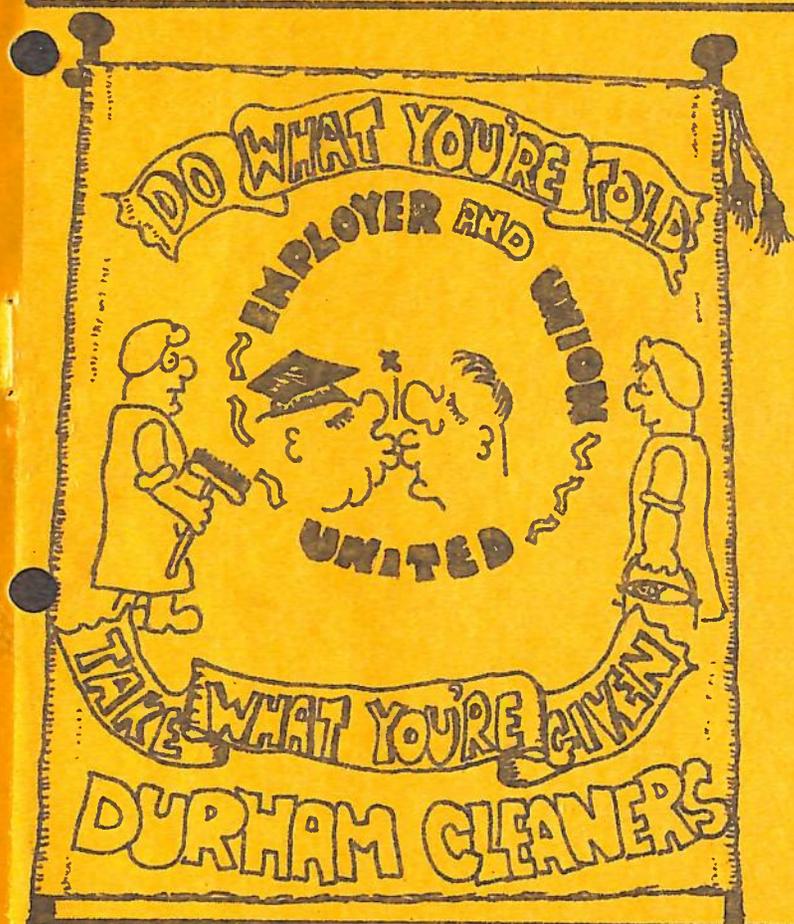


THE DURHAM EXPERIENCE

BUREAUCRATS AND WOMEN CLEANERS



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Solidarity

Pamphlet 52

LYNDA FINN

GAVIN WILLIAMS

BUREAUCRATS AND WOMEN CLEANERS

An account of the attempt by women cleaners at the University of Durham to gain effective trade union representation.

In a university or an office people leave the building dirty and find it clean in the morning. Clever stuff! Just another of those modern miracles to put in the same bracket as electric carving knives and colour telly. And if by accident people happen to see a woman with a mop and bucket disappearing round a corner how little it disturbs the sense that these places get cleaned by magic. Yet people clean offices and universities and get paid precious little for it and get treated like dirt into the bargain. This is an account of how some women cleaners tried to organise themselves and the difficulties they faced.

FOREWORD

The Labour Government's £2 billion tribute to international finance in the form of cuts in public expenditure and in employment is the latest in a long series. The Chancellor of the Exchequer's proposals are designed to maximise reductions while minimizing resistance by setting groups of workers against one another and as always by carrying them out at the expense of those worst placed to resist them. Reductions in employment and services will bear most heavily on the following groups: women, part-time workers, school-leavers, immigrant workers, children and the elderly. Direct redundancies of full-time workers in the public sector will be minimized in a variety of ways. Unemployment will be exported to the private sector by cutting back on government spending, especially on construction projects. The hours and employment of part-time workers will be cut back. Earlier retirement will be encouraged. Employment will be reduced by 'natural wastage', that is people who leave their jobs will not be replaced. The workers most likely to

leave their jobs, especially in a period of high unemployment, are women whose inherited domestic role makes them primarily responsible for the care of children, and the old and the infirm. Women wishing to re-enter employment will be unable to do so. This attack on employment is supported by the increasing emphasis on the ideology that 'A Woman's Place is in the Home'. As in the aftermath of the Second World War, women are being warned about the deprivation of children with working mothers, and the necessity of breast feeding, advised how to save money by working harder in the home, and facilities for abortion are under severe attack.(1)

In recent years there has been a sharp increase in part-time employment of women. Part-timers are cheap. They can be forced to accept wages and conditions which would be unacceptable to full-time workers. They can be employed outside normal working hours without overtime rates, denied paid holidays and sick leave, pension rights, and most crucially, claims to redundancy payments. Even under the new Employment Protection Act, rights in these areas will only be extended to those part-timers working more than 16 hours a week. Apart from all the other ways government and employers evade and delay the implementation of equal pay, part-time employment helps to maintain women as a reserve pool of cheap labour.(2)

As Counter-Information Services point out,(3) "Women are frequently written off as apathetic, second-class workers who don't really need the money and whose primary role is anyway in the home. And if you want to look at it that way there is plenty of evidence to back you up". Women are less likely than men to join trade unions, and to participate in trade union activities. However, it is not the case that, despite the best efforts of honest trade unionists, women are poor material for unionisation. It is rather the case that when women seek effective union representation, they are confronted both by the constraints imposed by their dual role as workers and as housewives and mothers and the attitudes which go with this, and also by the scepticism and chauvinism of trade union bureaucrats.

BUREAUCRATS AND WOMEN CLEANERS

This account shows how a small group of cleaners, employed in a part of the University of Durham, struggled in vain for effective union representation. Two major trade unions, the General and Municipal Workers Union (GMWU) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), were primarily concerned with settling their claims to their respective negotiating rights, rather than with negotiating the workers' demands. They treated

the workers as clients and did not act as representatives of the workers. The GMWU, while insisting on their exclusive right to represent the workers, have acted explicitly as the agents of the employers. Not only were the cleaners, in the absence of effective trade union support, in a weak bargaining position, but they found it difficult to resist the claims of the University, and its male and middle-class agents, to exercise authority over the terms and conditions of their employment. The part-time and 'secondary' nature of their work discouraged cleaners from taking consistently strong action in defence of their rights.

Durham has long been an area of high unemployment, so the University and Colleges have found it easy to recruit a large establishment of cleaners and catering staff who travel into the city from distant villages. They are employed by 14 separate colleges as well as different parts of the University. When they have been forced to look for economies, their first response has been to save money on the wages of cleaning and catering staff, rather than to cut back on the income and privileges of academic and administrative staff. By the end of 1973 the pay and conditions of the women cleaners were even worse than those offered by other public employers in the area. Cleaners were paid 40½p an hour for 14¾ hours per week. By comparison County Hall paid 46p per hour for a 21 hour week. Pay rises were countered by reductions in hours. Cleaners were not entitled to sick pay. Holidays were conceded, but cleaners did not gain any pension rights, pay increases for long service, or claims to redundancy payments. Catering staff at the student cafeteria were laid off without a retainer over University vacations as is standard practice. So, although they worked full-time, they never worked for a full year and thus never acquired the right to redundancy payments.

THE ROLE OF THE GMWU

According to an inter-union 'spheres of influence' agreement, the GMWU had claimed the right to recruit members among manual and domestic staff at the University of Durham. They had very few members among full-time domestic workers in the colleges, and took no interest in the recruitment of part-time cleaning staff, nor of women workers in general. Nevertheless, in 1972, Mrs. Maddison, then employed as a cleaner, asked a GMWU shop steward for membership forms and recruited about 20 members. He told her that she was wasting her time, as the union could not represent people working less than 21 hours. The members had 12p weekly subscriptions deducted from their wages, but were never issued with membership cards, informed of union meetings

or represented in pay negotiations. Finding that they were indeed wasting their time, they dropped out. Quite independently of this, the Durham Students Union (DSU), concerned at the lack of representation of full-time staff, mainly women, at the student cafeteria, wrote to ask the GMWU to recruit members. GMWU replied to their letter, but never followed it up.

The expansion of public employment provided the power base in the North-East for the officials of the GMWU. Their regional secretary Andrew Cunningham, who saw no contradiction in sitting on boards of management and 'representing' workers, sat on a number of employing bodies, including the Council of Durham University, and was a dominant figure in the Labour Party, until his arrest and conviction for corruption. The GMWU controlled union membership of manual workers in most public institutions in the North-East. In this way, they extended their power, while the employers were not unduly troubled by union demands, and the unions not unduly bothered by the need to recruit and represent workers.

ENTER THE TGWU

In October 1973, cleaners were given 1p per hour rise to standardise wages throughout the university. This derisory increase angered the cleaners. The authors, then a student and a teacher respectively at the University, discussed the possibility of unionisation with several cleaners and with Mrs. Maddison, then employed as a tea lady. Mr. Mills of the TGWU was invited to address cleaners. The authors, together with Mrs. Maddison, leafleted the cleaners. On 15 November two meetings were held, before and after work hours. Cleaners, mindful of their experience with the GMWU were sceptical of the willingness of the trade unions to represent part-time workers. Mr. Mills allayed their fears. They would pay a part-timers' subscription of 7p per week, but would have all the rights of full members. They would have their own branch. No agreements could be made by union officials unless they were accepted by the workers concerned. Within a week 62 cleaners and 2 tea ladies had joined the TGWU and formed a branch.

At this point the University took an unprecedented interest in the trade union membership of cleaners. On 19 November, Bryan Cooke, Senior Bursar, informed cleaners that while, as by law, 'Every individual is free to join the union of his or her choice or not to join a union,' he strongly encouraged them to join the GMWU as the University had agreed that the GMWU should represent manual and domestic staff. This encouragement was strongly reinforced by Mr. Hyde, an ex-R.S.M., the cleaners

supervisor. Despite this 'encouragement' only 5 women left the TGWU. Meanwhile the University wrote to the University Committee for Non-Teaching Staffs asking them to 'influence the TGWU to withdraw from what is undoubtedly GMWU territory'. No activity was forthcoming from the GMWU except, belatedly, a telephone call in which they peremptorily demanded that the TGWU refrain from recruiting and hand over the members to them. As Mr. Mills pointed out to Mr. Cooke, '... I am somewhat surprised to note that you are acting as an agent of the GMW Union. You will appreciate that when Unions breach the Bridlington Agreement it is normally the job of the Union who is claiming the breach to make the complaint, and not to ask an employer to act as agent.' But then the GMWU was soon to return the compliment.

Mr. Mills informed Mr. Cooke that the cleaners wished to remain in the TGWU and requested a meeting to discuss 'an improvement in basic pay, the introduction of a sick pay system, agreed review periods of terms and conditions of employment, an agreed establishment of cleaners and other items'.

'OUTSIDE AGITATORS'??!

The role of the authors of this account raised some significant problems. Our disgust at the 1p pay rise made us determined to help the cleaners. We made enquiries from cleaning and catering staff, from Mrs. Maddison, and from a student who had been a shop steward and had studied at Ruskin. We also consulted May Hobbs, who led the successful struggle to unionise London night cleaners. We conducted a brief survey of wages and conditions of service among University cleaners and catering staff. Only then did we begin to realise the abysmal lack of a number of basic rights, and of the consistent way in which over the years the University unilaterally kept down earnings. The University was probably not unusual in its employment practices; nor were we unusual in our ignorance. It was clear that cleaners were not willing to join the GMWU. We therefore contacted the TGWU, which had a cleaners branch in London and which, unlike the GMWU, had a reputation for protecting its members interests. Catering staff showed an initial interest, but then backed off when warned against joining the TGWU by the University. We therefore concentrated on the cleaners employed in the Arts and Social Science buildings, and made no attempt to recruit elsewhere in the University, because we did not have the capacity to do so, and because the GMWU did have some members on the Science Site and in certain colleges.

Although we are socialists who are committed to the objectives of the women's movement, we were not members of any

political organisation. Our objective was to help the women cleaners to form a trade union branch, which would give them the power to present and negotiate their own demands for improved wages and conditions, with the assistance and support of a powerful trade union. It was in this respect that we saw the campaign as political. We had no other motives, and did not wish to recruit cleaners into any other organisation. Political consciousness would develop out of experience, which was as true for us as it was for them.

We saw our job as providing initial assistance and encouragement. We had access to typewriters, telephones and duplicating facilities and skills in typing and in writing formal letters. The first objective was to get women to join the union. The second was to set up a proper union branch, with elected officers and regular meetings. Unfortunately, the cleaners continued to rely on us to keep minutes, draft letters and statements, and advise them. They were daunted by the University's formal and official use of language, and authoritative pronouncements. They saw us as people who could argue with the University in their own language, and counter the University's statements. This support could not be provided as and when required by a busy union official based in Newcastle.

This was partly a matter of lack of access to facilities and skills. But it was, and continues to be, far more a question of confidence. Women distrusted their own judgement in these sorts of matters. Characteristically, many of them asked their husbands whether they should join the union, and were guided by their husband's view on union issues. They saw themselves as uneducated, and therefore unable to decide these things for themselves. Several times cleaners said that if they'd had any brains they wouldn't have been cleaners. They were particularly awed by having to deal with the University.

THE STRUGGLE BEGINS

Over the Christmas break, the cleaners found themselves having to defend their meagre earnings, instead of negotiating for union recognition and improved wages and conditions. When Mr. Heath put Britain on a three day week, he exempted educational institutions. However, faced with the need to reduce planned expenditure, the University took the opportunity to try to cut back cleaners' earnings. At the end of December, Mr. Boobyer, the University Surveyor, told the cleaners that they could only work from Mondays to Wednesdays in accordance with Government regulations. In addition they were asked to

work on Saturday morning if they could 'to ensure the offices are suitable for opening the following Monday'. No consideration was given to the cleaners' need to maintain their earnings, but then Mr. Boobyer hoped 'that all members of staff involved appreciate the need to save electricity in the National interest'. No other University employees were required to make sacrifices in the 'National interest'. The existence of a union branch gave the cleaners the confidence to stand up to the University.

At a union meeting on 16 January the cleaners agreed to do no more than their normal work, and to ask the University to make up a full weeks wages for all members from 31 December. The University issued a circular agreeing to add 3 hours pay for each of the first 3 weeks of January, but only to women who had worked for the University throughout 1973, which excluded almost half the cleaners. The cleaners rejected this crude attempt to divide their members, and on 23 January decided not to come to work on Saturday, and to ask staff and students at the University not to use buildings for teaching on Thursdays and Fridays until cleaners were paid to clean them. On Thursday and Friday, 24 and 25 January, University buildings were picketed, with official TGWU support, and a pamphlet explaining the cleaners' grievances was issued. Support was given by the local ASTMS branch and by the students union, though this did not stop many students and most staff from crossing the picket lines. What did force the University to act was the adverse publicity. Local and national press and radio and television were soon on the spot, photographing and interviewing cleaners and phoning a startled Registrar to find out what was going on. By and large, coverage was predictably chauvinistic. "Mrs Mopps in Varsity dust-up" was the Daily Mail's choice headline, (4) but it was sufficient to get the University to arrange to meet the cleaners' committee, which it had previously refused to recognise.

During this very week, the GMWU had been engaged in negotiations with the University, and on 23 January had announced a general wage settlement, which referred only to full-time staff and did not mention the plight of the cleaners. In order to retain the standing of the GMWU, the University summoned Mr. Moss of the GMWU and dictated to him the terms on which it planned to settle the dispute, which Mr. Moss blithely accepted. The picket remained however until the TGWU branch committee had negotiated an agreement providing not only for the restoration of five day working, but also for the extra three hours pay per week to be paid to all cleaners. The GMWU had ignored this problem, being totally ignorant of it, not having consulted the cleaners on whose behalf it presumed to negotiate. The GMWU acted throughout this period as an agent of the employers, and then sought to take credit for an agreement which the cleaners themselves had forced on the University. (5)

It is important to note that the action taken was very limited. Strike action proved unnecessary, but would have been difficult to carry out, because the women were afraid of dismissal, and many of them were married to miners who were themselves on strike. Several women were too nervous to take part in the picket. Messages of support were received from other unions and organisations, including May Hobbs on behalf of the London night cleaners, which helped to boost morale. While the women were confident that what they were doing was right, they still saw this as secondary to their domestic duties. The meeting with the University on the afternoon of Friday 25 January had to be delayed, because three of the women on the committee had to return home 'to get their husbands off to work'. When the committee did meet the University authorities, they stood firm and refused to accept the terms dictated by the University. We, the authors, had feared that the University would be able to pull the wool over their eyes, but were proved wrong. Negotiating across the table, with the strength of the picket behind them, the women had no difficulty in resisting the University's bullshit and achieving all their demands. However, this was to prove more difficult on subsequent occasions when Mr. Boobyer, the University Surveyor, called the women together to a meeting and informed them of the University's decisions.

AGAIN THE GMWU

Having lost this battle, the University continued to wage the class war, using the middle-class weapons of official language and authority, and trade union agreements and pro-cedures. Their first move was to deny TGWU recognition, and establish the negotiating rights of the GMWU. Mr. Cooke wrote for the University to the Central Council for Non-teaching Staffs (CCNTS) asking them to restrain the TGWU. Five days after the strike had been settled, he enclosed 'one of the notices they are spreading around' (a pamphlet which had been distributed on the picket line) and complained that 'the TGWU are now openly causing disruption in the University, not only in labour relations but in the running of the academic life'. Their second move, having failed to reduce the number of hours worked, was to plan to reduce the numbers of cleaners employed. In this way they would recover the 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ p pay rise which they had given to the cleaners on 31 January, with the promise of achieving parity with local authority cleaners two years hence, by the end of 1975. The GMWU accepted the pay rise, and agreed that staff should be cut back by 'natural wastage'. Again, they simply accepted what the University put to them, did not consult any cleaners, and made no attempt to defend the cleaners' interests. They preferred to secure their right to negotiate on

the cleaners' behalf by asking the CCNTS to arrange a transfer of the cleaners at Durham University to their union. In all this, the GMWU acted only as the University's agents, while having the University act as their agents.(6)

After the successful picket morale was high among the cleaners. They asked for immediate parity with local authority cleaners, and agreed not to allow the University to move women around from one building to another at will, nor to accept any reduction in staff. Initially, the University made no official statement of its intention to cut staff, but when informal indications were given that women who left were not to be replaced, the branch agreed to instruct members not to do the work of anyone who had left until a replacement had been engaged. In March two cleaners left, and Mrs. Hansen and Mrs. Stone found themselves working on their own, with no indication of whether or when they might expect replacements. Not only were they expected to do the work previously done by two cleaners, but were left alone in buildings in which people had been warned against a prowler.

They wrote to Mr. Boobyer asking when they might expect replacements. Instead of replying, he arranged a meeting of all the cleaning staff. He told them they would just have to accept reductions, in 'return' for which the University would accept reduced cleaning standards. Women would be put into groups who would have to move around among the buildings. No commitment was given regarding the extent of these reductions. He appealed to women to co-operate with one another, that is to carry out the work done by people who had not been replaced. Only after two weeks was anyone asked to join Mrs. Stone, and by this time Mrs. Hansen had sought and found other employment. In April Mr. Boobyer did meet the TGWU branch committee with Mr. Mills, but again made no concessions. After this, he again addressed the cleaners, and announced that cuts in staff would be limited to 14 (20%) - though they have since gone even further than this.

In all this the University acted with an appalling lack of consideration for cleaners, and a lack of understanding of their work. Women were simply left on their own and subjected to great strain and uncertainty, without any attempt to solve the problem, either with the women concerned, or with any trade union. Cleaning staff were expected to bear a disproportionate share in the economies in University spending. The University, and the academics who determine university policy, have blithely assumed that women could reduce the standard of cleaning, and move from building as it suits the University. They fail to recognise that dirt is cumulative; a building left half-clean one day will be that much more difficult to clean the next.

Nor do they realise that people develop a routine for cleaning particular buildings and a responsibility for maintaining the cleanliness of their building, Women cleaners take a pride in their work. What to academics is a reduction in standards of service' is to cleaners their livelihood and work.

ACADEMIC COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

Having failed to reduce the working week by 40%, the University succeeded in carrying out a reduction in staff of 20% - and later of 30%. The only union which they would recognise, the GMWU, simply agreed to this without question. The University, with GMWU agreement, insisted on their right to decide unilaterally the number of people to be employed, and to change the conditions of their employment. Lacking union support, most women tended to accept the University's claim to exercise these managerial prerogatives. Prior to the picket, the University had only communicated with the cleaners by issuing circulars, and verbal instructions through the cleaners' supervisor. Now the University Surveyor chose to call the cleaners to a meeting, where he addressed them, appealed for their co-operation, and informed them of the University's decisions. In these circumstances women found it difficult to reply to his arguments and tended to defer to his authority. While some women refused to carry out extra work, and to be moved around, others agreed to co-operate. Those who did refuse had to do so individually, in their own buildings, without collective support, and naturally resented others who did not carry out the union decision. Different groups of women were asked to do different amounts of extra work, so that they focused their resentment on one another, rather than on the University. There was little opportunity for communication during work hours between women working in separate buildings, and as women became divided among themselves attendance at union meetings fell, and some members left the union. Those women who were uneasy about taking action began feeling that the more militant women were dominating union meetings and forcing meetings on them. And the problem was exacerbated by the University's success in having persuaded some women to join the GMWU.

Discouragement now developed from another source. The GMWU demanded that the trade union side of CCNTS implement the spheres of influence agreement, and instruct the TGWU to transfer their members to the GMWU - disregarding their own failure to represent the workers on whose behalf they presumed to negotiate. The CCNTS (trade union side) accepted their claim and told the two unions to resolve the matter at local

level. Accordingly the May 1974 meeting of the TGWU branch was attended by both Mr. Mills for the TGWU and Mr. Moss for the GMWU. Attempts to discuss particular issues and grievances against the University were ignored at this meeting - and remained on the table on which Mr. Mills had placed them in his letter to the University in December. The cleaners insisted on their right to remain members of the TGWU, and to recruit any new cleaners to the TGWU; otherwise the branch would simply wither away by 'natural wastage'. They also wished to be represented by an official of their own union. Neither Mr. Mills nor Mr. Moss, though both conceded the justice of the cleaners' complaints, were prepared to do more than allow the cleaners to remain members of the TGWU, and be represented by their own branch committee in discussing particular grievances with Messrs. Cooke and Boobyer of the University. Above this, matters would have to be taken up by the GMWU on the Joint Consultative Committee, or taken up at national level. Although the cleaners insisted on recruiting new members in the face of Mr. Moss's objections, it was clear that the issue had been decided over their heads at national level, and that their problems would continue to be decided over their heads between union officials, or between union officials and the University. The most important consideration for the unions was to settle their relations with one another, rather than to concern themselves with the problems of the workers themselves. This is not perhaps surprising. Union officials are busy people, and the cleaners were a small and weak group of workers. But they are among a very large number of under-unionised and under-paid, but economically important, part-time women workers.

Since then, then, the TGWU branch has maintained itself in existence, with declining enthusiasm and falling membership - down from 62 to 29 by July 1976. Further cuts proceeded without resistance, until the University started recruiting again with only 51 cleaners. No new cleaners were appointed when a new three storey building was completed. Originally, the University had intended to allocate eight cleaners to it, but instead transferred women from the next building to it. One simple result of this is that some buildings do not get cleaned properly; most of the work now consists of clearing away rubbish. Attempts were made to get Mr. Moss to take up questions concerning pay and conditions at the Joint Consultative Committee, but letters sent to him were simply ignored. May Hobbs addressed a desultory branch meeting in March 1975. This could do little more than confirm her scepticism regarding the attitudes of both trade unions and employers to women cleaners. After hearing of developments at Durham she said that she had always cited the Ministry of Defence as the worst example of employers of cleaners; henceforth she would take the University of Durham as her example.(7)

THE TGWU COPS OUT

Despite the lack of official recognition, the University has taken grudging notice of the cleaners, and consulted the branch committee over particular problems affecting their individual members. In the Autumn of 1975, Mr. Boobyer called a meeting at which the cleaners were asked to forgo their share of the £6 a week pay rise, 15p an hour, to help out the University, and accept 10p per hour! This the cleaners adamantly refused, and since 1973, their wages have improved from 40¹/₂p to 90p per hour - though after cutting staff, the increase to the University is only about 20%, far less than the rate of inflation, in other words a substantial cut in their real wages bill. An inter-union committee has been set up within the University, which could have helped cleaners to resist cuts and improve their conditions. Lacking official recognition the TGWU are, however, excluded from this. In April 1976, the two unions decided to resolve the embarrassing question of recognition at an enquiry into the Spheres of Influence Agreement (not that the cleaners themselves were consulted). The regional organiser for the TGWU, Mr. Gibson, who has replaced Mr. Mills, sent the cleaners a copy of a letter from the GMWU instructing the TGWU to cease recruiting members. The branch committee was unable to contact Mr. Gibson to query this letter. Since then the branch has given up holding regular meetings. But in defiance of official instructions, new cleaners have been recruited by the TGWU branch committee. This, we gathered from Mr. Gibson, would place him in a dilemma.

The dilemma facing the cleaners is rather more severe. In view of the GMWU's record, they will not be party to any inter-union transfer. The more militant and committed cleaners will drop out of the trade union movement rather than be forced to join the GMWU. Denied the right to representation by their own union, the cleaners are denied the right to union representation.

POLITICAL LESSONS

We had hoped that relevant political lessons, both for ourselves and for the cleaners, would emerge from the experience of the campaign. These lessons have emerged with a vengeance.

The first lesson is that cuts in public expenditure will be concentrated on those least able to resist them. They will be more effective, and more difficult to resist, when they don't

involve sackings, but rely instead on 'natural wastage', that is not replacing workers who leave jobs, and on the exercise of managerial authority to pass the increased work-load on to those remaining. They can be countered by determined union action, but this requires both the active solidarity of all the workers involved, and consistent support from their trade unions. In this, as in so many cases, the employer could rely on the collusion of the unions in carrying out their attack on workers' jobs and conditions. 'Moderation' in presenting workers' demands is coupled with 'responsibility' to the employers' requirements.

The second lesson is that women workers, including part-time workers, are eager to gain the protection of a trade union, however limited one might see this to be. Given the support of their union, they are capable of joining together to defend themselves against attacks on their pay and conditions of work. It is extremely difficult to take on both the trade unions and their employers. Without union support they fear dismissal, tend to defer to the authority of management, and can more easily be divided against one another. The separation of cleaners into small groups, working in a number of separate buildings, and coming together only to collect their keys and pay packets, makes solidarity more difficult, and the exploitation of resentments and rivalries among the cleaners much easier.

The cleaners' lack of confidence in themselves extends to their relations with union officials as well as with their employers. Union officials tend to adopt a patronising attitude to the cleaners, They saw the women as lacking the knowledge to understand the full complexities of union affairs. Thus they would need to be instructed and advised by union officials. The cleaners did not necessarily accept the advice, nor trust the motives of officials, even of their own union, the TGWU. But they could not directly challenge the advice and instructions of union officials any more than of University administrators. They therefore looked to us, the authors of this account, to act both as an alternative source of advice, and as intermediaries between them and the union officials. And for their part, union officials found it easier to deal with us than to discuss problems directly with the cleaners.

There was a clear difference in the cleaners' attitudes towards the two of us, one male and a lecturer, the other female and a student. They saw the woman as a valued friend and ally. They deferred to the man and his opinions and looked to him for leadership. This was in part a matter of academic status. But it tied in clearly with a more widespread deference to male authority, whether exercised by friend or foe. When both of us left Durham in July, 1975, it was more difficult for the branch

to deal with its own union officials, more so perhaps than with the University. Branch organisation needs to recognise these difficulties, and also take account of the particular problems, regarding times of meetings and isolation from other workers, which may face part-time workers. In large impersonal union branches, dominated by other, predominantly male, workers, part-time women workers will feel themselves to be outsiders. Only with their own branch, or sub-branch, can they be sure that their own particular problems and circumstances will be taken account of.

But obviously these problems go beyond the forms of union organisation. The women cleaners lacked confidence in their own judgement and capacity to act, both because they were women, and because they were "uneducated". It is not that they lacked the capacity to identify their own grievances and problems. They had a shrewd appreciation of the University and its workings, and of their own strengths and weaknesses. It is rather that school had taught them they were failures. And their employer, the University, is the pinnacle of a system which defines some as knowledgeable and intelligent, by defining others including the cleaners as ignorant. The problem is not so much an educational one as a political one. A class society must, via its education system, separate those who are to hold positions of power from those who are to sell their labour. Given the dominant criterion of success, the latter will fail, and will perceive themselves as failures. In the case of the Durham cleaners, their employers and union officials found it easy to mystify them with bureaucratic and official language and apparently authoritative sounding pronouncements. This problem is not peculiar to the Durham cleaners: it is common to all working class people in struggle.

The primacy of their domestic role also effected their view of the importance of unionisation. The barriers for women who are considered first and foremost housewives and mothers are enormous. Unfortunately, even union officials have a tendency to see them, incorrectly, as working for pin-money as a supplement to the income of the main bread-winner, the husband. (Mr. Mills, to his credit, did deny this). Women need strong encouragement and not the continual discouragement which the Durham cleaners received. While it is necessary to make minor alterations in union proceedings, such as providing creches and altering times of union meetings, these are by no means sufficient. The division of the domestic labour in the home needs radical changes. If women are to play a full part in industrial struggle, men must play their full part in the home. Although a discussion of the nature and functions of the patriarchal nuclear family is not within the boundaries of this account, its demands on women have a crucial bearing on their role as workers.

The third lesson, then, concerns the very real difficulties faced by part-time women workers in overcoming the constraints imposed by their lack of formal educational qualifications, inherited domestic role, and the part-time nature of their work. But, despite these difficulties, the unionisation of part-time women workers, such as university cleaners, is both necessary and possible. Our most important lesson was that the main barrier to unionisation is not the attitudes of part-time women workers, but the actual discouragement of the women by trade unions.

The primary concerns of trade union officials are organisational and financial. At times the bureaucrats' empires can be expanded by supporting militant action of newly unionised workers. But these empires can best be protected by agreeing to a closed shop with employers and with other unions, which maintains their monopoly of access to a captive clientele.(8) This sort of closed shop is very different from that established by workers themselves to protect their solidarity. It is a cartel of middlemen, monopolising the business of reconciling workers' demands to the requirements of their employers.

In the world of trade unions, though not of employers, part-time women workers do not occupy an important place. Their membership dues do not justify the degree of support and assistance which they initially require from their union. The smooth demarcation of spheres of influence among unions is more important than the actual representation of workers. Thus, in this particular case, a union branch was formed in the hopes of requiring employers to negotiate with the workers concerned and with their representatives over wages, and over a range of basic rights concerning sick pay, holiday pay, establishment levels and other issues. In the event, the workers have been forced to attempt to defend themselves, unsuccessfully, against cuts in employment, have not been able to require their employer to negotiate with their representatives, except over minor, personal matters, and have not been able to get the issues which had been raised in Mr. Mills' first letter to the University considered at all. The University was able to exploit their weaknesses because of the lack of necessary support from the trade unions. But then, as May Hobbs told the Durham cleaners, "The unions have counted us in pounds, shillings and pence, and we weren't enough money for them".

NOTES

(1) We have taken these points from a pamphlet by Garnett College students, For a Woman's Right to Work, June 1976. Obtainable from For a Woman's Right to Work Pamphlet, Furzedown College Students' Union, Welham Road, London, S.W.17. 10p plus post and packing.

(2) Counter-Information Services, Crisis series. Anti-report 15, Women, pp.17-21.

(3) Women, p.22.

(4) Daily Mail, 25 January 1974. The picket was covered by The Northern Echo, Durham Advertiser, Evening Chronicle, The Journal (Newcastle), the Daily Mirror, Sun, and The Guardian. Subsequent accounts appeared in Spare Rib no.22, Tribune, Red Weekly and Record (paper of the TGWU).

Documentary evidence for our account is in the hands of the cleaners.

(5) Journal, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 28 January 1974.

(6) Cf. M. Fore, GMWU Scab Union, Solidarity pamphlet - 10p obtainable from Solidarity (London), 123 Lathom Road, London E.6. - and the account of GMWU scabbing in Tony Lane & Kenneth Roberts, Strike at Pilkingtons, Fontana, 1971.

(7) May Hobbs' visit is reported in an account of these developments by Bel Mooney, 'Durham's dirty dispute', New Statesman, 21 March 1975.

(8) Compare the fate of the Glass and General Workers' Union in Strike at Pilkingtons.

The authors are grateful to the committee and members of Branch 8/461 of the TGWU, Durham, for their friendship, for what we have learnt from them, and for use of relevant documents.

SOLIDARITY POSTSCRIPT

Solidarity has always argued that the trade unions are irremediably integrated into the modern state. They cannot be reformed into organisations 'effectively' representing the true interests of workers. And they cannot play any positive role in the transformation of society. We have documented how trade union bureaucrats act to divide, defuse or smash workers' struggles. These people do not act in this way because they like 'betraying' or 'selling out'. Nor do they have some perverse desire to screw people up. They do what they do because their interests are quite different from the interests of the people they allegedly 'represent'. Their power is based on their ability to act as middlemen on the labour market, delivering a relatively passive workforce to private or state employers. This is why they are just as scared as the boss at the emergence of independent working class action, controlled from below.

This pamphlet describes how at Durham, in pursuit of the interests of the GMWU and of the TGWU, the most elementary needs of a group of women cleaners were disregarded and their interests thrown away.

What happened at Durham was a small struggle. But the problems and issues thrown up - and the lessons learnt - are common to hundreds of thousands of other workers. They affect other women employed in cleaning, the catering and hotel industries, and many similar jobs. These jobs are essential but are ignored not only by trade unions but very often also by radicals as well (the latter usually being hypnotised by the more 'romantic' fields of industrial struggle). The experiences described in this pamphlet will, we hope, be of value to those in similar situations. There is no reason why those beginning to move into the line of battle should go through the same bitter experience of progressive disillusion with the union bosses. Right from the beginning, they should take the control of their own struggles into their own hands.

It is true that it is still sometimes possible, even in the most monolithic and authoritarian unions, for workers to use the union structure at the base to some purpose: for example, to make contact with other workers. Union membership at the place of work, imposed and controlled by the workers, can sometimes mean that they can dominate the job a little more than they could before. Such membership occasionally helps create solidarity in a way which people understand. Sometimes, in 19th century conditions and in backward industries (and these still pertain in some areas), even the union bureaucracies can 'achieve' superficial improvements. But the heavy price that has to be paid for the 'advantages' of union membership is that control passes into the hands of the officials. This tendency is increasing, with a greater penetration by the officials into the place of work. The physical reality of the 'closed shop' has a very different meaning when dominated by the union bosses. It then often becomes a means of controlling and disciplining workers.

It is insufficient to say that union officials don't do the job they are supposed to do. At Durham, even if the officials had acted like everyone's fantasy Superorganiser, would this in the long run have altered the situation? Let us imagine that, through the good offices of some official, a massive picket of militant union shock troops had backed the women's claim. Let us imagine that there had been systematic blacking of supplies to the University, in support of the cleaners. The likely result would have been that the women's demands would have been met in full. They might all have become union members. Their working lives might have become marginally more pleasant (or less unpleasant). But their role in such a struggle would have been passive. They would have been sitting in the audience, while someone else conducted the orchestra. The contacts for waging future struggles would only be available through 'official channels'. Those involved would have emerged with just as little confidence in acting by and for themselves as they had when they started the struggle. And should our fantasy Superorganiser change his mind and/or transfer 'his' members to the 'Lie-on-your-backs-and-let-the-boss-stamp-on-your-face Victims and Allied Trade Union', the women might have found the same shock troops were around to make sure they did what they were told. (That is far from being a fantasy. Our Motor Bulletin No.2 - UAW Scab Union, price 10p - shows how it happened to some car workers.)

We are aware of many of the pitfalls and problems. It is this which makes it difficult for us to endorse all the formulations of the authors of this pamphlet. We feel uneasy when they urge 'effective union representation' or refer to the need for women to be represented by 'their own union'. We cannot accept their belief that 'with their own branch or sub-branch (the women) can be sure that their own particular problems and circumstances will be taken account of'. We agree with the authors that the unions 'did not act as representatives of the workers' and because we are impressed by the fact that this is the rule, rather than the exception, we cannot follow the authors in their paradoxical conclusion that 'the unionisation of part-time women workers, such as University cleaners, is both possible and necessary'.

While fully understanding the frustrations and difficulties that lead people to seize on union organisation as the 'necessary' first step, we think it is about time that workers began seriously to discuss the possibility of industrial organisation and struggle in no way dependent on the apparatus of the unions.