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Review: Dole Bondage – Up Yours!

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Anarchist Communist Federation

1997

Dole Bondage – Up Yours! is a pamphlet in the form of an open letter of resignation by Stuart Bracewell as secretary of Wales Against the Job Seekers Allowance (WAJSA). It recounts the development of the group until late 1996. By then, as happens in many single issue campaigns, leftist domination of a broad front of activists first rendered the group irrelevant to those it had been formed to empower, in this case the unemployed. Then it sapped the group of the creative energy needed to publicise and fight the issue, by calling another boring demo with limited potential. Finally it destroyed the group as it stood by inactivity, by not building for or turning up for the march they had called, leaving unemployed activists demoralised and disillusioned. As an angry founder member of WAJSA, Stuart Bracewell exposes the cynical and redundant organisations such as the CPSA, Socialist Party (then Militant) etc.

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whom he rightly blames for the stagnation of the group. This is a lesson to us all.

WAJSA was, with hindsight, doomed from the first, containing an alliance of anarchists and Earth-Firsters and members of Militant, Socialist Labour Party, Cymru Goch, Alliance for Workers Liberty and later, the CPSA. As is often the case when such groups come together “sectarian differences...seemed to have been put aside”. Sectarian differences are a red herring when it comes to working with the left. What is really at issue is our entirely different agendas. What proves to be a problem, as it did in WAJSA, is that the Left’s first tactic is to make sure that their agenda becomes that of the group. In response, libertarians frequently put our agenda on the back-burner, or express it only apologetically, for the sake of unity. In this case, the libertarian agenda was the empowerment of the unemployed. The Leftist agenda was the empowerment of CPSA members working in Benefit Agency/Employment Service, which was eventually exposed by their own tactics and refusal to engage in any action opposed by CPSA representatives. These agendas were not only different but, as time has told, mutually exclusive.

The CPSA are the union whose members’ job it has been to implement the welfare state and to protect its resources from ‘fraud’ by claimants. Since the introduction of the JSA in particular, this role has been extended to the active persecution of the unemployed. In WAJSA, the inevitable conflict of interests came to a head when CPSA reps turned up to accuse libertarians of planning assaults on their members. This was part of the hysterical response of much of the Left to the Three Strikes policy; a policy which does not involve recommending physical assaults on employment staff, has not actually been implemented anywhere except in Edinburgh where it originated and has not even been mentioned, let alone debated, in WAJSA until this point. Suggestions that the CPSA members obstruct the legislation were labelled “ultra-left nonsense” by a CPSA steward, and to occupy offices of managers in a show of “mutual

solidarity” between the CPSA workers and claimants was called “Mickey Mouse terrorism” by a Socialist Party member. As *Dole Bondage* points out itself, “abstract calls for *unity* and *solidarity* are futile unless there is something concrete to base that unity on, and mutual acts of solidarity”.

Dole Bondage raised particular interest in Nottingham Campaign Against the JSA (NCAJSA), not least because it reached that group exactly at the same time as the Left disassociated themselves from NCAJSA. NCAJSA was lucky, having potentially fallen prey to Leftist inertia, and worse, itself. Fortunately, the Left are so weak these days that they tend to drift off if they can't dominate a group by numbers or by large amounts of ill-directioned activism (letter writing, press work etc. etc.). The 'spontaneously libertarian' nature of NCAJSA (most of its long-standing members had never met before the group was started) frightened the Left as soon as they appeared, because of the high level of political awareness and consequent debate in the group. This process of discussing politics in meetings is very frustrating to trade unionists in particular, who claim to know only that the workers are right and potentially have power, and that claimants are victims of capital and have no power. Well, where does this leave the unemployed when they perceive themselves to be in conflict with workers? Simply raising this question meant that NCAJSA was “ideologically confused”. Things came to a head when a leading Militant member initiated an anti-Project Work demo at the offices of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, in the middle of nowhere, volunteering his cadre in support and also to do the press work and arrange an 'appointment' with the manager to make sure he would be present. Scarily like the WAJSA experience, none of these promises materialised and the demo was an embarrassing flop. The office wasn't even staffed at the time of the demo! Soon the group heard through minutes of a Trades Council meeting sent to the unemployed workers delegate! that the group was “anti-worker” and had been dropped.

If the Left had been a large or very active proportion of NCAJSA membership, this would have been as destructive to the group as the presence of the Left was to WAJSA. Happily, NCAJSA is now free to criticise those who need criticising; those who need to wake up and realise that we no longer live in a clear-cut world of worker vs. boss (if we ever did). Politics and daily life is far more complex. For example, as *Dole Bondage* points out, it is the same leftists who oppose and attack scabs for undermining the power of workers as are now attempting to undermine the power of the unemployed to survive the attacks of the state. They do this by supporting the workers who uncritically implement state legislation, uncritically except to demand screens to protect themselves from the evil and violent unemployed. They fail to see that cutting off someone's benefit, or even threatening to, goes beyond 'doing their jobs'. It is threatening violence – starvation – against claimants. We have to ask, would the reaction be as indifferent to racist or sexist legislation. Of course not, and rightly. It would seem that, as long as a worker is a 'legitimate' worker (i.e. not a scab) that the unemployed can be sacrificed so that that worker can build his or her career. As a CPSA member of WAJSA put it, when it was suggested that industrial action should be taken, "(it was better that) union members implement the JSA than scabs".

It has to be said that the non-Labourite Groundswell network has provided a national framework for debate and activism essential for groups such as the one in Nottingham to survive. If WAJSA had been less Left dominated and more involved in Groundswell (which *Dole Bondage* admits it was not) then the libertarian-minded might have found the support necessary to establish their own agenda from the start. For clarification, the ACF is involved in local groups and consequently in Groundswell. Whilst much valuable debate about the JSA takes place in the ACF we do not seek to set up JSA groups or to co-ordinate them like the Left do their 'front organisations', nor to take them over! We seek to participate in what we call the 'culture of resistance' as it emerges, and

to both support it practically and influence it with our ideas on an open and non-cynical basis.

Things are somewhat 'up in the air' for the anti-JSA movement nationally, as it waits to see what form of forced labour New Labour is offering the unemployed and plans its response. But a combination of a Labour government and the leftist abandonment of the interests of the unemployed makes it easier for claimants to identify the real enemy. Capitalism, of whatever variety, needs the unemployed to stay unemployed to keep its workers working. It should be no surprise then that the left-wing of capitalism wants to stifle political debate amongst the unemployed.