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Why the Unions Fail Us

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This brings home the crucial failure of the “organising model” favoured by Unite! and other unions. They are social democratic in nature and essentially believe capitalism can and should be managed better to benefit workers.

To do this they have to work with the bosses and get the Labour Party to provide a legislative framework. A top down model of union recognition, negotiation controlled by full time officials and a concentration on “headline” issues like the London Living Wage, not the real concerns of workers, are their objectives. Unite!’s relationship with Mitie was always more important to them than the interests of a small, troublesome group of workers.

Social democrats take the fact that cleaning contractors are rich multinationals to mean they should be more willing to pay better wages as they can “afford” it. In fact, they are rich precisely because they constantly cut costs on existing contracts and win more by undercutting competitors.

Besides giving investors a greater return, this attracts further investment and keeps share prices up. Their wealth proves they are ruthless but makes them attractive “partners” for social democrats. Winning the London Living Wage has always led first to cutting jobs, like with the shift changes at Schroders and Willis, then to victimisation of union activists. These workers are “hard to organise” due to the level of commitment required from the union to support them. The “organising model” of reformist trades unionism is based on gaining union recognition followed by organisation around health and safety and other routine issues; it can’t cope with the class warfare which arises from this race to the bottom.

Trouble begins with the transfer to a new contractor, which will have won the contract by offering the same service for less. To make profit they cut costs by sacking the better paid workers and not replacing them, increasing workloads. Contractors rely on convincing workers they have no rights and can’t organise, or that there will be dire consequences if they do. The easiest way to do this is to use immigration controls. Immigration controls don’t keep people out of the UK; they control them when they’re here creating a “good business environment” for contractors. Rich companies thrive in this environment.

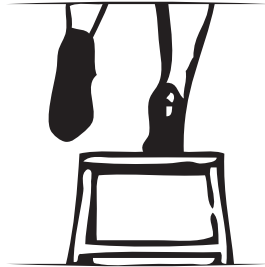
Mitie lags behind Capita and SERCO in the “outsourcing” and services stakes, but in 2008 its pre-tax profits were £67.9m on a turnover of £1.4bn. Year on year increases since 2004 had roughly doubled these figures. The NPL building management contract was run by SERCO which also runs immigration detention centres and carries out deportations; it subcontracted the cleaning to Amey, thus making money both from the cheaper workforce provided by immigration controls and from deporting migrants. SERCO is part owned by Ferrovia, a major shareholder in Tube-lines, which itself subcontracts cleaning on London Underground. These companies have their fingers in all the pies and are very powerful.

The layers of subcontracting require research to find and pressurise the people who matter, who control the money, have the public profile and can be embarrassed. One reason for subcontracting is to evade responsibility for the workforce, as well as to hamper solidarity and cut costs. Our targets shouldn’t be Amey, but NPL with its standing in the scientific community; not Mitie or Lancaster but the bank that subcontracts to them and who has a reputation. Our aim shouldn’t just be to shame capitalists into acting against their own interests, but to expose their true nature and advocate their abolition. The existing unions can’t and won’t do this; it is not just the methods but the aims

and objectives of social democrats which fail the working class.

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