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Kevin Doyle

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Unequal power, unequal pay
November 2003

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Originally published in Workers Solidarity No78

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During the year a spate of reports have ‘discovered’ what a lot of workers already know – that equal pay for equal work just doesn’t exist. Although legal victories and a raft of employment equality legislation have made some dents, the fact remains that discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity and age (to name just a few) persists and is widespread. It seems obvious to ask: why?

To attempt to answer this question, anarchists argue that we have to look at an aspect of life that is often ignored – how the workplace and the office are organised. Take any workplace – small or large, corporate or local sweatshop – and what you will find, first and foremost, is a hierarchy. At the top is the manager or boss, and beneath him (mostly him) are layers of management; then supervisors. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the full-time workers, then contract workers... and so on.

What distinguishes the different layers within the hierarchy? Well one thing is the job they do, of course. But a second fundamental difference is the power they have. At the top is the boss with most power – the power to hire and fire, to set wages and

hours and conditions. At the bottom is the contract worker — often with the worst wages and hours, the least benefits and the least security of income. In between are a layer of other managers and supervisors, with different duties but also with different levels of power.

Anarchists call this form of organisation a power-hierarchy. In capitalism, workplaces are organised like this because in reality there is no other way to get things done. Most people, given a choice, would not work for an employer. Employers are people we have to work for because if we don't we will end up poor (and in many countries, very poor) if we don't. A good example of what's at stake is found in the difference we often notice in ourselves when we are doing work at home 'for ourselves' compared to when we are doing work at the job for the boss. Working 'for your self', as we all know, is a lot more pleasant and productive. Bosses know this too, which is why they need active methods to force us to work harder.

Under capitalism the workplace is organised around a huge imbalance in power. The boss and the top managers have most control; the rest of us toe the line. There are many consequences for organising economic life in this way. One of the most significant is the key issue mentioned above — persistent inequality. To survive in a competitive environment a boss must fundamentally encourage discrimination. Promoting division and competition makes the existing hierarchy dynamic — there is a constant threat of falling lower in the pecking order, as well as a chance of going upwards too.

For the boss the overall reward is increased productivity. A second, crucially important consequence is that the generalised division that is caused within the workforce which acts as a buffer for the boss's rule.

It is not surprising that the power-hierarchy that exists in present day workplaces makes use of human differences such as gender, ethnicity and age to divide us. A system of economic organisation — capitalism — that is fundamentally about greed

and theft through profit must rely on unfair and inhuman means to survive. Women, for example, traditionally suffer lower pay and longer work hours in the workplace; they also do less well in their efforts to climb up the power-hierarchy. But this 'lower reward for effort' that many women suffer has nothing to do with women being women. It has everything to do with increasing employee productivity through the promotion of division and competition.

Although modern 'equality legislation' has outlawed overt discrimination in a lot of countries, the general format of discrimination continues unabated in covert form. This (and the persistence of inequality in pay) shouldn't surprise us. In reality no matter how much legislation is enacted, such statutes will never challenge the fundamental right of a boss or corporation to create and actively maintain a power-hierarchy. To challenge this right we need a revolution.