

CAMPAIGNING FOR CARE

in social services—

5

TACTICAL USE OF INDUSTRIAL ACTION

There are various forms of union action many of which include positive and imaginative ideas involving action at your workplace. Not all union action involves strikes and withdrawing your labour. This is particularly important for health and social service workers many of whom are very reluctant to take traditional strike action because of the consequences for the people they serve.

Workers in some services have rarely taken strike action and are unlikely to do so on any large scale in the immediate future because they have a close relationship with the users of the service and are meeting peoples immediate social needs. There is a strong argument for such workers to 'work-in' whilst other workers strike. Below we give various ideas of how this combined form of action can be used positively. It can be used as part of your tactics to go onto the offensive to show that it is management and the employer who are uncaring and ruthless in provoking industrial action rather than steeling yourselves for media reaction blaming it all on the workers.

We must now broaden the different types of union action and combine them with new imaginative tactics. Simply using the same old tactics is no longer adequate and makes your response all too predictable by management and the employer. However there will be some situations when a complete withdrawal of labour is necessary including all non-emergency social service workers. How you prepare for this including possibly setting up some alternative temporary workers controlled service is discussed below.

- Union action of whatever kind must be used to strengthen your negotiating position and increasing political support and power.
- Union action should be linked and coordinated with other forms of action including action outside of the workplace.
- It should involve the maximum number of workers in planning

and carrying out and keeping all workers informed of its progress and changes in tactics.

- Try to work out managements response and your counter tactics before you embark on it.

- Union action which alienates a large number of users and the wider public can be counter-productive in the long term.

- Work out the consequences (loss of bonus, overtime etc) of your action for workers in other sections and departments, explain the reasons for your action, and seek their support and co-operation.

- Seek the support of other sections who might take action with you.

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PREPARING FOR NEGOTIATIONS

Before regular meetings with management on JCCs and LJC's or specific negotiations with your own management always try to have your own pre-meeting to:

- Work out your demands.
- Have a clear negotiating position agreed between all the unions represented.
- Decide what is definitely not negotiable, what you could concede later, what is negotiable now, together with your own demands about what you want on the agenda.
- Decide on delegates and who will present your case — remember never go alone.
- Work out ways to report back to the workforce on progress and decisions.

With more and more centralised control over local government through rate capping, grant penalties and statutory tendering, trade unions are being pushed into a position of having to consider deals often involving cuts in hours, natural wastage and changes in working practices.

Statutory tendering is likely to result in those local authorities opposed to the legislation seeking comprehensive departmental reviews on ways around the legislation and to prepare to compete with contractors. This is likely to mean proposals for cuts in staffing, wages and conditions, working hours and changes in duties and working procedures. Social Service departments may initially be exempt from tendering.

However, this could be introduced at any stage once the proposals become law. Tendering of services in other departments eg school meals, will directly affect social services.

See Section 7: Counter offensive against contractors for details of negotiating tactics against tendering.

□ Don't just negotiate — take other forms of action to strengthen your negotiating position.

□ The range, level and quality of service must be an integral part of your negotiating demands. We have to shift the debate away from crude members and money to focus on social needs and the quality and effectiveness of services.

Here are various ideas and tactics which can be used to fight cuts and privatisation in social services.

1. Get a job description or a list of duties. The first task is to ensure that all workers have a job description and a defined or guaranteed working week together with agreed staffing ratios. Many home helps still don't have any of these basic requirements without which union action is even more difficult. It may be necessary for other workers to take supportive action to strengthen a campaign say, for example, by home helps.

2. Establish standards of service. These are not only important for job descriptions but also for staffing ratios and campaigning against cuts, short staffing and reductions in the quality of care. Draw up your own set of standards using DHSS guidelines (see separate box) and local needs and circumstances, as a basis for negotiations. These standards will also be important in fighting privatisation — contractors should be compared to what it should be like not what it is like now. Another tactic is to select a day when you collectively work to a set of standards which you consider should be the basis of the service. This could bring home to the council, management and the public the gap between what the service should be and is now and could make it harder to force through cuts.

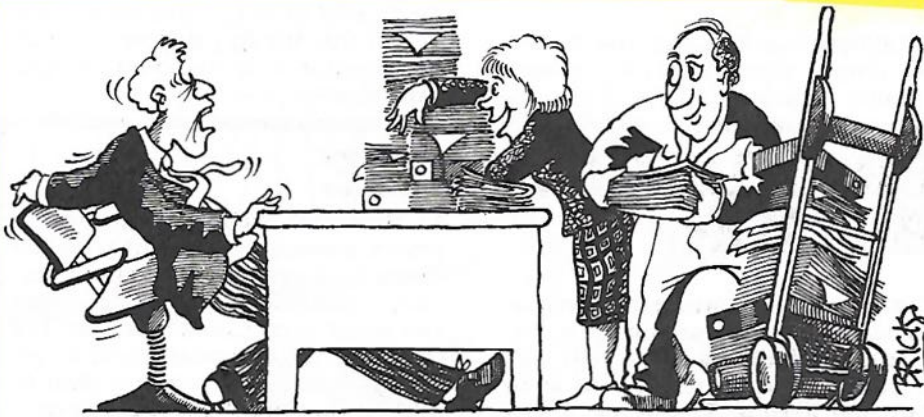
3. Project yourselves as caring workers. Calculate how much time different groups of workers spend doing unpaid work as part of your job. Use this to show that you care about services and to argue against management's attempts to reduce services and jobs.

4. Explain what your job involves in leaflets to the public, how you carry it out, your duties and responsibilities and the standards which must be maintained. Could be part of a 'Put the Care back into Caring' campaign. See also open days etc.

5. Refuse to implement cuts in standards of service. Collectively continue to work at your existing standard of service and if certain areas are not cleared then this can eventually force management to do the work and eventually employ more workers or revert to previous standards. Obviously this can't apply to all jobs because to do so would result in a reduced service. Expose the problems as management's making and responsibility.



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'NOT THAT WE THINK YOU HAVEN'T GOT A FIRM UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT OUR JOB ENTAILS; JUST THOUGHT WE'D CLARIFY IT FOR YOU....'

6. Refuse to cover vacant or frozen posts. When workers leave immediately put pressure on for replacements. Get your section to collectively agree not to cover for these posts or refuse to cover certain duties rather than the whole job. For example, keep people clean and fed but refuse to do laundry. Sometimes you may have to take unsavory action but it may be the only way of really stopping action by management.

7. Working to rule. This means strictly working according to your job description or contract of employment and selectively refusing to carry out other duties and responsibilities. Can include strict time-keeping, taking all specified meal breaks, adhering strictly to all health and safety and departmental procedures and not taking normally accepted short cuts, reporting for work at the specified place. You can also impose an overtime ban. Work out which will be most effective in hitting management rather than simply causing inconvenience to yourselves and/or to users. Drivers could refuse to take out vehicles or use equipment unless it is in full working order.

8. Refuse to collect new or increased charges for social services whilst continuing to provide the service, eg home helps, day centres. Must be done collectively and make it a clear public issue in the media. Show how charges hurt users, how they are likely to be a very small part of the departments budget, and what it costs to collect them. Keep a record of the amount you collectively refuse to collect so that after a week (and then regularly) you can publicise how much you have saved users. Higher charges now are often the thin edge of the wedge for more and higher charges later. They can also ultimately lead to the setting up of rival private agencies and the further loss of public sector jobs.

Try to get NALGO's support for this action. Have trade union reps available when workers who refuse to collect charges report back to the department and management are waiting. Remember, elderly users may be afraid to co-operate so make special efforts to allay their fears. Workers in Tower Hamlets social services successfully refused to collect meals-on-wheels charges several years ago as a method of union action.

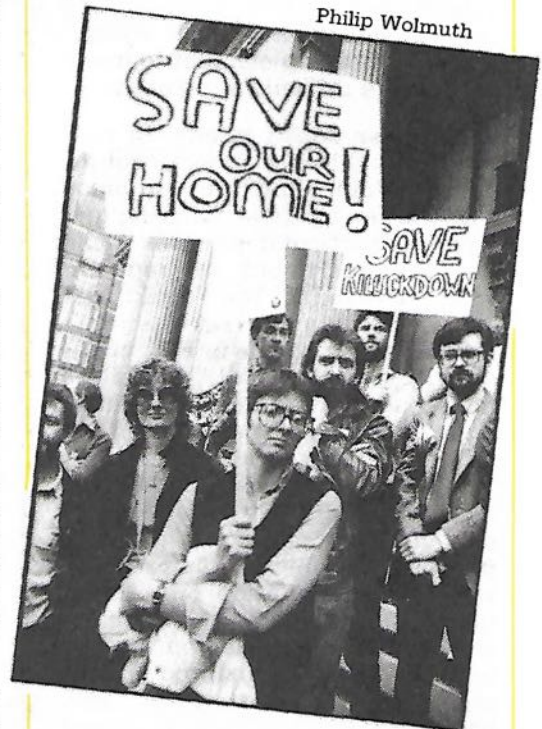
9. Refuse to co-operate with contractors. This could include refusing to assist contractors workers carry out their duties eg don't cover up the failure of contractors refusing to make good any work not carried out to the proper standard, refusing unauthorised access to facilities such as telephones etc. Monitor their performance — see Monitoring sheets and Section 7: Counter offensive against Contractors for other ideas.

10. Refuse to co-operate with agency staff. Refuse to work alongside or to co-operate with workers from agencies where their use is not agreed. Use the monitoring sheets to gather information on the use of agency staff, problems caused, standard of work, cost and so on and time its release with a boycott to try to force management to review its policy. Explain to agency workers why you are carrying out this action.

11. Refuse to co-operate with voluntary workers where they represent an attack on your jobs, wages and the quality of the service. Many negotiated formal schemes using volunteers are a useful addition. Where they threaten existing jobs it is important to stop such schemes immediately because they can quickly expand if the council is looking to get services on the cheap. Draw up a set of criteria for the use of volunteer schemes and

keep a watching brief to make sure that it is implemented properly. Boycotting unwanted volunteer schemes could involve refusing to organise work to be carried out by volunteers, training, supervision, explaining the use of equipment and facilities. Use the Monitoring sheets in this action kit. Contact the voluntary organisations involved in sending volunteers to explain why you are taking this action as well as the volunteers themselves. Find out if these organisations have trade union reps on their committees and ask them for support and to raise the matter internally. The same applies to the use of MSC schemes.

Philip Wolmuth



12. Refuse to use private services eg placing children and the elderly in private residential homes, requesting private contractors to carry out repairs at sheltered homes. Argue that it is not part of your job and that you will not undermine the jobs of other council workers where there is a DLO. Contact NALGO and the DLO unions eg UCATT, TGWU, GMBU for support and keep a note of the jobs involved so that this information can be used by the DLO unions to argue that they should carry out this work. You may be dissatisfied with the DLO's work — discuss this with the building unions at the JSSC or at a separate meeting. Social workers sometimes place individuals in private or voluntary homes because the local authority does not provide the required specialist service. Ensure this is publicised and argue that the council does provide

these services. Expose the fact that it may be costing the council more money to use agency staff, the standard of care, and working conditions of agency staff.

13. Refuse to co-operate with work study and auditors when they are preparing the ground for tenders. Always demand to know the aims and purposes of these studies so that they can decide whether to co-operate or not and on what terms. Action could include giving only the very minimum information about your job, refusing to discuss possible changes in practices and procedures if this will hinder the tendering process. On the other hand you could co-operate to try to change job descriptions eg. increase the caring element to make them more difficult to privatise.

14. Expose social needs. In conjunction with pensioners groups, nursery campaigns, etc. organise a day when all those wanting and needing particular services come to the department to 'register' their demands. You could get other workers to represent in number terms, those unable or unwilling to take part. Could be linked to a press conference/release in which you explain all the different needs, waiting lists etc. You could always have large banners exposing the different needs eg. children need 500 nursery places. 1500 pensioners need sheltered accommodation etc. An alternative to having people 'register' would be to place an equivalent number of painted poles, stakes or whatever on the town hall grass or in the main shopping area. The point of all this is to find dramatic ways of highlighting social needs and keeping them on the political agenda. It can be hard work but its vitally important to keep plugging away at it.

15. Expose existing inadequate conditions. If the council refuses to carry out improvements to its existing homes and facilities eg. it may block planned improvements to a residential home because it may want to close it instead, you could carefully prepare a plan of action which might include:

- getting sympathetic Environmental Health Inspectorsto inspect the premises for any deficiencies.
- try to persuade an inspector from the council's or an adjacent local authority's private homes monitoring team to make observations which you could use to put pressure on the council.
- gather evidence that the council

is deliberately keeping the home half empty when there are many in need of places.

BROADENING THE ACTION

There will be situations when these forms of action are inadequate. Management will use or play on your refusal to take stronger action. The users of services, their relatives and neighbours and the wider public may have come to 'expect' your service and to 'assume' its continuation. Whilst it is politically correct that they should see it as a right it is often only when the service is threatened that they come to fully value your work. It is also important for users and the public to understand that few public services in our present economic system can ever continue without constant support and struggle by workers and users. It is also important to have ways, however small, that users, relatives and neighbours can support your campaign eg. through letters, petitions. It is also possible to win their support for stronger union action.

16. Work-in whilst others take strike action. Use union action positively by clearly stating that some workers in what you determine are essential services are to work-in ie do their normal job during the period of union action. Ensure that all workers know who is in and who is out to prevent conflicts and disputes on picket lines — circulate list to all members. Make sure users are well informed beforehand and get workers to distribute leaflets on the day(s) about why you are taking this action and the campaign demands. Make sure the media are equally informed about the work-in as they are about the strike. Draw attention to the work-in by organising a press conference about unmet social needs, conditions in private homes, failures by contractors, the effects of cuts and so on. Try to avoid conflicts over pay — a work-in based on workers refusing pay may result in a lock-out by management. Pay of workers working-in could always be pooled or donated to campaign funds. For example, last year in Peterborough a 10 per cent staff cut was proposed in one residential home. With careful planning, for example stocking up food, NUPE members worked in and locked out management. Three days later the cut was removed.

Be careful how you use this material so that it can't be used to hasten closure or is exploited by private homes.

17. Selective strike action. Decide which services you want to withdraw to have the maximum impact politically and which ones you want to continue working. Try to work out managements response and how long you plan to take the action. What will you do if management suspends some workers and/or attempts to bring in agency or volunteer workers to do your job? If you plan to escalate the action how will this be done. Selective strike action could be linked to a day or half day of action when all workers could take industrial action and take part in other events eg march, rally, picket or the other activities described below.

18. Strike action but set up an alternative temporary service. This means going on strike but workers collectively deciding that some services should continue. They could even be improved or provide a service/activity which people have been needing and demanding. For example, whilst some workers mount picket lines and other strike activities others could use tenants, community or church halls to run a day centre for the elderly, a nursery for kids etc. You will be surprised at what you can achieve with a bit of organisation. Make sure people know about these arrangements beforehand, be positive and enthusiastic and help to allay peoples fears about a break in their routine. Publicise the alternative service by inviting the media to see it in operation. Beware of dirty tricks — the council may try to send in health inspectors to claim about inadequate facilities or overcrowding. If premises are not available organise outings for the elderly and children to local events, the countryside or seaside.

19. Occupation and work-in. This tactic has been successfully used to achieve major delays in hospital closures eg. Thornton View, Bradford. It could also be used to prevent or delay the closure of residential homes. Workers effectively take over the management and running of the home. Management's main tactic will be to try to reduce through attrition, or take away, through 'dawn raids', so it is vitally important to maintain picket lines etc. For full details of how other campaigns organised occupations and the lessons they learnt see references.