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Three Strikes – Effective Tactic against the Job Seekers Allowance

Anarchist Communist Federation

1997

The Three Strikes strategy was thought up as a way of exposing dole workers and management who are using the JSA to harass claimants. Unions like the CPSA, as well as the TUC and many on the Left, have condemned this initiative. Indeed the CPSA counterposed the demand of security screens to protect dole workers from angry claimants. Nationally, the doleworkers unions have done little to practically resist the JSA, and their members have been implementing both the JSA and Project Work. Locally, some union leaders were threatening and pointing out unemployed activists. Unemployed activists in Edinburgh reported to the Groundswell meeting that a ‘Third Strike’ was being issued against a claimant adviser. The whole questioning of the Three Strikes strategy by the Left reveals that once again, they are not the solution, but part of the problem. For instance, one can read in Socialist Outlook, paper of the Trotskyist group of the same name, an article by one Keith Sinclair called ‘How Not To Fight the Job Seekers Allowance

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or Three Strikes that Shouldn't be Supported'. The remarkably ill-informed article (aren't Trots supposed to be in the vanguard of theory?) tells us that the Three Strikes strategy is "no longer the national policy of that group". The hack then goes on to tell us that: "The Three Strikes policy cuts across attempts to win over job centre workers to actively oppose the JSA. Left activists in the CPSA are put on the defensive, as management and right-wing union officials combine to suggest that all anti-JSA activities are targeted at CPSA members. Three Strikes makes it more difficult to win over job centre workers, and is, in reality, a gift to management and the right-wing leadership of the CPSA". We are also told that the "main advocates of 'Three Strikes' tend to be from an anarchist background. However anarchists and syndicalists who operate within the existing trade unions and Trade Councils are often opposed to Three Strikes. Support for Three Strikes is often linked with a refusal to put pressure on the Labour Party and union leaderships to fight the JSA and Project Work"(!).

Let's look at this statement in detail. From our own involvement in anti-JSA activity it is certainly not our view that Three Strikes has been abandoned by Groundswell. There was certainly no visible opposition to it at the last meeting. Indeed, there seemed to be general approval for any Three Strikes action. As to the statement that anarchists and syndicalists were opposed to it, well, it does not seem true of the comrades of the anarcho-syndicalist Solidarity Federation. The only other syndicalist group noticeably active in the Trades Councils are the Syndicalist Bulletin people. We were not aware that they opposed Three Strikes. Perhaps we can have some information from them on their stance?

Then we come to the ludicrous and misleading demands to put pressure on Labour and the union leaders (and end up wasting our time). There are no plans to repeal the JSA from Labour, indeed there has been no opposition from them at all. In fact, Gordon Brown, Labour Shadow Chancellor, has made it clear that he will not remove the JSA and proposes that the young unemployed work

for their dole. To think that Labour will change course over this is ridiculous and dangerous.

Let's look at the main claim that the article makes, that Three Strikes will damage unity between the unemployed and dole workers. This accusation of causing disunity has often been raised when particular sections of the working class express their own specific interests. The working class is not a monolith, it consists of many different groups and interests. Unity is not won by harping on about a false concept of 'Unity', which does not exist at the moment, but recognising those specific interests. When women organised against sexism and discrimination, the old cry of "You're causing splits in the ranks of the working class" went up. The same when black people organised against racism.

It has to be remarked that many members of Left outfits are dole workers. Groups like the Socialist Party (who have changed their name from Militant), Socialist Outlook, the SWP and the Alliance for Workers Liberty are particularly active in the CPSA, Socialist Party/Militant having most success in capturing positions in the bureaucracy. There has been general hostility to Three Strikes in the ranks of the Left, not just the Trotskyists but groups like the Scargillite Socialist Labour Party.

We have to face facts. There is a general culture among doleworkers of contempt towards claimants. The misleading argument that ranks are broken by the unemployed defending themselves fails to recognise that a particular hierarchical relationship exists between doleworkers and the unemployed. For a start, the Left has deliberately misunderstood the general thrust of Three Strikes. It would be chiefly aimed at office managers and 'advisers'- the enforcers sent in to make sure the JSA is put through effectively. It would very rarely be aimed at lowly doleworkers. However, where there were cases of doleworkers behaving in an arrogant and bullying way to claimants, and enthusiastically applying the terms of the JSA, no doubt Three Strikes actions would be undertaken. On the other hand, could it not be safely argued by doleworkers that

they were refusing to get enthusiastic about applying the JSA precisely because they feared action from the unemployed?

The unemployed have few methods of defence at their disposal. Unlike waged workers who work in one workplace, or several owned by the same firm, they have few opportunities to get together. The re-organisation of signing on increased this atomisation, allowing few to congregate at one time. Obviously the unemployed should attempt to organise collectively where possible, establishing anti-JSA groups or joining those already in existence. Waged workers have the weapons of workplace action at their disposal, be they strikes, work-to-rules, go-slows or occupations, etc. The unemployed have none of these means of action. Obviously occupations and sit-ins and demonstrations are some of the tactics that can be used. But why argue against a tactic that can be used under specific circumstances, by people who are often powerless? Once again, as with previous examples like the Poll Tax, the Left has got it wrong. This reflects their wilful ignoring of the different positions of doleworkers and those signing on. It also reflects the deep compromises the Left has made by its positions within the trade unions. There is a clear line, a class divide if you like, between those Leftists who condemn Three Strikes and those revolutionaries who are open-minded about the tactic.