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SINGLE STATUS – INSIDE LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S PAY TURMOIL



Cuba and disaster relief

06



Class conscious social work

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Yasser Arafat, 1929–2004

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IF YOU WANT TO REBUILD BRITAIN, READ ON

WORKERS

“ First thoughts: Just work and die

THERE ARE times when European Union directives are so handy for the government, you would think they had been written in Whitehall. (And who knows, you might be right.) Take the latest “anti-discrimination legislation”, designed to force us to treat people looking to retire (or not) equally regardless of their age (see Eurotrash, p4).

In a sane world, you would think that the imposition of a system that forces old people to carry on working might be seen as discriminatory. After all, it's the strains and stresses of working for capitalism that are at the root of so much ill health and early death. What's fine, or tolerable, when you are younger can kill when you grow old.

But we do not live in a sane world. Our government interprets anti-discrimination as ending the compulsory age of retirement unless the employer (not the worker) can justify it. All are equal, for all shall now work until they die – if they are deemed exploitable.

Two years ago a Labour minister suggested a retirement age of 70, returning to the original pensionable age at the beginning of the 20th century. Just wait: the government now has the legislative framework to try and justify it.

Meanwhile, new legislation already enacted means that from next year everyone, equally, whatever their age, can use savings to create “individualised” (such a lovely word) pension plans. This includes being able to buy second homes as part of the pension plan – effectively, for higher rate taxpayers, a 40% government subsidy for a cottage in the country, or in someone else's country.

Already over half of all government tax relief on pension contributions goes to 10% of the population. Obviously, that's not enough for the Blair gang. But then, we all have an equal opportunity to buy a second home. Handy for some, even if millions of people cannot afford to buy their first one: a survey last month for the Halifax revealed that in 92% of British urban postal districts a first-buyer couple each earning the average wage cannot get a mortgage on the average house.

But why stop at two homes? Blunkett has three, at least. Despite having resigned ignominiously as Home Secretary, caught fiddling expenses and handing out favours, he is still living in the £3 million “grace and favour” house that goes with the job. No rent, and no accounting for a taxable benefit worth £30,000 more than he now earns. Very handy.



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Rebuilding Britain

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Constitution debate hots up

A MEETING on 15 December in Westminster enjoyed an eloquent denunciation of the proposed new EU Constitution by Trine Mach, the spokesperson for Denmark's June Movement. She noted that Denmark's trade unions were strongly questioning the Constitution, and had formed Trade Unions Against the EU Constitution, which has already been campaigning against the recent EU Directives on Services, and for trade union rights.

In Denmark (as in Britain) the EU has been driving the attacks on welfare and creeping privatisation of public services. The Constitution's Article III-217.4 extends the EU Commission's power to force public services open to liberalisation (read privatisation) as part of EU trade deals. The Danish government had said that privatisation was a political necessity and denounced its opponents as inward-looking nationalists linked only to the extreme right, a disinformation strategy familiar to workers here. Mach urged the meeting not to ignore the harmful effect that the Constitution would have on countries' manufacturing industries. We must not focus only on the need to defend our services, she said. She pointed out that EU member governments would try to confuse the Constitution debate by saying that it was about whether to withdraw from the EU, which was in fact a question for another referendum.

Just as in Denmark, government and EU bodies here are spending a great deal of our money on pro-EU, including pro-Constitution, propaganda. The Foreign Office has budgeted for an annual spend on European Union communications of £200,000. Last year, this paid for more than 70 pro-euro events and a range of publications and media relations activity. It is to publish an analysis of the EU Constitution, and a "lay person's" guide.

There are six different EU budget information lines with 10 million euros allocated in 2004. The EU also funds think tanks, cultural organisations and other bodies advancing the idea of Europe, which received more than 6 million euros in 2003.

The EU Parliament spent more than £260,000 on celebrating the new EU Constitution with champagne receptions before it has been ratified. Yet the European Parliament does not even have any say on whether the Constitution is ratified by member states.

Whatever the EU and government may spend to persuade us, workers will make up their own minds. Whatever the TUC says, trade union members will make up their own minds. When the government and TUC were gung-ho for entering the euro, workers were still so opposed that they did not dare to hold a referendum.

If you have news from your industry, trade or profession we want to hear from you. Call us or fax on 020 8801 9543 or e-mail to rebuilding@workers.org.uk

CUBA BOYCOTT

\$250 million smoke

THE US HAS now introduced draconian anti-smoking measures, including a possible \$250,000 dollar fine and up to 10 years in jail. But the legislation only applies to US citizens buying and smoking Cuban cigars anywhere in the world. It's amazing how such a small country can terrify a brutal superpower.

IRAQ CONTRACTS

What are friends for?

THE GOVERNMENT has overridden the British candidate Amec and given Kellogg Brown & Root, a US subsidiary of Dick Cheney's Halliburton, the key job of overseeing construction of the Royal Navy's two new aircraft carriers, the biggest warships ever built in Britain. Yet KBR is in bankruptcy protection in the USA, and has botched the running of its other British warship facility, the Devonport dockyard in Plymouth. A nice sweetener for Bush, though.

DISCRIMINATION

Pregnant and poor

GUESS WHAT happens to trainee midwives who get pregnant? Yes, they lose their income. In a united bid to end this discrimination UNISON went last month to the Employment Appeals Tribunal, supported by the Royal College of Midwives, the Maternity Alliance and the Equal Opportunities Commission. The Department of Health is resisting the action, of course.

EUROTRASH

The latest from Brussels

More, and more, and more

The European Commission is demanding a 35% increase in the EU budget, already £70 billion a year. Since 1984 Britain has paid 58 billion euros more to the EU than we have received, compared with France's 29 billion and Italy's 17 billion.

Compulsory retirement

The government is to implement the EU Equal Treatment Framework Directive as part of legislation intended to end "ageism". The government interprets this as abolition of the compulsory retirement age unless the employer, not the worker, can justify it. This is convenient for a government intent on raising to 65 years the age at which anyone can draw their pension. And women, too, will have to wait until they are 65 – in the name of "equality".

Reaction abroad

EU governments are calling for a military rapid reaction force to use in wars across the world. Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said, "Battle groups will be capable of dealing with a range of peace support and humanitarian tasks." This is part of an EU effort to develop an independent "defence" capacity that can be deployed outside US-led NATO missions. Hoon claimed that the battle groups were not a precursor to an EU standing army.

Speaking out

The imposition of English as the lingua franca of the EU has advantages for American companies in Europe, but not necessarily for their workers. French employees of the US multinational General Electric Medical Systems, which makes X-ray equipment, have accused the company in court of discrimination against the large proportion of its staff who speak no English.

Thatchers out

Thatched cottages may reflect nostalgia for a rural Britain long gone. But new EU rules present a threat to Britain's 70,000 thatched properties and sound a death knell for the thatcher's trade. Straw from the type of wheat preferred by the EU cannot be used for thatching. EU directives ban the growing of traditional long-straw wheat, or even buying or donating its seeds.



Photo: Workers

MINERS at Kellingley Colliery, Pontefract, fought a four-month dispute in early 2004 to prevent UK Coal undermining the jobs and terms and conditions of miners working at the pit. The jobs of redundant miners from the Selby complex were saved in return for the introduction of extended shifts and longer days. The company is now seeking 150 redundancies, almost all from the original Selby workforce, due to what it calls "geological problems". The loss of 150 jobs would reduce the workforce to 400 and leave Kellingley as only one of three surviving Yorkshire pits. But for how long?

Plastics firm flees Britain

RUBBER AND PLASTICS processor Trelleborg announced major restructuring of its British seals business last month, affecting the jobs of around 850 workers. After closing its South Wales plant at Milford Haven in October, it laid plans to close its North Wales plant at Newtown and another at Ross-on-Wye. It also said it wanted to relocate the technical centre and headquarters from Tewkesbury closer to Birmingham, to facilitate the amalgamation of an office and warehouse in Solihull, which will also close. Two manufacturing sites in Derbyshire may also amalgamate.

Work continues to move to the company site in Poland (where there is still 40% unemployment) and Tijuana, Mexico. Some tank-track wheels business is being moved to Leicester from Tewkesbury. The company has agreed to open a new factory in Bangalore, India, and is considering manufacture in China. The factory in Brazil continues to grow slowly. Meanwhile the factory at Bridgwater, Somerset, apparently safe at the moment, could miss the safety net in the next round and move to Eastern Europe.

Needless to say, workers on all sites are reeling from the changes. There is no history of solidarity between sites, as the company has grown by acquiring companies, rather than organically. Natural growth generally helps in building stronger union organisation, as workers tend to know each other better.

Some sites have rising order books. But this does not stop the relentless drive to change – to raise the rate of profit even higher. The products are mainly low-value articles and so could easily be produced anywhere in the world, wherever the company thinks there are cheaper rates. The word in the industry is that you can't get space on container ships out of Britain because they are all fully loaded with British machinery going abroad.

JOURNALISM

Writer 'suicide'

GARY WEBB, US journalist and writer, is dead. 49 years old, he apparently shot himself twice, totally destroying his face. The official verdict was suicide, though that does not explain how someone can shoot themselves in the head twice.

Webb was the investigative journalist who in 1996 exposed the CIA for drug dealing in Los Angeles. The CIA sold hundreds of tons of crack cocaine to fund the Contras in Nicaragua.

By 1997 no major US newspaper would publish Webb. His last project was to demonstrate how the CIA was fostering a drug epidemic, especially among US Afro-Caribbean and Hispanic communities.

HORSES

Rumblings in the stables

THE NATIONAL TRAINERS' Federation and the Stable Lads' Association have announced a new pay settlement for horse racing stable staff. This includes a 3.3% wage increase, a £6 daily subsistence allowance, and improvements on overnight and away day allowances.

Until recently stable staff – all "lads" irrespective of gender – received a flat rate of £12 a day, but now the statutory minimum wage of £4.85 per hour will apply from February. The pay settlement is a major step forward in some respects, but the profession is still run in a backward, almost feudal way and the deal was

recently criticised by Lord Donoughue in an independent review of terms and conditions as not going far enough to advance the stable staff.

In June 2004 Donoughue led a committee investigation into the conditions of stable lads which resulted in a damning indictment of the sport of kings, oil magnates and millionaires. The report called for pension provision, a brand new system of wages, benefits, remuneration and working patterns, and the tackling of health and safety issues, bullying and sexual harassment.

The review also suggested the formation of a proper trade union to replace the Stable Lads' Association. Rumblings among stable staff indicate that this might happen sooner rather than later.

Universities under attack

THE GOVERNMENT'S discredited Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is leading to the threat of closures across departments in higher education. Research funding – based controversially on the number of times published research is cited by other researchers – depends on the ratings that university departments achieve in the RAE. But university workers are resisting, warning that the RAE distorts higher education and will lead to the destruction of research across the sector.

The Association of University Teachers has condemned plans by the employer at Brunel University to axe 60 academic jobs (one in eight of the academic staff). The proposed cuts would damage every school in the university, including its engineering school – and this in a university named after Britain's most famous engineer.

The employer at Exeter University plans to sack 130 staff and to close the chemistry, mining engineering, Italian and music departments. Local AUT members have condemned these plans.

The AUT has also been active on the pay front and has been able to lift its successful academic boycott of Nottingham University after a ballot of local members. The university council has agreed to negotiate constructively on job grading and pay progression.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Brighton council climbs down

TEACHING ASSISTANTS in Brighton have called off further strike action (see WORKERS, last issue) after the council agreed to binding arbitration at ACAS towards the end of January.

The assistants had voted for more strikes, starting on 20 January. At first the council stood firm, saying there could be no "blank cheque", but under the threat of broader strike action it suddenly caved in. Two other UNISON branches in Brighton, fearful that a precedent might be set, let it be known that they, too, were considering strike ballots.

The teaching assistants were taking action because the council had tried to change the terms of a regrading halfway

through the process. Since the regrading was taking place under a single status agreement (see article, p8), the worry was that the council would take the same trick with other workers' gradings.

Armed with a ballot result, the teaching assistants had met on 5 January at a mass meeting and voted for further strikes. Action would have included a refusal to cover classes for absent teachers and only working contracted hours. The council had agreed to go to ACAS, but not to accept the results of arbitration. Now it will.

The central issue remains. The council's attempt to change the terms of the regrading would mean that any increase in pay for the assistants would have been funded by a reduction in the number of paid weeks they would work each year.

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

FEBRUARY

Friday 18 February

TUC Pensions Campaign

A day of local and regional action to highlight proposed damaging changes to public sector pensions. Unions representing health, local government, and civil service workers will be organising local meetings and publicity as well as lobbying MPs (who should be in their constituencies that day).

Friday 25 February

TUC 'Work Your Proper Hours Day'

The TUC is urging people who do unpaid overtime to "work your proper hours" on that day so that they take a proper lunch break, and arrive and leave work on time. This should remind Britain's employers just how much they depend on the goodwill and voluntary extra work of their staff, the TUC says. Somewhat optimistically, the TUC is calling on all employers to take their staff out on the same day "for lunch, coffee or a cocktail", to show how much they appreciate their workers' commitment. What we should have is a "Work Your Proper Hours Year", or working life, but it's a start.

ECONOMIES

Bush, Blair, and deficits

THE US TRADE deficit for November was a record \$60.3 billion (£32 billion), up from October's \$56 billion. Oil imports were a record \$13.4 billion. The USA's trade deficit total for the first eleven months of 2004 was \$561 billion, far more than the record \$496 billion for the whole of 2003. The US surplus on agricultural goods, a constant since 1959, has vanished.

This trade deficit adds to the stresses in the economy caused by the US government's record budget deficit of \$400 billion.

• Britain's trade deficit is also growing, up from £5.8 billion in the second quarter of 2004 to £8.8 billion in the third. The City in its wisdom had forecast £6.3 billion. The deficit on our trade with the other European Union countries was £6.4 billion, up from £5.7 billion in the previous quarter. The combined deficit for October and November was £9.6 billion.

RIP: the Free Trade Area of the Americas

IN DECEMBER 2004, the Presidents of Venezuela and Cuba announced the death of the Free Trade Area of the Americas – FTAA or ALCA in Spanish. The US proposed the idea nearly five years ago as a crude copy of the European Union model. The plan was to expand NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Area, combining Canada, the US and Mexico with every country (except one) in the Americas including the Caribbean, North, Central and South America.

There would be a single currency, the US dollar, and the economies of all American countries (except one) would be annexed to adopt free market economics, cuts in public expenditure, deregulation and privatisation, and to become fodder for US capitalism. This was to be the mechanism to ensure the survival of US capitalism. The US economy would flourish with access to the new markets, a huge pool of cheap labour and plenty of new opportunities for US companies to exploit the “liberalisation” of these additional economies.

Conferences of all American countries (except one) were held to thrash out details and whip any reluctant nations into line. The one country excluded decided to campaign against the FTAA, not on the grounds that it wanted to be part of it. Cuba said it would damage workers throughout the Americas and enlarge the US empire. Cuba argued for referendums –not annexation.

The dream crumbles

The US dream quickly began to crumble. The new government of Venezuela broke ranks and said it wanted no part of the FTAA. This action was followed by the new governments in Brazil and then Argentina, whose previous government had collapsed trying to service debts of \$100 billion. The new government refused to accept IMF conditions for debt repayment and began to turn its economy around. In January 2005, Argentine President Kirchner told its creditors they could have 25% of the debts repaid but that was it, they were getting no more.

The new governments in Panama and Uruguay are making similar noises and other new governments in Costa Rica and Bolivia are rejecting neo-liberal economic policies. The Caribbean countries of CARICOM are demonstrating their independence. The South American common market MERCOSUR has called for regional unity in the face of US pressure for the FTAA. These countries have responded by creating the South American Community of Nations to defend continental sovereignty.

The final nail in the FTAA coffin has been the joint Venezuelan–Cuban declaration to promote the “Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas”. The declaration is based on eliminating import tariffs and tax free profits on mutual investments. Cuba will guarantee \$27 per barrel for Venezuelan oil, 2,000 scholarships in Cuba for young Venezuelans, transfer of Venezuelan technology to the Cuban oil sector and promotion of joint ventures. Known in Spanish as ALBA, this concept is seen as the antithesis of the FTAA (ALCA) being based on cooperation and solidarity, not the neo-liberalism of the FTAA.

At a time when the Ukraine is being served up on a plate for future annexation into the European equivalent of the FTAA, the EU, concepts of sovereignty, solidarity, mutual cooperation, defiance of the IMF and opposition to free market policies are in the ascendancy in the other hemisphere.

Blair’s competition with the British send to the victims of the tsunami**Who says disaster aid is**

WORKING-CLASS GENEROSITY and solidarity look very different from aid by capitalist governments. Workers regularly give up their time and money to assist victims of a natural disaster or for other workers in struggle – as in the solidarity with the Soviet people in the Second World War and with the Vietnamese people in the 1960s. Remember the generosity shown to Africa both during the famine and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Remember the support for the miners in 1984/5.

But Brown’s talk of cancelling debt to Indian Ocean countries is a smokescreen for the fact that most of the Department for International Development’s budget has been spent on the war in Iraq. The cost of debt forgiveness will not be felt by the British government for at least a year if not more. Many debt cancellations will be conditional on IMF “structural adjustment” – privatisation. Meanwhile, US and UK governments urge all involved in conflict in the region to stop it and be friends – aid is above politics.

It’s worth looking a bit closer at the politics of aid in two calamitous disasters in Africa and Central America.

Mozambique

In 1975, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) won independence after decades of ruthless Portuguese colonialism. The only liberation movement, Frelimo set about developing a non-aligned foreign policy and a socialist domestic programme. Despite the flight of most Portuguese, leaving a vacuum where the civil service once was and a bankrupt and crippled economy, Mozambique built schools, clinics and hospitals, and developed its sugar and other industries. By 1980, the number of school leavers had quadrupled and the primary health care system was praised by the World Health Organisation.

Mozambique had also implemented the mandatory sanctions against the white racist regime then ruling in neighbouring Rhodesia and closed the port of Beira to any goods destined for that country. The Portuguese had flouted the sanctions and thrown a lifeline to the Smith regime. The Rhodesian racists retaliated by establishing a mercenary army, Renamo, whose job was to destroy all of the gains of Mozambican independence by destroying schools, clinics, railway lines and transport, and by terrorising the population.

Massacres

After the the victory of independence forces in Zimbabwe in 1980, control of Renamo switched to the apartheid regime in South Africa, with the tacit approval of the Reagan government in the US. Renamo now accelerated its bloody work, killing every teacher, nurse, doctor and skilled professional it could find and massacring hundreds of thousands, forcing them to flee to the cities. South African troops and mercenaries were directly involved in this war, which resulted in nearly one million Mozambican deaths.

At the same time, Mozambique began to suffer from severe droughts which, coupled with the Renamo action, led to the collapse of agricultural production and starvation. Mozambique appealed for food aid but was consistently refused it by the US. The US dominated the UN World Food Programme at the time, and mass starvation was delayed only by donations from the Soviet Union, Sweden and the Mennonite Church.

After 100,000 Mozambicans had starved to death and the country

people over the amount of our money the government will disaster focuses attention on the politics of aid...

Not a political issue?



Photo: Workers

Cuban doctors in Gonaives, Haiti: class solidarity in action

was economically on its knees and desperate for aid, the US said it was prepared to send aid on certain conditions: drop any reference to Marxism–Leninism in the Frelimo constitution, drop any reference to socialism in the country’s constitution, introduce a free market and privatisation, share power with Renamo, show independence from the USSR, stop voting against the US in the United Nations, and stop the Mozambican press from attacking the US. Any aid would be distributed by US-appointed charities, usually linked to fundamentalist Christian organisations or right-wing bodies such as ‘Heritage’: the Mozambican government could have no part in the allocation or distribution of the aid. All aid was to be privatised, as were all state-owned institutions.

Ultimatum

Mozambique had no choice – either starve or give in, and it remains today among the poorest of nations in the world, dependent on aid and charities, where government offices and social services buildings have their electricity

supply disconnected because they cannot pay their bills to the privatised electricity company.

Haiti and Honduras

In 1998 hurricanes Mitch and Georges devastated Central America and the Caribbean killing more than 60,000. Worst hit was Honduras (Mitch) where the hurricane paused off the coast before moving inland, where it dropped all its water, washing away bridges, roads, villages and livestock, leaving nearly 20,000 dead and missing.

Hurricane Georges devastated the Caribbean. In Haiti over 1,000 were killed with 250,000 left homeless and scores of thousands of cattle washed away. Honduras had been used as a US base for the Nicaraguan contras in the 1980s, but was no longer of any value to the US. Haiti had no infrastructure to cope with such a crisis before the hurricane and was the poorest country in the Americas.

The international aid agencies, including some from the US, went in to help, as did a small number of Cuban doctors. After a short time, the agencies

left, but the Cubans stayed and built up their medical brigades, and are still there today, with the blessing of the people.

Cuba had no diplomatic relations with either country and the Honduran government was hostile to Cuba. But the people of both countries demanded that the Cuban doctors stay and stay they did, building health systems, saving lives and providing (free) medical training to young poor Hondurans and Haitians both in Havana and in their own countries, so they can take over from the Cubans.

At the Latin American Medical School in Havana, where 8,000 young people from 24 African and Latin American countries are being trained to become doctors to return to their countries, the Rector describes the philosophy of the school as “Love and Solidarity”.

In this spirit, 300 Cuban doctors and health professionals in Honduras and 600 in Haiti have between them saved well over 100,000 lives in the two countries since the hurricanes. In Honduras, only 60% of the population were covered by the government, private or military health systems. The rest were in inaccessible areas worst hit by Mitch, and this is where Cuban doctors have built a health care system where none existed before.

In Haiti, neither the US-inspired coup which overthrew President Aristide nor hurricane Jeanne, which left 2,000 dead in 2004, has deterred the young Cuban doctors from providing a free health service. At the peak of the violence surrounding Aristide’s overthrow, when all the aid agencies fled the country, it was left to the Cuban Medical Brigade to provide the only medical facility in the country to look after the population.

This is working-class generosity and solidarity in action. They do not boast and shout about how many millions of dollars they have donated because they have none, only human resources – workers. They don’t trumpet a new Marshall Plan for Africa and they lay down no conditions. They just get on with it modestly and the workers of the host countries understand exactly what working class internationalism means. Just as British workers understand the concepts of generosity and solidarity.

Back in 1997 local government workers agreed a structure that : manual and nonmanual staff and between men and women...

Local government workers face up to their



The single status agreement had been widely supported in the expectation that it would address inequalities in pay

ALL AROUND the country local government workers are aggrieved and in revolt against a new pay system, which is part of a single status agreement dating back to 1997. Protests vary, with groups coming out for periods of strike action like the bin workers in Coventry, widespread ballot rejections of the new pay system, lobbies, mass meetings in work time, non-cooperation and widespread protest in the local press.

A special feature of these protests is that they are directed not only against their employers but also at their unions, UNISON, GMB and TGWU, especially where the local branch and regional officials are perceived to have collaborated in the local agreement. Some members have taken legal action against their employers and union officials to recover back pay under equality legislation encouraged by no-win no-fee solicitors.

Expectation

Yet the single status agreement had been widely supported in the expectation that it would address inequalities in pay and

conditions among local government workers. It was known that there were occupational groups such as care workers, mainly women, who were underpaid relative to many comparable groups. Manual workers and white collar also had different working conditions resulting from previous agreements.

Before the creation of UNISON, administrative, professional, technical and clerical (APTC) workers had been covered by the Purple Book negotiated by NALGO and the APTC section of other unions, while manual workers had agreements negotiated by NUPE, GMB and TGWU. The creation of UNISON gave impetus to harmonise pay and conditions, with the hope that many would gain from the greater unity.

Although it was accepted that not everyone would gain in every condition, the aim was to level upwards so all could enjoy the best conditions. UNISON workers, who backed the single status agreement overwhelmingly in a ballot, were not giving authority to rob some workers to pay others.

The agreement also promised improved access to training for all. Against a background of skill shortages this was seen as a great opportunity for advance for workers, which would also benefit the community.

Widespread pay cuts

What has gone so wrong to cause widespread pay cuts of thousands of pounds to men and women workers at all levels of the pay scales?

In Hull, for example, the unions gave a cautious welcome in March 2004 when the cabinet of the council agreed a 5-year pay protection for any losers in the pay evaluation exercise, although the Labour council had dropped a commitment to back pay for gainers because of budget cuts. In July 2004 when the results of the job evaluation exercise were announced there was an uproar. There were pay cuts ranging up to £12,000 a year! 90% of GMB and 98% of TGWU workers voted to reject the evaluation scheme.

By August 2004 UNISON members voted for an industrial action ballot and

ould have seen a levelling up of pay across grades, between

ay problems

instructed negotiators to seek no losers, and implementation of gains for winners. Of the 7,500 in the new pay structure, 1,430 had lost, 2,800 had gained and 3,270 had remained the same. A binman had lost £5,700 out of his £17,000 salary, a GMB representative working in highways had lost £4,477 a year and council solicitors' pay was dropping by £6,000. One of the solicitors said professional staff had taken a huge drop in wages, many were leaving and being replaced by either unqualified staff or by agency staff who will be paid more.

In Coventry, the council reached the end of the third attempt at implementing the pay review in six years in September 2004. It had put in more money and a protection deal which freezes salaries for 5 years, and it was optimistic about a deal. When the results came out the workers were outraged. Many were to lose thousands of pounds.

£8,000 pay cut

Losers included binmen (who immediately walked out on strike) and school secretaries. Benefit advice workers were losing £8,000 a year and environmental offices £4,000. Noise team workers, who work night shifts and face verbal and physical abuse and had just appeared on a BBC programme that praised their work, faced losing £9,500 a year.

Among the winners were carers and dinner ladies. The council estimated 4,000 gainers, 4,000 staying the same and 2,000 losers. UNISON's branch secretary explained that there were many more losers when one took into account the loss of future grade increases in the old system to which many were entitled. The ballot results were not surprising: rejection by the membership of all three unions – by 4 to 1 in UNISON, 3 to 2 in GMB and by a few percent in TGWU. The employer, having threatened to impose the system, is back in negotiations with a new ballot expected next April.

Similar rejection has occurred in Worcester in two ballots. In this case, however, it has been accompanied by a huge drop in morale among members and a 30% loss of membership.

'Only a fifth of councils have implemented the pay system seven years after the agreement, and these are mostly small authorities...'

In Newcastle settlement was reached relatively early and an 8-year protection agreement led to acceptance by members. But the agreement did not include back pay for those workers, such as cleaners, cooks and carers, who had gained. A no-win no-fee solicitor stepped in and sued both branch officials and the council. The council has now settled out of court, and the government allowed it to use capital receipts for the back pay. Middlesbrough has been similarly sued.

Pay reviews with widespread losses to compensate for gainers like the ones described above have been typical around the country, resulting in equally widespread slowdown in progress. Only a fifth of councils have implemented the pay system seven years after the agreement, and these are mostly small authorities.

Initial confidence

The initial confidence of branch delegates at a special conference at Crystal Palace in 1997 was based on the fact that the system required local agreement. They believed that any job evaluation scheme agreed nationally would be fair. The ballot result from the membership at large was also helped by being linked to an annual pay deal which included a cut in working hours for manual workers, bringing them into line with their APTC colleagues. But as soon as branch officers and stewards started negotiations with the employers and joint training with managers on the nationally agreed job evaluation scheme, doubts and concerns emerged.

The employers' main motivation for supporting the scheme was to avoid equal

pay claims for groups of women workers such as school cooks, care workers and nursery nurses. Several cases had already established in the courts that they were underpaid compared to traditional male occupations such as ground workers or road cleaners, many of whom had the same basic pay but also earned bonuses tied to performance. It was already known that when claims were successful, not only were future costs for the services increased, but millions were needed for back pay.

The employers' plans became apparent when they stated that any changes in pay had to be cost neutral. Among workers single status became synonymous with rob Peter to pay Paula. As the first results came out it turned into robbing Pauline and Peter to pay Paula.

Attempts by union negotiators to extend bonus schemes to women workers were rejected by the employers, as were schemes that consolidated bonuses into salaries and extended this to underpaid groups.

Many union members remembered the strike by Ford women workers when they won equal pay supported by their unions and male workmates. They asked why we were not mobilising the underpaid groups with support from their fellow union members. By then the idea of membership struggle against employers had become either suspect or unattainable to many, particularly some full-time officials. The union culture had turned into that of a service union, with legal expertise and belief that European Union legislation would achieve fairness.

Huge resources were put into legal cases and appeals and any legal victory used as a recruitment tool. The GMB made it a central part of its recruitment strategy, targeting groups of workers with the promise of equal pay claims. Easy trade unionism, gain without pain on cheap subscriptions.

But legal setbacks were not publicised. UNISON had won a case giving back pay to workers who had achieved equal pay. Their employer immediately privatised the

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

service and the new employer refused to pay the back pay. UNISON took appeals all the way up to the European Court of Justice: concerned not to undermine privatisation, it backed the employers.

One of the expected advantages of the new system was transparency, but pay negotiators and stewards found it difficult to find out details of who gained and lost in concluded deals. None of the unions published results either nationally or regionally. In Solihull the negotiators had signed a confidentiality clause. News travelled by word of mouth and increasingly adverts for many jobs had a market supplement. This was an indication that the job had had a pay cut.

Market supplements

Market supplements are allowed under the national agreement, provided that they are applied to all groups where recruitment is difficult and provided they are removed as soon as the market changes. The market supplement does not contribute to pensions, saving the employers money and undermining the pension scheme. Yet it has become an important element of pay protection in negotiations, as one way to prevent the destruction of many services.

Increasingly workers questioned the fairness of the job evaluation schemes. In Sandwell, in the West Midlands, engineers volunteered to have all job levels evaluated in one team as part of a mock exercise to test the proposed computer system. They gained detailed knowledge of the scheme and found the flaws. It could not fairly evaluate all the jobs.

Further investigation showed that many councils had applied the evaluation only for the bottom parts of the pay groups where the highest risk of equal pay claims existed. Ironically these were the groups which had had a job evaluation scheme in the manual workers' pay agreement. Whenever stewards questioned the single status scheme, officials said we had a very successful job evaluation system before; what is different now?

Some councils apply the nationally agreed scheme NJC to the bottom half of the pay scale groups and the Hay scheme at the top. In London the GLPC scheme is used. Where two schemes have been used, difficulties have occurred at the meeting point.

Limitations

What is clear is that the job evaluation schemes, far from being objective tools, are either designed to produce certain outcomes or have limitations which prevent their fair use for all pay groups. In complex situations like a large metropolitan council, where typically between 2,000 and 3,000 job types are required, the problems are predictable.

Different schemes may deliver different outcomes, so the choice of scheme is actually very important. For example Hay is likely to compress salaries at the bottom and stretch those at the top. The GLPC scheme can be expected to deliver similar outcomes to the NJC but may undervalue front-line jobs, which have responsibility for people and put emotional demands on the workers.

When challenged on the unfair effects on groups like engineers, bin workers, solicitors, librarians, ground workers, and many others, a national UNISON officer said that pay hierarchies had to change, and that society had undervalued women's jobs and overvalued male jobs. The NJC scheme has been designed by "expert" consultants; it cannot be challenged by members.

One union, two pay systems

A question increasingly asked by UNISON members is this: Why has Agenda For Change in the health service delivered such a different outcome and pay schemes when workers in both are organised by the same union? There is at the very top a liaison committee on service conditions to exchange knowledge and experience, but it has had no effect.

The NHS job evaluation scheme measures skills and knowledge much more fairly. Undoubtedly the employers are wary of the effects of undervaluing

'Why has Agenda For Change in the Health Service delivered such a different outcome and pay schemes when workers in both are organised by the same union?'

skilled and professional health workers at a time when so much political importance is placed on improvements in the health service. Also, a pilot scheme enabled any errors to be corrected. Administrative jobs had low outcomes, so the scheme is being looked at again to identify where the real content of the job is being undervalued.

Most importantly, Agenda for Change is much better funded, using the money that has gone into the NHS from central government. The obvious difference has not been lost on local government workers. Increasingly at negotiations the question asked of the employers is, How much money are you putting into the single status agreement?

Equal pay will be achieved and it will be paid by those who underpaid our fellow workers for years – the employers. We will not allow them to rob one group of our members to subsidise the pay of others.

The latest pay settlement (2004-6) has made completion of job evaluation and new pay structures an employers' condition: if it is not completed by the deadlines, the 3rd-year pay increase could be stopped by the employers. Faced with non-cooperation and resistance from members and their branch representatives, the employers increasingly threaten to carry out the evaluation without the involvement of the unions or the holders of the jobs being assessed and then to impose the new pay scheme. This has galvanised the membership. Avoiding the problem is no longer an option.

Reg Birch:

engineer, trade unionist, communist

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Will Podmore

Social work has had an ambiguous relationship to the working class... many opportunities to engage in class struggle...

Class conscious social work?



Photo: Workers

Underfunded, undervalued: social services workers need to start setting their own agenda and improving their conditions

SOCIAL WORKERS have not always been regarded as a section of the working class, and have been treated with a degree of disdain by other sections of the class. For instance, in the Reg Birch biography (see advertisement, previous page) Dorothy Birch notes how within the community of Byker, Newcastle, where she grew up in the 1920s-30s, "...everyone hated the welfare workers who gave good advice like why don't you sell your tea set?". Such sentiments would have carried considerable weight both at the time and more recently.

Social work originated in Britain through bodies such as the Charity Organisation Society in the late 19th century, dominated by people such as Beatrice Webb, and had a specific role of policing the poor through the Poor Laws and educating them to "live better lives". But things have changed a great deal since then. Nowadays social work is given extremely narrowly defined roles, such as

the recognition and prevention of child abuse and care management of the elderly.

For at least the past three decades social work with children and families has lurched through a series of high-profile child death cases such as Maria Colwell and Victoria Climbié. Successive governments have responded with increasingly tight regulation of the daily work of social workers in local authority social services departments.

Technical procedures have been designed to minimise social workers' discretion and scope for making autonomous decisions based on sound professional judgements. At the same time their ability to contribute to the welfare of society generally has also been marginalised and labelled as out of step with the alleged need to target resources and "get tough" on welfare dependents.

Every time a child dies, the tragedy is likely to be portrayed as the fault of

incompetent, arrogant or uncaring individual social workers. No government has faced up to the damage caused to sound professional practice by their attacks on the structures and financing of local authorities.

But neither has there been strong or consistent resistance by social workers themselves. A "what can we do about it" attitude has prevailed for too long. Current figures for the length of time people stay in the profession indicate the way many have responded: a large number leave social work within five years of qualifying.

Liverpool strike

Now there are signs that social workers are starting to act on the need to fight these trends collectively through their unions. In Liverpool, a strike has just ended, begun in August against the local authority's plans to reduce the number of qualified workers manning the out-of-hours emergency team, a crucial service which covers adult, and

ass but in its current form and context there would seem to be

‘One of the most positive aspects of the emerging collective resistance is the clearer thinking emerging about class...’

children and family services through the night. The authority plans to move the service to a “call centre” with a few qualified workers overseeing people who have had no social work training at all.

The Liverpool social workers are also striking over the practice of allocating complex child protection work to unqualified social workers or, at best, newly qualified workers in their first posts. This is despite the recommendations of the Climbié enquiry and must be seen as a short-term response to the massive shortage of qualified workers.

The strike received a lot of support from UNISON local government branches in the form of financial donations and communications about similar issues going on in social services departments across Britain. There is also a national campaign, led by various social work educators, for a “social work manifesto” designed to encourage social workers to start setting the agenda within the profession and begin, collectively, to resist the trends that are alienating so many skilled workers from the work they feel passionately about. The manifesto calls for work to achieve these aims through unions – a far more productive course of action than the sometimes fashionable chasing of world-wide anti-capitalist protests.

A British-based workforce

While it has not yet reached the levels seen in the NHS, there is an increasing trend to respond to the recruitment and retention crisis in social work by recruiting from overseas. In 2001-2 1,175 social workers were recruited from countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe and New Zealand. In 2002-3 this rose to 1,370. A comparison

of these figures with the numbers of British social workers leaving the profession illustrates some absurd situations. Home care workers from India, for example, have been recruited in the Hampshire area.

Private recruitment agencies go to national government and local authorities, encouraging them to pay thousands of pounds to social workers from the Philippines (an area seen as having untapped resources) towards their living costs in moving here. These same agencies take 17-25% commission on each social worker who comes.

All this is happening despite the protests of government officials from some of the countries concerned. In 2001 Dr Zola Skweyiya, South Africa’s minister for social development, complained about the poaching of South African social workers needed in their own country.

There are examples of other local authorities looking to recruit local people to train as social workers, as in Kent, where a scheme has run since 2000. But unless workers start to exercise control many employers will take the option of recruiting from overseas.

The European Union

One area overlooked so far by social workers seeking to resist the destructive trends described above is the EU. The government is making many legislative and policy changes to prepare for further integration, involving cuts and privatisation in public services. The impact on social work and social services is highlighted by a recent independent audit (August 2004) of Edinburgh social services.

The audit supports UNISON’s contention that social workers in the city cannot do an effective job with the resources provided. At the same time as this audit was being produced, the government was commissioning PricewaterhouseCoopers to look at ways to “out-source” crucial child protection, fostering and education services within the Children Act.

Social workers have to connect this move with the EU’s insistence that national governments reduce public spending to

EU-prescribed levels and open up public services to private companies. Again, the most effective way to do this is through the organised, protracted struggle only possible through trade unions. Social workers could also highlight this issue in conjunction with other national campaigns such as Defend Council Housing.

The most positive aspect of the emerging collective resistance to these issues is the clearer thinking emerging about class. For too long social workers have seen the working class as those who use their services, mainly the poorest in society, while agonising over their own “middle-class” status in relation to this group.

But those involved in the social work manifesto are emphasising that the nature of capitalism is such that all those who rely on selling their labour power, including social workers and social work educators, are alienated from any sense of fulfillment in their work, the very same alienation that their clients feel when excluded from employment, or from finding work to enable them to feed their families or to gain a sense of worth. It is time for workers in this sector to grasp the nettle and engage in the struggle to take control of their workplaces.

As social workers begin to see and take their rightful place it will be appropriate to think about the contribution they could make to a genuinely democratic society, in the sense seen in countries like Cuba. Social work does have a distinctive set of skills and knowledge that are essential to dealing with social issues. While under a system where society was organised for the benefit of the majority these problems should be largely eradicated, it would be rather romantic to think that they would simply disappear.

There would still be a need for skilled and dedicated professionals to deal with issues around those who are unable to work through sickness, severe disability or old age. Childcare and the prevention of child abuse is another area where the contribution of social workers could be beneficial. Working closely with a range of other health and education workers, social workers do have the knowledge and skills to be effective in these areas.

Mourned and honoured by Palestinians, Arafat was buried in Ne But his final journey is yet to come...

Yasser Arafat, 1929–2004: “Mr Palestine”

Yasser Arafat, who died in November 2004, personified the Palestinians’ fight for freedom: he kept alive their hopes and defied their enemies, often in the most difficult of circumstances. Throughout a life of struggle, he remained true to his objective: a free independent Palestine.

Arafat was born in Cairo in 1929: his father was a textile merchant who was a Palestinian with some Egyptian ancestry; his mother came from an old Palestinian family in Jerusalem. His mother died when he was five, and he was sent to live with his maternal uncle in Jerusalem – then under British rule, which the Palestinians were opposing. One of his earliest memories is of British soldiers breaking into his uncle’s house after midnight, beating members of the family and smashing furniture. At the age of 9, he returned to Cairo, where an older sister took care of him.

Before he was 17, Arafat was smuggling arms to Palestine to be used against the British and the Zionists. At 19, during the war between the Zionists and the Arab states, Arafat left his studies at Faud University in Cairo to fight the Zionist usurpers in the Gaza area.

The defeat of the Arabs and the establishment of the state of Israel left Arafat in despair and he contemplated studying in America. Recovering his spirits and retaining his vision of an independent Palestinian homeland, he returned to Cairo University to major in engineering but spent most of his time as leader of the Palestinian students. His life’s work as “Mr Palestine” effectively began in 1953 when, as a student in Egypt, he wrote “Don’t Forget Palestine” in blood and presented the petition to Egypt’s military leader.

Arafat managed to get his degree in 1956, worked briefly in Egypt, then resettled in Kuwait, first being employed in the department of public works. He spent all his spare time in political activities, to which he contributed most of his profits.

Disenchanted with the Arab world’s inability to do anything about Israel’s 1948 conquests, in 1958 he and his friends founded an underground network of nationalist cells, Al-Fatah, (meaning “conquest”), which in 1959 started a magazine calling for armed struggle against Israel. He was now in effect the leader of Palestinian resistance.

At the end of 1964, Arafat left Kuwait to organise Fatah raids into Israel from Jordan. Also in 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was established, under the sponsorship of the Arab League, bringing together a number of groups all working to free Palestine.

After the 1967 Six-Day War, Fatah emerged as the best organised and most powerful of the groups making up the PLO. Arafat became chairman of the PLO executive in 1969 and transformed the PLO. No longer a puppet organisation of the Arab states, it became an independent nationalist organisation, based in Jordan. However, the PLO’s early terrorist strategy of hijacking aircraft to bring the Palestinian cause to world attention was at best dubious, at worst counter-productive.

Guerrilla attacks

Arafat developed the PLO into a state within the state of Jordan, with its own military forces, acting independently of Jordanian authorities and launching guerrilla attacks on Israel. But in 1970/71 King Hussein of Jordan had them bloodily thrown out. Arafat and the PLO resettled in Lebanon and attempted to repeat the same strategy. This time the PLO were driven out by an Israeli invasion, and Arafat removed his organisation to Tunis.

The period after the expulsion from Lebanon was a low time in the fortunes of Arafat and the PLO. Then, in 1987, the intifada (“shaking”) protest movement erupted in the occupied territories, strengthening the PLO and Arafat as it directed world attention to the difficult plight of the Palestinians. In the same year, Arafat declared that the PLO was the Palestinian government-in-exile.

In 1988, Arafat showed far-sighted ability to make necessary tactical shifts in the light of experience with a change of policy announced in a speech at a special United Nations session, declaring that the PLO renounced terrorism and supported “the right of all parties concerned in the Middle East conflict to live in peace and security, including the state of Palestine, Israel and other neighbours”.

The acceptance of the principle of the



Photo: Gush Shalom/www.gush-shalom.org

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who led his people's struggle for nearly 50 years

ember in Ramallah.

two states, Palestine and Israel, living side by side, increased the prospects for a peace agreement with Israel dramatically, though the 1991 Iraq war soon dented it.

The last decade has seen some progress, but much setback in the subsequent struggle to realise this route to independence and to address the contentious issues it left. In 1994 Arafat re-entered Gaza, ending his 27-year sojourn in the diaspora. In 1996 he was elected President of the fledgling Palestine National Authority with 83% of the vote. Palestinian authorities were created; Palestinian political leadership was restored to its homeland.

But later Israel – with US encouragement, connivance and support – has shown its reluctance to honour the agreements. Dissatisfaction with the lack of progress and with living conditions in the occupied territories provoked a Palestinian uprising in 2000, a second intifada, to which Sharon's government responded with massive armed incursions into Palestinian towns and cities, killing hundreds and leading to a 3-year blockade of Arafat in his ruined Ramallah headquarters. Though ill for many years, he continued to press his people's cause, refusing to quit at the behest of Israel.

Courage

Courage and perseverance personified Arafat; his ability to lead his people out of the most difficult of situations and turn the tables, not just once but many times. That is why he was still so honoured as a leader. He never gave in.

And that is why Palestinians mourned his passing and honoured his life. Thousands took to the streets, many wearing Arafat's trademark, the chequered headscarf. And that is why the Palestinians will continue to draw on Arafat's legacy and spirit as they defy the arrogance of the usurper, Israel; the USA's client state.

Arafat's body has been interred in a stone coffin inside the confines of Ramallah so that it can be moved to Jerusalem when it becomes the capital of a future independent state of Palestine. The final part of his journey is still to come.

WHAT'S THE PARTY?

We in the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), and others who want to see a change in the social system we live under, aspire to a society run in such a way as to provide for the needs, and the desires, of working people, not the needs and desires of those who live by the work of others. These latter people we call capitalists and the system they have created we call capitalism. We don't just aspire to change it, we work to achieve that change.

We object to capitalism not because it is unfair and unkind, although it has taken those vices and made virtues out of them. We object because it does not work. It cannot feed everyone, or house them, or provide work for them. We need, and will work to create a system that can.

We object to capitalism not because it is opposed to terrorism; in fact it helped create it. We object because it cannot, or will not, get rid of it. To destroy terrorism you'd have to destroy capitalism, the supporter of the anti-progress forces which lean on terror to survive. We'd have to wait a long time for that.

We object to capitalism not because it says it opposes division in society; it creates both. We object because it has assiduously created immigration to divide workers here, and now wants to take that a dangerous step further, by institutionalising religious difference into division via 'faith' schools (actually a contradiction in terms).

Capitalism may be all the nasty things well-meaning citizens say it is. But that's not why we workers must destroy it. We must destroy it because it cannot provide for our futures, our children's futures. We must build our own future, and stop complaining about the mess created in our name.

Time will pass, and just as certainly, change will come. The only constant thing in life is change. Just as new growth replaces decay in the natural world, this foreign body in our lives, the foreign body we call capitalism, will have to be replaced by the new, by the forces of the future, building for themselves and theirs, and not for the few. We can work together to make the time for that oh-so-overdue change come all the closer, all the quicker.

Step aside capital. It's our turn now.

How to get in touch

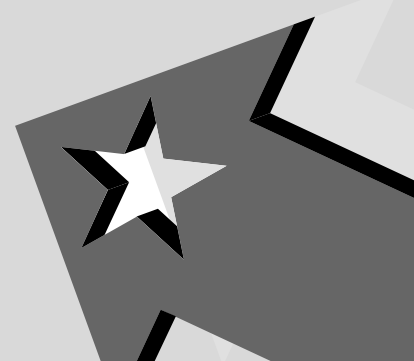
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Back to Front – Lord of the lies

**‘New Labour?
New world
order? No,
it’s an old
story...’**

IT IS NOW three-and-a-half years since Bush promised to get “the people who knocked these buildings down”. Instead, he and Blair attacked Iraq, the one Middle Eastern country where there was no al Qaeda.

What does occupying Iraq mean? It means 40,000 prisoners, widespread abuse, torture, atrocities, beatings, humiliation, intimidation, killings, death squads, house searches, raids, demolitions. It means no jobs, no water, no electricity, no rebuilding, and no security. It means power plants, telephone exchanges, hospitals, schools, sewage and sanitation systems all still in ruins. The only new buildings are 12, supposedly permanent, US military bases.

The US government pledged \$18.4 billion to rebuild Iraq, but any money goes straight through to US firms like Halliburton, which gets \$1 billion every month, saving it from bankruptcy. (Its chief executive, now Vice President Dick Cheney, bought Dresser Industries for \$7.7 billion, without noticing that it owed billions in damages.) Kellogg, Brown & Root, a Halliburton subsidiary, got \$2.3 billion in contracts.

Bechtel got \$1.8 billion to rebuild Iraq’s water, sewage and electricity systems. Both Halliburton and Bechtel have been fined for corrupt practices. Another US firm got \$780 million, despite convictions for fraud on three federal projects and a legal ban on getting US

government work.

The longer the occupation goes on, the worse it becomes, the smaller the coalition gets, and the larger the resistance grows.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld publicly promises a swift victory, but privately says that the USA is in for a “long, hard slog” in Iraq, as in Afghanistan. Cheney said in April 1991, “I think to have American military forces engaged in a civil war inside Iraq would fit the definition of quagmire.”

New Labour? New world order? No, it’s an old story. T. E. Lawrence wrote at the end of the First World War, “We were casting them [British soldiers] by thousands into the fire to the worst of deaths, not to win the war but that the corn and rice and oil of Mesopotamia [Iraq] might be ours.”

He also wrote, “The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiqués are belated, insincere, incomplete. Things have been far worse that we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than the public knows.”

Imperialism does not change.

We should be demanding that the troops are withdrawn, to let the people of Iraq run their country in the way that they want to. Imposing foreign rule is not democratic, but despotic.

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