glasgow City Council will have been persuaded to withdraw its plans to ban demonstrations from George Square. It is disgusting that councillors who call themselves Labour should be proposing restrictions on the right to demonstrate. George Square's central place in the history of Scotland's labour movement gives this a particularly bitter edge, but such restrictions are growing everywhere, even where these spaces have not been fully privatised. And they are being imposed by people who would rush to express their indignation at similar restrictions in the Middle East or Russia. Of course this is all part of the general rightward shift that has prioritised the demands of big business and brought a new disciplining of the working class. Yet again we are having to fight for rights won long ago that we had come to take for granted.



Please find us on

www.scottishunemployedworkers.net

(where you can also link to our Facebook Group)

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Sarah Glynn asks

WHAT GOOD ARE DEMONSTRATIONS?

With October 20th set as the date for our next big march against cuts and austerity, this seems a good time to look at what marches and demonstrations can do and why we will be there in Glasgow. We've been on a lot of marches in these last two years. We had the STUC march in Edinburgh in October 2010, the big national march in London the following March, the wet one in Glasgow last October, the big marches supporting the Pension strike in November, and the day at the seaside outside the Conservative Party conference in Troon (which the mainstream press didn't bother to notice). And nothing seems to have changed. Those sceptical voices who always tell you that marching achieves nothing - do they perhaps have a point?

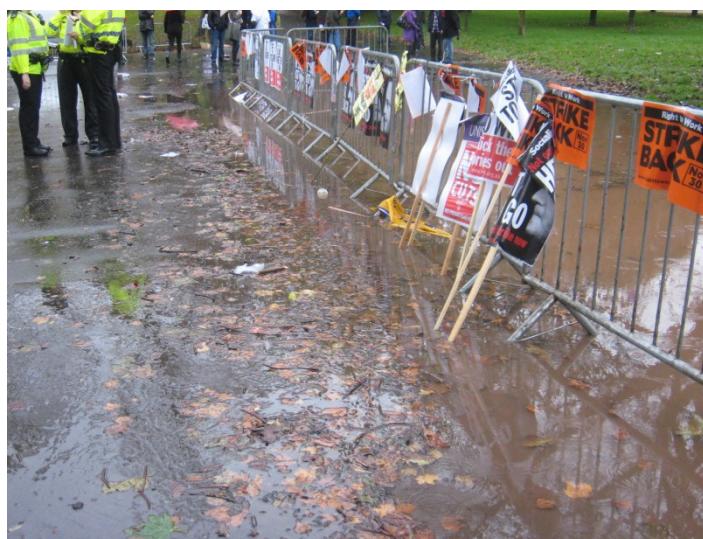
On the other hand, we have witnessed live on our televisions the power of mass demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt. And we know, historically, that mass movements can affect change: which is how we have those things we now take for granted such as universal franchise and the welfare state. Elites don't just cede power from the goodness of their hearts. Establishment forces recognise the potential power of demonstrations, which is why they do their best to restrict and minimise them and to keep them away from prominent places.

But there is still a risk that demonstrations can simply march people up to the top of the hill and then march them down again: that they can act to release people's anger without directing it anywhere constructive,

leaving participants disillusioned and strengthening the confidence of the authorities. To avoid this, marches and demonstrations need to be part of something bigger. They need to be imbedded in persistent grassroots campaigning – such as the campaigns against Workfare and against the Work Capability Assessments – that is itself part of a bigger movement to change the structure of society. And protesters need to be prepared to take their protest forward and not to pack up and go home when the going gets difficult.

The trade unions are providing a crucial role in organising mass protest, and they are filling some of the space left by the absence of mainstream political opposition to the politics of the market; but they can't take the place of a political movement. They will respond to pressure from their members, but they are congenitally cautious organisations. We can't just sit back and expect them to lead us. We all need to build for demonstrations, and also keep up the pressure after the demonstrations are over.

While demonstrations on their own are not enough, they still have a vital part to play. And the physical power of getting together cannot be supplanted by a virtual network, however useful an addition that can be to a campaigner's toolbox. A big demonstration can reach a new layer of people. It can bring in more people and force the media and authorities to take notice. And it can build a crucial sense of solidarity and power among all those who take part.



*What happens when the march is over?
– Glasgow 2011*

Mike Cormack from Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty writes:

NO TO WORKFARE – RESISTING FORCED UNPAID LABOUR

In Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty (ECAP) our opposition to workfare springs from the direct experience of unemployed people forced onto these exploiting schemes. A4e and other workfare providers treat unemployed people compelled to participate with a total lack of respect, frequently bullying and threatening claimants that they will stop their benefits. People have experienced contemptuous treatment from employers using the slave labour schemes, including charities like British Heart Foundation.

But no more! (At least not in Edinburgh) Through direct action, persistence and the notable courage of some particular claimants, ECAP has forced providers A4e, Ingeus and JHP to recognise claimants' right to be accompanied by the representatives of their choice at workfare appointments. Through ECAP claimants have won several victories, overturning sanctions imposed on claimants, and obtaining apologies, compensation and better conditions.

And now we are going on the offensive, demonstrating at and occupying the shops using the government's work-for-your-benefits schemes. Already this year we have occupied Tesco's, Poundstretcher and British Heart Foundation in Edinburgh. Taking action on the UK-wide Days of Action organised through the Boycott Workfare network (www.boycottworkfare.org), our message to bosses is : "If you exploit us, we will shut you down!"



Occupying British Heart Foundation

Regular leafleting at A4e and at Job Centres, and widespread distribution of stickers and posters, spreads the word that resistance is

possible. This direct contact, plus the fact that several of us are on workfare ourselves, means we learn how the Work Programme and other schemes are operating locally and which employers are involved. People affected come to the weekly drop-in support and solidarity sessions on poverty-related problems run at the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh. Here we not only fight the individual cases but encourage people to become involved in the wider battle to stop workfare. If need be members of the ECAP Solidarity Network can turn up at offices to support claimants up against the authorities.

Workfare is an attack on the waged and unwaged, undermining all workers' wages and conditions. So we try to make links with workers in employment, for example joining the High Riggs Job Centre pickets against pension cuts, and taking solidarity action with Council cleansing workers fighting wage-cuts and privatisation. We also link up with local anti cuts groups, eg North Edinburgh Fights Back, who participate in our actions.

Before the ConDems, ECAP and its predecessors resisted New Labour's New Deal. We recognise that all political parties, committed to the profit-based capitalist economy, are pursuing the anti working class agenda of cuts and the imposition of work discipline. The TUC supported Labour's workfare. Now it avows opposition to ConDem workfare, but campaigns for Labour's "Job Guarantee" which would cut young workers' benefits if they didn't take a sub-minimum wage job. Workers' growing awareness has resulted in some national Unions and many Trades Councils and Union branches making anti workfare declarations – but the challenge now is to build an *effective workplace boycott* of workfare. ECAP is committed to independent organising and making links with similar groups and workers at the grass-roots level.

Much needs done, but already the anti-workfare movement has succeeded in pressurising employers and charities such as Sainsburys, Waterstones, Holland and Barrett and Shelter to pull out of workfare. Grassroots organising and UK-wide co-ordinated direct action can bring results.

For more information see
www.edinburghagainstpoverty.org.uk

www.scottishunemployedworkers.net

Sean Cudden, who blogs at skintandangry.wordpress.com, asks

WORK PROGRAMME, WHAT DO YOU DO?

The following is not verbatim but it is based on real conversations I have had with Work Programme Advisors.

WP: Hello, it's really nice to meet you. We're really looking forward to getting you into sustainable work.

Me: That's great. What happens now?

WP: You go off and look for work.

Me: And what do you do?

WP: We wait for you to find work.

Me: Eh ... OK.

* * *

WP: Did you look for work?

Me: Yes.

WP: Did you find anything?

Me: I've got an interview.

WP: Brilliant! We're so happy for you.

* * *

WP: How did the interview go?

Me: It went well. But I need a Disclosure which I can't afford to pay for.

WP: *Can't* is a negative. We don't do negatives.

Me: *We don't do negatives* is a negative.

WP: H'mmm we might have to think about how we can make your attitude more positive.

Me: I'll look forward to that. What about this Disclosure check? Can the Work Programme pay for it?

WP: Yes we can. All you have to do is get an offer of work and we'll pay for your Disclosure.

Me: But they said I have to have a Disclosure before they will offer me the job.

WP: Don't worry we'll pay for it when you've got the job.

Me: But they won't give me the job without a Disclosure.

WP: That's OK just explain to them that you'll get one when you've got the job.

Me: So I should embarrass myself in front of a potential employer by telling them I'm long-term unemployed and can't afford the Disclosure check that they say I need but that the Work Programme will eventually pay for one if they exempt me from the criteria they're applying to all the other applicants?

WP: That's it. Much more positive. Now you're getting it.

Me: Could you remind me what it is the Work Programme gets paid for?

