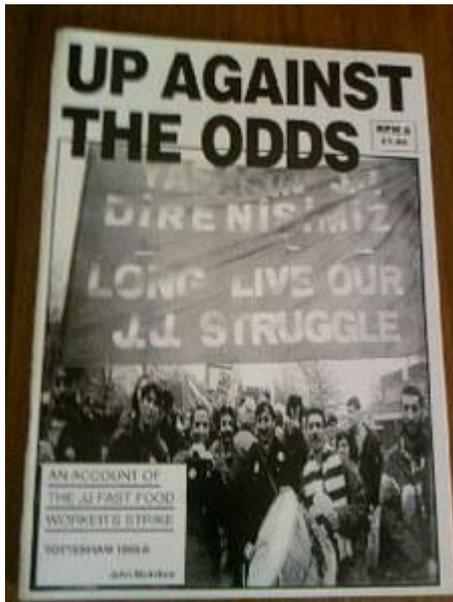


Up against the odds - The JJ Foods strike, 1995



An account of the JJ fast food worker's strike in Tottenham, 1995-6, and its lessons for workers today.

This pamphlet looks at the problems the JJ workers faced: of working within the current union structures, of police and State harassment, the bureaucracy of industrial tribunals and the participation of the organised left. It also attempts to draw some positive lessons as to how workers can improve things for the better through direct action and working class organisation.

When workers take strike action, things start to change. It is a time when people very quickly start to organise, communicate and think in a different and more positive way and when solidarity becomes more than just a slogan. Although perhaps not always the most effective form of industrial action against your boss, going on strike does immediately make it much clearer what and who workers are up against when they make a serious attempt at improving things at work. In however small ways, you start to feel strength and value each other in not only fighting an unequal and alienating system but also seeing and creating a society that workers will eventually run ourselves. And in contrast, workers see the worst excesses of the profit-led system that we are struggling against.

The workers at JJ Fast Foods workers were sacked on October 1995 for organising against low pay and atrocious working conditions. Their activities in the Dispute, and the support for them that was generated in the local community and beyond is an example of grassroots working class self-organisation at its best. It showed the vital part that immigrant communities can play in these struggles, effectively cutting across the racism and false divisions that are deliberately and increasingly encouraged and inflamed by Politicians, Capitalists, the Media and the Far Right.

John McArthur Member of the JJ Fast Food Workers Support Group 1995-96 April 2000.

Introduction

Shortly after 5.30am on 31st October 1995 in a warehouse on an industrial estate in Tottenham, North London, forty-five mainly Kurdish and Turkish workers who had joined a union at JJ Fast Food

Distribution Company were refusing to work. They were protesting at the victimisation and sacking of their elected shop steward (workplace union rep) the day before.

The response of their Boss, Mustafa Kamil, flanked by his security guards, was to separate them from the other workers and force them out of the warehouse. As they gathered outside, they had to defend themselves against members of a right-wing Turkish Nationalist group who attacked them with sticks, bricks, bottles, crowbars and billiard balls in bags.

Twenty minutes later units from the Metropolitan Police's paramilitary Territorial Support Group arrived and attacked them with batons, hospitalising four workers and injuring many others. Over the next four months the JJ dispute became possibly the most important dispute in North/East London in the last years of the 20th Century. The 45 workers undertook a solid and disciplined unofficial strike for over 4 months in the face of police and scab violence, intimidation and hardship. On top of this, they had to deal with sabotage by the union they were members of, and the double-edged involvement of the British, Kurdish and Turkish left wing organisations.

The Dispute exposed the exploitation of immigrant and low paid workers through fear and intimidation. It also exposed the failure of the British Trade Union bureaucracy to give any meaningful support to such workers. This short pamphlet has been put together in recognition that struggles such as that waged by the JJ workers need to be documented and discussed.

Background

There are no reliable figures on exactly how many Turkish speaking workers there are in North London. An educated guess would be 50,000 plus. The Fast Food and Textile industries are significant employers of immigrant workers. Some of these businesses are run by Turkish or Kurdish bosses. However, in regard to the Textile Industry the firms are dependent on, or competing against powerful companies such as C&A and Debenhams who's buying power means they dictate and control the industry. [1]

Many of the workers have fled persecution and genocide in other countries. (2) On arrival in Britain, people are forced to take work in sweatshops or fast food warehouses and outlets, where a 70-hour week for £100 is normal (1). Significantly, the British State has continued to intensify its harassment, detention or forced dispersal of immigrant workers. The main intention is to create racist divisions and tension between communities in London and beyond and to make it more difficult for these communities to organise with others against those who are oppressing them.

Union organisation is virtually non-existence in these industries. The British TUC affiliated unions have shown little interest in supporting immigrant workers and no strategy or structure for winning better conditions where many workers' immigration status is problematic.

Occasionally, left wing groups or the odd TGWU (Transport and General Workers' Union) full-timer distribute union recruitment material. But no real workplace organisation exists further than the level of paper membership and token 'recognition'. The TGWU and GMB (General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union), both of whom claim to represent Textile and Fast Food workers, do not have a Turkish speaking official. Generally these workers have been isolated from what is left of the 'British' labour movement and from the British working class. The JJ Dispute started to change all of this.

The start of the Dispute

The JJ Fast Food workers were working 60-70 hour weeks for around £130 a week under intolerable conditions. A working day could last from 5am to 5pm. There was no proper lunch or tea breaks, even for loaders who worked in sub zero temperatures. There was no overtime, holiday or sick pay. Drivers themselves had to pay out for any counterfeit money they were given, parking fines and damage to trucks.

In the face of all this, 45 of a total of 75 workers joined the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) over the summer of 1995. These included Turkish, Kurdish, Cypriot and Russian workers but it was mainly at the initiative of the Kurdish workers, who included members of communist or socialist organisations and who had been involved in political and union activity in Turkey and Kurdistan. The workers elected a union representative [shop steward] at a mass meeting and put forward some basic demands, mainly on Health and Safety issues. The boss, Mustafa Kamil, immediately tried to divide the workers, and isolate the activists. He sacked the Shop Steward over the phone.

Halloween Day's Horror

On the day after, the 31st of October, most of the workers effectively went on strike. They arrived at the warehouse and stood around. When the boss asked them to work they refused and said that they wanted their steward reinstated. At this point Mustafa Kamil asked the non-union members to move to another side of the warehouse. He then told the union members to leave. He appears to have prepared for this in advance as he had with him a number of security guards, relatives and/or members and supporters of the extremist group the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). These were armed with sticks.

A violent confrontation ensued. The union members - many of whom had direct experience of fascist and police actions in Turkey and Kurdistan gave as good as they got despite being unarmed and unprepared. The union members then gathered outside the gates, some with serious head injuries. The police were called and on arrival they attacked the Trade Unionists. One of the union members was followed and arrested by the police later in the day. The following day the sacked workers and around 100 supporters again gathered outside the warehouse. There was an attempt to block the access road. The police again attempted to break up the picket. In doing so there were scuffles. Demonstrators were again injured and four were arrested. The Police were able to keep the factory open.

Spreading support

During the next few days large pickets by workers and supporters took place. The workers quickly produced a leaflet in Turkish and English recording what had happened and detailing their demands. These were: reinstatement of all unionised workers, all workers to have contracts, holiday and sick pay, no money to be paid by drivers out of their own pockets and two shifts to be introduced in the freezers where they worked at -30 degrees Fahrenheit.

On the following Saturday workers and supporters held a rally outside the factory. A number of unelected, full-time paid officials from the Southeast Region of the Transport and General Workers Union spoke and promised their full support. The daily "Pickets" were at first heavily controlled by the TGWU officials with one attending every morning for about a month. From the start, the officials worked directly with the police in ensuring that the picket was kept behind barriers and away from

the main gate. The officials usually stood on the police's side of the barriers, outside of the picket. When workers or supporters occasionally moved nearer to the factory, the officials intervened and told workers to move back behind the barriers. The Police supported this by threatening those moving outside of the barriers with immediate arrest.

Every morning for over two months around 50 workers and supporters marched 1/2 a mile to the warehouse where we held a lively picket. This often involved Kurdish folk dancing and music, singing, speeches and chanting. There were also regular verbal onslaughts towards the scabs. Speakers took turns on the megaphone to directly appeal to them to join the strike or to leave. This had some level of success on occasions. There was a regular turnover of scabs at the factory and on rare occasions whole groups of them stood and listened to what was being said. There were sporadic attempts to block the road and stop vans leaving, but the Territorial Support Group quickly stopped these.

During this time, the workers were having regular meetings with union officials, mainly concerning strike/hardship pay. Fearing that JJ's boss may attempt to drag the union into court for supporting the JJ workers, the TGWU officials told the strikers that the pickets were not to be pickets and that the dispute was not a strike. The TGWU's main activity was to immediately start in process applications to an Industrial Tribunal.

Policing

Remarkably, following the confrontations of the first two days, there was not one incident at the picket line involving either injury or arrest during the whole dispute. Nevertheless, the policing over the first few weeks was completely out of proportion to the "public order" situation. During this time, the number of police usually outnumbered demonstrators.

Large numbers of units from the riot-trained Territorial Support Group were present every day for nearly two weeks. The police set up a permanent control unit in a car park nearby, with video surveillance and riot equipment. The place was so saturated that local residents presumed a new police station had been opened! This was undoubtedly a reaction to the fact that this was the first major dispute in the area for over 10 years. It is clear that the Tottenham police welcomed the opportunity to try their para-military saturation policing usually reserved for Tottenham's black community.

Also, the State -not least M15's Stella Rimmington- have over recent years stated their intention to increase their "surveillance" of the Kurdish community, and the Press have attempted to feed the police's paranoia that every Kurd in London is a Terrorist. (3) The Police also openly gave the Boss, Mustafa Kamil, police protection, on occasions ferrying him to and from negotiations, allowing negotiations to take place in Tottenham police station and loaning him a bulletproof vest! British supporters were slow to realise the significance of the States' response to the Dispute, mainly evident in the level and nature of the policing of it.

TGWU officials gave the names of 5 of the strikers' leaders to the police in the first week of the Dispute. Shortly after this, the Police visited workers at the Turkish Cafe they were using for a meeting place and threatened to come back and arrest the "leaders" if there was any "trouble". This had an immediate and marked effect on the confidence of the strike leaders to initiate activities. There were also incidents of people being stopped around Tottenham and questioned about their involvement in the Dispute.

In December, as workers and supporters congregated in a car park before marching to the factory for the picket, plain clothes police officers turned up and questioned workers. Some were asked how long they had lived in the country and others had their cars searched. This, of course, fits the usual pattern of "petty" harassment by police of any strikers. But it also had the added sinister threat to the workers of race checks and criminalisation of asylum seekers. It was no coincidence that at this time the Asylum and Immigration Bill (4) was going through Parliament and deportations were on the increase (5). For good reason the workers avoided set-piece conflicts with the Police. There were other, more effective, and safer ways that the Dispute could be won.

Organising support

JJ delivery vans continued to leave the warehouse, but scabs appeared slow, demoralised, and unable to operate equipment. The pickets were on a slightly raised hill, and this enabled workers to see directly the problems the unskilled scabs were having in doing their job. It also made it possible to take photographs of the frozen food being left outside of the refrigerators. This was useful later in the Dispute in exposing possible Hazards to public health for anyone eating any of the products coming from the warehouse. In the third week, six workers who originally stayed at work joined their mates outside and also became members of the union.

Supporters who had been involved in disputes like this before such as at [Bacton Fashions in Hackney in 1990](#) knew that the union officials would quickly sell out the Dispute if the workers did not start organising activities independently. On the joint initiative of a group of the Kurdish strikers, members of the Colin Roach Centre in Hackney (who had long-standing links in the Kurdish and Turkish community) and Haringey Solidarity Group (a local independent political organisation) the JJ Fast Food Locked Out Workers' Support Group was formed in the /second week of the Dispute.

The first meeting was held on November 3rd. A practical strategy for winning the Dispute was agreed jointly by workers and supporters. The meeting was fully translated, with the first language being Turkish, the workers first language. From the start, the Group did not want, or need, the involvement of the TGWU full time officials. Activities planned were to be boycotts, pickets, street and workplace collections, organising speakers at union meetings and doing mass flyposting.

The Support group organised consistent, unconditional support to workers until the end of the Dispute. It was the only democratic forum where JJ workers sat down with the mainly British supporters, discussed issues and organised support. The sense of comradeship and common purpose within the Support Group enabled people of diverse political affiliations to work together constructively. To varying degrees, this involved members of Militant Labour, individual Labour Party members, the TDKP (Turkish Revolutionary Communist Party), Day-Mer Kurdish/ Turkish Community Centre, Turkish/ Kurdish Anarchist Group 5th May, TKP-ML, TGWU Textile Workers' Branch, Haringey Solidarity Group and the Colin Roach Centre.

A regular Bulletin, 'The Tottenham Picket', was produced by the Support Group in Turkish and English publicising the Dispute. This was desktop published and translated into Turkish by the 5th May Turkish/Kurdish anarchist Group. Hundreds of copies were sent out to organisations nationally by Haringey Solidarity Group and distributed to supporters on the street and at union meetings.

The boycott

Most of the outlets for JJ's were small burger and kebab shops around North London. The main one

of these was Jenny Burgers. This was quickly established from records at Companies House in London, where a public record of all British companies accounts are held. A boycott campaign of Jenny's was immediately organised by the Support Group. This was to be the public face of a widespread boycott campaign aimed at getting the scab vans stopped from delivering altogether.

Thousands of "Boycott Jenny's" leaflets were produced and distributed. Pickets of Jenny's Burgers were held around London by the Support Group over the weeks up to Xmas in Islington, Crouch End, Muswell Hill and Walthamstow and elsewhere. This was backed up by the vital work early on in the Dispute by the workers themselves who did much in getting JJ goods blacked in local fast food and Kebab shops around North London and beyond. This involved spreading information within the Turkish and Kurdish community about the Dispute. The first few weeks saw sporadic incidents of violence and intimidation from both sides in the dispute. At least one striker had death threats posted on his door during this time.

The Turkish press carried stories from day one. The daily Turkish newspaper, Hurriyet, carried a scare story alleging that the strike was being orchestrated for political reasons, and that the Kurdish independence movement, specifically the Kurdistan Workers Party, was heavily involved. Following protests by the strikers, including a visit to the newspaper offices, the paper retracted the allegations. Other Kurdish and Turkish newspaper were generally sympathetic to the strikers.

The other main JJ outlet was schools in nearby local authorities. A campaign to get local authorities to boycott JJ products was started. Members of the Support Group held lobbies of Council meetings. This succeeded in embarrassing the controlling Labour groups in Harrow, Enfield and Southwark Councils into eventually stopping their contracts with JJ's.

The support group publicised widely the health hazards involved, particularly to school children getting their school meals from JJ's. Strikers pointed out that the scabs were leaving outside food usually kept in the refrigerator. Photographs proved this and the Support group leafleted schools in Enfield telling parents that the continual defrosting and refrosting may contaminate burgers (as would handling by scab labour.)

Whilst all this took place the daily pickets continued. Legal support for workers and supporters at these was organised with the help of members of the Legal Defence and Monitoring Group based at Tottenham Unwaged Centre. The members of Haringey Solidarity Group (HSG) offered the centre at the start of the dispute as an organising base. It was near to the warehouse and had a phone line. It became a meeting place and contact address, for the workers and supporters. This simple gesture was a recognition of the need for self-organisation by the workers themselves and it meant the workers could meet regularly without union officials being present, and decide on strategy.

Linking with others

"In this country, unemployment is at a high level. Racist laws follow one after another. The division between black and white is constantly fostered and there is constant violence against foreigners. All these are political reflections of British imperialism." Kenan. JJ worker. Dec 1995

On a number of occasions, the JJ workers visited the Hillingdon strikers' picket line, who were on strike against cuts to pay and conditions at Hillingdon Hospital. These visits were reciprocated. In early December 1995 a steward from the Liverpool Dockers' dispute visited and spoke at the picket

line. The workers and members of the Support Group organised a coach to Liverpool, along with the T&G Textile Workers Branch, and attended a demonstration in Liverpool in support of the 500 dockers, who were on strike against cuts in pay and conditions. A speech from the JJ workers was read out at the rally. The delegation was warmly received by the Dockers and their families and supporters. Links between the Liverpool dockers and Turkish workers in London have been kept up since.

The JJ workers, with their banner, headed the 3,000 strong March against Race Checks and the Government Asylum Laws held in Hackney on December 16th. Again, the contingent was a strong and significant part of the Demonstration. The March was supported by virtually all of the Turkish and Kurdish left-wing organisations, which was unusual. It was a sign of the impact that the JJ workers' unity had made in these communities that they were able to head the march as a group of workers from different communities and political backgrounds who, despite their differences, were organising together.

A Social, involving a children's party, a public meeting, and a music event was held in December in one of the Kurdish political community centres in Hackney. This was highly successful, and raised the morale of many supporters, workers and their families. The day included a photographic exhibition of the Dispute, a video showing and a public meeting with speeches by supporters and workers. Daily pickets continued but were reduced to one a week after the Industrial Tribunal was started. They were usually quite lively and helped to maintain regular contact between workers and between workers and supporters. As it was usually still cold and dark we often lit fires. Kurdish dancing and folk music usually livened things up and British and Kurdish resistance songs were shared. Breakfast and strike meetings at the Tottenham Unwaged Centre often followed pickets.

The nature of the "pickets" on Saturdays was usually quite different. Some of these were advertised more widely, and two were officially called and attended by the TGWU officials who would speak offering the "full support of the trade union movement". Left-wing paper sellers, who were not seen during the rest of the week, also turned up. In November, to the surprise of the strikers, the TGWU officials unilaterally announced that the time of the pickets would be changed to two o'clock in the afternoon because at 5.00am it was "too dark". The fact that any JJ vans going into the factory at 2.00pm would be empty did not seem to bother them. This decision was ignored by workers and supporters and the morning pickets continued as usual, with no officials being present for the rest of the dispute.

Negotiations

Meanwhile, the boycott was resulting in bringing the company to its knees. And this was without any mass picketing or set piece confrontation with the Police. For many weeks, the scab workforce had been doing less than 30% of the work before the Dispute. They were being bribed with over double the wages that the sacked workers had been receiving. At the end of December, half of the scab workforce left the factory due to the conditions of work that the boss had imposed. These actions were undoubtedly the reason why Mustafa Kamil approached the TGWU officials asking for negotiations early in November. On 29th November a meeting was held with TGWU officials and two workers' representatives. The meeting was actually held at Tottenham Police Station, with the agreement of the T&G officials.

Kamil appeared terrified. He told officials that he had received death threats and feared for his life and turned up in a bulletproof vest. At the meeting, he admitted his business was suffering, and that he was under pressure. He also admitted that he was unhappy with the work the scabs were doing, and that he wanted the strike to end. He made a number of offers, including union recognition (but not job security) and financial offers which amounted to a few thousand pounds. These were taken back to the workers. The workers rejected all of these, and agreed to continue pressurising the Company until they got all of their demands. The Dispute continued.

Racism resisted

In the New Year, the dispute was effectively being won. During the usually busy period around Xmas the deliveries had been dramatically reduced. Hardly anything was going out of the depot. A "For Sale" sign appeared outside the JJ warehouse and it was rumoured that Kamil was cutting his losses by closing the factory and moving it North to Enfield, to set up under another name. This had been done in 1990 by the Turkish boss at the Hackney Textile factory Bacton Fashions during a long-running dispute.

Mustafa Kamil met again with officials and workers. He made a number of financial offers, but would not agree to have all of the workers back. At one point he made a list of all of the workers he would have back which excluded all of the Kurdish workers! He said that some of the workers did not have the "right papers" and that some of them had not even been on the books. This was a blatant attempt at dividing the Kurdish workers from the others. It was also an open use of the states' racist practices in harassing workers over their immigration status, which, as has been commented, was on the increase at the time. On another occasion he secretly met with a small number of the Turkish and Cypriot workers, attempting to bribe them to come back. T&G officials were involved in arranging these meetings. The workers refused to make a deal.

The Transport and General Workers Union

The Union official's hope of persuading the workers to go back at any price was being resisted. Workers and supporters were meeting, organising and picketing without any support from the TGWU officials. And they were winning. The role of the TGWU was to give out £35 a week "hardship pay", providing solicitors to process the applications for the Industrial Tribunal and attending negotiating meetings at which they desperately tried to stitch up any deal possible to end the dispute.

The officials of the Transport and General Workers' Union, had from the start of the dispute, a main strategy of working through the Courts and worked to convince the strikers that an Industrial Tribunal would win concessions from Kamil. Workers reported that the officials had said the Tribunal would get them all reinstated. Even if it did, this would still have left the small matter of lousy pay and conditions unresolved! The fact was that the T&G officials wanted recognition at any cost even if this meant workers returning under worse conditions than previously. Their other aim was to protect themselves from sequestration (seizing of funds by the courts).

The TGWU made token gestures to show that they were "supporting" the workers such as printing a few leaflets and arranging collections at some workplaces. Meanwhile at many heated meetings with the workers they continually tried to get the pickets called off. Even the Turkish translator commented in a support group meeting that the officials were "bullying" the workers. Under pressure from the workers to show their support the officials continually promised that they would

organise a mass demonstration in North London in support of the strike. Predictably, this never materialised. In the end, the support group and the workers organised a demonstration independently of them.

The response of the officials was to attempt to openly sabotage the demonstration. In their first and only recognition of the Support Group, they sent a hostile letter saying that the Demonstration had not been agreed by the TGWU and was therefore unofficial. They also contacted the Police telling them this. These actions put the workers directly at risk. The police, hostile at the best of times, were basically being given the OK by the TGWU to ban, or prevent the demonstration on the grounds that it was "not official". This threat was taken very seriously, but the strikers and the Support group were determined to exercise their right to demonstrate and went ahead with its organisation. Legal observers, stewards and speakers were arranged. In the event, the TGWU backed down and agreed to support it when JJ stewards challenged them over the issue. The demonstration and rally went ahead successfully.

Winning the war

"What we have shown is that it is possible to fight together in these communities and win! Already, we have gained important victories. Forty workers who had no previous trade union experience, who hardly speak any English, have been able to resist and fight back for eight weeks without going back to work. The implications of this dispute cannot be overestimated. Despite our lack of experience, and all of the problems, we have managed to beat the boss who wouldn't even treat us as human beings at the beginning." Ali Yildirim, JJ worker. Dec 1995

By the New Year, the 45 workers were conducting a well-organised and effective all-out indefinite unofficial strike that was bringing the Company to its knees. And they were winning. JJ's was going bust. If, at this point, the workers had gone in and negotiated on their own, with their own demands (which they had drawn up from the start anyway) they stood a good chance of winning concessions from Kamil, and all being reinstated under better pay and conditions. There would have been no need to look towards the Industrial Tribunal.

This was not to happen. By the New Year, a date for the Industrial Tribunal was set. The union lost no time in diverting the workers away from the struggle. They held many meetings with workers over this, and continually sowed the illusions that the Tribunal would get them what they wanted. Also some workers were beginning to take other jobs, and the workers had stopped meeting independently. All meetings now took place at the posh offices of the T&G with the Tribunal being the sole item on the Agenda. From here things went downhill. Crucial time had been lost. By February, the scabs were learning the job, and the workers were simply waiting for the Tribunal.

The workers were drawn away from collective activities and this undermined the economic struggle of direct action pickets and boycotts against the Company. Consequently, the Support group also lost its direction. Unable to work with the majority of strikers, the activities of the support group were reduced and the boycott campaign toned down. Mustafa Kamil had ridden the storm. The first hearing of the Tribunal was on January 13th 1996 was adjourned for 3 weeks later when a two-week session was held. During this time extensive evidence was given. A catalogue of injustices and anti-union practices were revealed. The workers giving evidence were visibly relieved that their grievances were finally being heard in an arena that they had been persuaded to trust. After two weeks the Tribunal ruled that the workers had been sacked for union membership and ordered

them to return to work on 26th February. The company, meanwhile, were expected to re-instate them and agree to discussions on outstanding grievances.

The return to work

Around 35 workers returned on this date only to be told by Mustafa Kamil that, in spite of the ruling in the workers' favour, there was to be no union recognition, and that he could make them work from 5am till midnight if he wanted. If they didn't accept this, they could stuff their jobs. There was an argument and all of the workers walked out again. The workers went back to the union and the District Official referred the issue back to the Tribunal. The Tribunal recommended bringing in ACAS, who directed Kamil to either reinstate the workers or face further court proceedings. At the same time, they directed workers to sign work contracts based on their conditions of work at the time that they were sacked. This was a devastating blow.

The union officials from the TGWU had not prepared the workers for this. They had told the workers to return, but had said nothing about it being on the same terms and conditions or in some cases worse ones. There was now only a vague assurance that once they were back at work the TGWU would negotiate better pay and conditions for them. However, the boss at JJ's was fully aware of the implications of the Industrial Tribunal's decision and got his solicitor to draft contracts incorporating the worst practices previously operated at the firm. He had no trouble doing this because they had been so well documented by the workers at the Tribunal. This amounted to no overtime pay, any holiday pay, drivers paid only for driving time, and not the time spent loading and unloading; and divisive pay differentials. This last point was later used to victimise some of the workers most active in the dispute by transferring them on to much less pay than they had been on previously.

The workers were completely disillusioned with what the officials had done, and how the court had manipulated them. For the first time in two months, and the last time in the Dispute, they again met independently at the Tottenham Unwaged Centre. As at the beginning of the dispute there was frank and open discussion about what to do but with the agreement that by the end of the meeting they would thrash out a collective decision that all would respect. Some of the workers said that they would refuse to go back under such conditions, and should stick out. Other workers wanted to go back. After all of the divisions of the past few weeks, of being stabbed in the back by the union officials, and ordered about against their will by the court, they agreed a number of demands that they would put to Kamil the next morning.

These conditions under which they would go back included formal recognition of union stewards, holiday pay, overtime pay, and minimum Health and Safety regulations. The next morning when the workers met with the TGWU District Official he flatly told them they could not put these demands and that they had to accept the new contract which the union could not challenge in any way. The parts of the contract relating to a degree of union recognition and grievance and disciplinary procedure came within the ACAS code of practice, statutory sick pay is a legal requirement; and these provisions were in the contract because the Tribunal had ruled they should be. Nothing else could be added.

The subsequent ACAS decisions had only elaborated detail on the union recognition issue i.e. Kamil had to accept that the union had the right to represent the workers and negotiate on their behalf, and that the workers could elect shop stewards. But the question of formal recognition of the union was to be the subject of future discussion. The forum for this discussion would be the meeting of a

joint working party consisting of workers' shop stewards, the T&G official, and the employer, who would meet weekly for the first 8 weeks after the return to work. Disillusioned by betrayal, only twelve out of the original 42 sacked JJ workers returned to work on 18 March. Four of the workers went in at the same time and told Kamil where he could stick his jobs. None of the workers were happy with this. They were forced to return under conditions, which were even worse than before. It was those intolerable, degrading conditions and low pay, which were the reason for the Dispute in the first place. They joined the union for one purpose, to enable them to fight to improve their pay and conditions at work.

Keeping within the law

Throughout the dispute the "revolutionary" left continually told the workers that they had to get the T&G to make their dispute official in order to win. This did a lot of damage in sowing false illusions and wasting the workers' time and energy (not to mention eardrums!). From the start, it was perfectly clear that the TGWU never had any intention of making the Dispute official. The anti-union laws made it possible for a union to be taken to court for organising unofficial action. Technically unofficial action involves all strikes where recognition is an issue because there is no legal basis for a dispute between a group of workers and an employer where the latter has not recognised the workers' trade union. If the union officials were seen to be condoning the action with a ballot, they would risk having their funds sequestered. The corporate, financial interests of the union were therefore put before those of the workers and the Union remained powerless. That was why, for the TGWU officials, the JJ Dispute was always bizarrely referred to as just a 'protest'. They religiously followed not just the letter but the spirit of the anti-trade union laws.

The role of the organised Left

This next section looks at how organised left groups approached the Dispute. It must be pointed out that the criticisms here are levelled at the organisations people were in. The JJ workers, uniting despite their political affiliations, resulted in a unity of action of supporters and workers -which spanned Turkish communists to British anarchists. This happened successfully for a time as people used their heads, forgot the agendas of their various parties, and simply got stuck in and did the practical solidarity work that nobody could ignore.

But there were exceptions to this. This was when Left groups were sufficiently organised to put their own party's aims before those of the workers. In my own experience, the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) was a glaring example of this approach. I will look at how this happened in practice, and then briefly look at the role of the Turkish and Kurdish left in the dispute, which has mainly been highlighted by workers since the dispute finished.

It might seem a bit negative, and it is, but if we are to learn any lessons from disputes like this it is vital that the authoritarian, damaging and anti-working class actions of groups such as the SWP are exposed and that people are aware of their role, so that we can work round them effectively in the future. It is also important because many (including some of the SWP's own members) are still under the illusion that the organisation was actively and positively involved in the JJ dispute.

The SWP's role was to prove an embarrassing and damaging cock-up, revealing the Organisation as one of unashamed sectarianism. They were the first British group on the scene at the first picket. SWP members were among those arrested at the picket on the second day. Following this, the party's activities then centred on organising collections within mainly white-collar, UNISON and NUT

branches for the workers. This was done entirely separately from any other group, including that of the Support Group whose activities they boycotted.

This resulted in a number of organisational problems for strike support. Collections were often undertaken as part of an SWP paper sale. This caused many problems for the support group. For instance, when activists in the Colin Roach Centre, Hackney, visited workplaces with JJ workers, they found that the SWP had been round to do a collection (paper sale) before them, and had alienated the workers. This happened during the second week of the dispute at Hackney Bus Garage, where the SWP's visit resulted in a blanket ban on all visits by outside trade unionists. Despite these problems, the SWP flatly refused to collaborate with anyone else in supporting the Dispute.

The SWP's response to the setting up of the Support Group is worth recording in some detail. From an early stage, it was clear that the SWP Central Committee had seen this dispute as a priority. The Strategy, as has been commented, was to do collections as part of paper sales or at white collar union meetings, attend a picket once a week, and make it look as if they were the main group supporting the Dispute. A conscious decision was made by JJ workers and members of Haringey Solidarity Group and the Colin Roach Centre to exclude the SWP from the first meeting of the Support group. It was rightly predicted that the SWP would initially attempt to dominate the Support Group so at this stage they were not invited. At the end of the first demonstration on the first Saturday, a meeting was called for that afternoon.

As it happened, two members did attend the meeting, finding out about it by chance a few hours before and they took a practical role in the meeting, agreeing to join the activities. One of these was later told by SWP full-timers to keep away from the dispute. A lively, practical meeting was held in Turkish and translated into English, outlining a strategy for winning the Dispute based on direct action and a boycott of the Company. When they found out about this meeting, the SWP leadership panicked and seem to have told their entire Tottenham membership (and beyond) to turn up and flood the next meeting of the Support Group. They got the date wrong and turned up at a flyposting session instead. As soon as they realised, they disappeared outside and held an emergency caucus lasting half an hour to decide whether to help put up "Support the JJ Fast Food Workers" posters. The leadership eventually persuaded them to leave and go collecting/paper selling at the 5th November Fire works display at Alexandra Palace. No explanation for this sudden departure was ever given. Just one SWP member returned to help with the flyposting.

The next Support Group meeting was flooded by the SWP, who manipulated one of their members into chairing. The first half of the meeting was given over to SWP members reading out long lists of collections done at their paper sales. These actually included items such as "Wood Green Tube: £2 collected" . They then prioritised telling the JJ workers to "push the T&G officials to act" and to call mass pickets. The Meeting was conducted in English, with no translation, leaving the majority of people actually on strike excluded as the British left argued over the role of the T&G bureaucracy. I remember one striker whose wife had received death threats from scabs the day before, and needed to discuss this at the meeting, sleeping through most of it as like all the strikers he was exhausted from the week's activities. It was a minor miracle that anything practical came out of the meeting.

The SWP continued in a similar vein for the next few weeks, members reading out lists of their Paper sale collections and making speeches about the need to "Push the union leadership to act". The

urgency of the task in hand meant, however, that they did not remain unopposed as members of the Support Group continued to organise support for the JJ workers amongst a range of working class organisations including local trade unions. After a few weeks the SWP dropped the pretence of being involved in the Dispute at all. They had been unable to control or recruit from the Support Group or the strikers themselves and withdrew without any explanation leading to confusion amongst some SWP members. Some of those who would have liked to remain involved told Support Group members they had been ordered away from the Dispute.

Obviously, it is more difficult for me to take a critical look at the Turkish and Kurdish left, but JJ workers have asked that I include a section on this. The JJ workers were members of many different political parties, some were even in the MHP, a Turkish ultra-nationalist group. From the start, therefore, this unique dispute was enabling workers with diverse political affiliations to fight together. It's ironic that at one point Mustafa Kamil actually approached the MHP for help. They replied that their only involvement in the dispute was that two of their members were on strike, and they wanted it to stay that way! [of course, as referred to earlier some members of the MHP were involved on the attack on the strikers on October 31st - there is no knowledge if they were expelled for doing so]

Collectively, the JJ workers actively resisted bringing party politics into the dispute. But this in no way meant that legitimate political issues were ignored. On the contrary, strike meetings were informed with political discussion about tactics, the role of the union etc, etc. Also, it can be clearly seen, specifically by the JJ workers involvement in the anti-race checks demonstration of December 11th and the Liverpool dockers' dispute, that the JJ workers immediately started generalising their own struggle to other areas of working class resistance. And they also rightly educated many people on the issue of Kurdish independence, and how this fitted in with their socialist perspective of oppression and exploitation of workers everywhere.

The Turkish and Kurdish left continually tried to intervene in the Dispute. The workers always resisted this. The main organised Turkish/Kurdish left group was Day-Mer (controlled by members of the TDKP, the Revolutionary Turkish Communist Party, which has now dissolved into the new Emek Partisi, the Turkish Workers Party.) Day-Mer members were able to attend the daily pickets and Support Group activities and worked closely with the JJ workers on a daily basis. They were instrumental in arranging for the first delegation up to Liverpool. Much of this was practical solidarity work that was faultless. Yet it must be said that ultimately it was a problem that just one group was seen as central to the Dispute. This ultimately alienated some of the JJ workers. As with British left politics, because one group was seen to be dominating, others gave less active support. Also, as with any political party, the party line came first. Although giving practical support on the ground, the view of Day-Mer's leadership was that the workers had to work within the T&G structures to "push the union leaders to act." This was actually similar to the position of the SWP, although what they did in practice was different.

Also, because of their involvement in the TGWU Textile Workers' Branch, Day-Mer worked within the confines of the TGWU and ultimately (despite organising some important wildcat strikes in textile factories shortly after the JJ dispute) they did not wish to work outside the TGWU structure. Their approach, again like most of the British left, is to challenge and take over the union leadership within the structure. Independent direct action was therefore a means to an end.

Other groups also wanted to intervene, but the workers, rightly or wrongly, rejected their demands. Supporters of the Kurdistan Workers Party, the largest Kurdish left grouping in London wanted to come down en-masse. This would have involved Kurdish independence slogans and banners. There would undoubtedly have been an impressive show of support, but the JJ workers asked them not to, feeling it would alienate some of the strikers. It could be argued that if the Kurdish issues were discussed openly and frankly at the start then this would not have been a problem. Likewise, the MLKP offered to set up a permanent picket tent at the Depot entrance. This seemingly practical and positive idea was not taken up, because the workers were very clear that they did not want the party political strings that were attached.

Continuing links

Support group meetings continued weekly until a few weeks after the 13 workers returned to work in April. Towards the end, these meetings became dominated by supporters. However well intentioned, it was British supporters who were writing propaganda and reports and initiating ideas (although, in theory, the JJ workers who were still attending had the final veto of every decision).

This was true of the initiative in March 1996. Workers and supporters called a joint Open Meeting to discuss the lessons we had learnt from working together in the Dispute, to record these for publication and circulation to other workers, and to agree how we could work together in the future. The discussions were to include, the economics of the fast food industry, the role of the police in the dispute, the role of the union bureaucracy, the specific problems faced by immigrant workers, and continuing the links by building a network of Rank and File activists and workers in struggle. We agreed to set up a permanent Strike Support Group to support workers in North London who are in struggle. Unfortunately this failed to materialise due to political disagreements within the Support Group. These centred on whether to support TGWU "initiatives" to unionise Turkish workers. There were wide differences of opinion over this.

The future: Which direction?

The differences of opinion over which direction to go in once the dispute had ended were significant. The crux was whether people had faith in working within TUC unions. This last section is an attempt to make some sense of these disagreements and to draw some conclusions. The JJ Dispute highlighted the limits with current TUC-style union "organisation" in this country. The most important thing is that the Dispute took place at all. In many such workplaces around North London there is no trade union activity and even where the TGWU have formal "recognition" agreements with the employers, shop-floor organisation remains virtually non-existent.

Where union activity does take place it is usually confined to occasional casework on disciplinaries, grievances and , token "pay negotiations". Union full time officials dominate any decision-making. It is common for workers to see full-timers or even shop stewards as being in the pockets of management. JJ's was different. Against the wishes, or forecast, of the full-timers, the JJ workers started fighting for themselves, refusing to be sold out. It is clear that it was impossible to win the Dispute within the structure of the Transport and General Workers Union, or any other TUC affiliated union. Alarmed by a group of workers fighting for themselves, the TGWU officials worked within and with the State to pacify, defuse and eventually sabotage the Dispute. The TGWU officials ultimately succeeded in restricting the workers self-organisation.

It would be simplistic to blame the problems in the dispute on the TGWU "not doing enough" or being "too bureaucratic". The problems are much deeper than this. The British Trade Union movement does not put the interests of workers above those of employers. The role of the unions is to moderate the demands of workers so that bosses can still make a profit without serious disruption. Workers are expected to keep their heads down, not asking for too much, and capitalism can continue to run smoothly.

Many of the left parties colluded in this by arguing for the workers to put their trust in the union bureaucracy. At JJ's the SWP, the largest left party in the country, and their paper gave the British TGWU full-timer as the contact for the dispute and ignored the existence of an independent support group, office, telephone and meeting place.

In contrast, when they met independently of the union officials and looked to their own ideas and organisation the workers recognised that it was direct action, which would achieve the results, they wanted. JJ Fast Foods had to be brought to a halt, whether that meant legal or illegal means. This was almost achieved within just two months. The JJ workers were clear that if they did not get their jobs back then the business had to be forced to close down completely. Suggested tactics ranged from economic pressure to literally torching the place. It was argued by workers that at least this would send out the message that bosses could not get away with sacking union members. Meanwhile, the left talked of getting Bill Morris, the T&G leader, to come down to the picket line and getting the strike made official.

The role of anarchists in the Dispute

There was considerable input from local anarchists in the JJ strike, which deserves a mention. Anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists involved consistently encouraged, supported and argued for the workers to take full control of the dispute themselves from the start, and not rely on the TGWU. This was done in many practical ways, which encouraged self-organisation. The setting up of the Support Group was initiated by anarchists, together with members of the Colin Roach Centre. An anarchist-controlled shop-front building was given over to the workers for use a strike centre within days of the dispute starting.

Haringey Solidarity Group, an anarchist-led community organisation, provided hundreds of pounds for the workers and the Support Group to produce their own bulletins and, leaflets and posters about the dispute. Anarchists consistently argued against relying on, or even having anything to do with, the Industrial Tribunal. This was not through any purist "don't use the courts" approach, but through the direct practical experience that tribunals do not serve in the interest of workers, even in clear cases of discrimination, as the JJ sackings were.

It was anarchists who arranged legal support for the workers, both on immigration issues, and legal monitoring of pickets and demonstrations. The Turkish/Kurdish Anarchist 5th May Group translated every newsletter into Turkish. This was important in getting information out that came directly from the workers themselves as the rare TGWU literature that was circulated gave only the "official" account of the dispute and the workers demands.

A lot of the work of anarchists went unnoticed. It is both a strength and a weakness that anarchists were undertaking much of the practical work, but failing to put a strong enough case for breaking with the courts and the TGWU, and for complete independent organisation. There was also a lack of

concrete examples of current independent working class organisation at the time, and no clear analysis of what this actually meant.

Conclusion

The above Story of the Dispute (in case you hadn't noticed) is not without my own subjective observations. There are clear criticisms of tactics, strategies and aims that materialised during the Dispute. Many of the points could also relate to other similar "lock-out" disputes that have been taking place in Britain at the end of the nineties, notably the Hillingdon Hospital cleaners, Liverpool Dockers and the Magnet Kitchen workers in Darlington, County Durham.

There is no reason to believe that there will not be similar disputes. The Government's "fairness at work" legislation appears to be strengthening the power and control of union officials, making it more difficult for workers to organise independently. Workers will remain isolated and alienated from "their" union if they take any real form of industrial action. The problem is; how do we prepare to win in the future? It is clear that meaningful union structures need to be established which are controlled directly by workers based on direct action and which are strong enough to survive. The nature of such union organisation is beyond the scope of this pamphlet. So I'll try and be brief, positive and practical with the conclusions.

As has been shown, the workers were generally set out to involve all the strikers in activities and decision-making from day one. Many of the strikers and their families had been involved in political struggle for most of their lives. Most were not at all surprised or freaked by the aggressive policing, the threats and bribes from the boss or from the sudden arrival at the beginning of the dispute of the 57 varieties of Marxist Party. Despite their own political allegiances they recognised that party political issues must be kept out of the Dispute. This did not mean taking the politics out of the dispute; this was all too evident in the striker's tactics and attitudes during the dispute.

The workers were well organised, and met once a day at the beginning of the Dispute to decide on actions, which enabled them to keep things together against the odds. But, as I've tried to show, the forces against them were too powerful. I do not mean the boss or the police, but the workers' Trade Union, the Transport and General Workers Union. The actions of the full-time officials' eventually took the life out of the Dispute and turned it into a sterile argument in a Tribunal. This eventually demoralised and defeated the workers. It did the job of the Boss for him.

The frustrating thing is that unlike many similar disputes the JJ workers were actually close to winning outright at one point. The fact was that the JJ workers were not up against an employer who had limitless resources such as, for instance, the multinational Pall Mall Company who sacked the Hillingdon hospital cleaners at around the same time. The JJ workers could see visibly that within weeks of starting their action they had not only severely dented their boss's reputation, they had also reduced his Company's profits, forcing him to look desperately to seek a negotiated settlement. The Union officials were not willing to hammer home the workers advantage and force a settlement on their terms. By allowing the officials to negotiate on their behalf the JJ workers allowed control of the dispute to be taken out of their hands at a crucial time. They gave control of their dispute the union officials. This was a mistake.

What the TGWU offered was an illusion: a mass membership that could offer the resources and the solidarity to bring about a victory by a group of workers against their employer. As regards the

practical resources, it should be possible for local groups of workers to get together and organise these. After all what are they? A photocopier, phone and Computer at an Office plus access to independent legal advice which would not be used politically to damage the collective nature of any Dispute. This might seem like I'm simplifying things in terms of resources. But I'm trying to demystify the monopoly that TUC unions seem to hold over so-called workplace organisation. The bread and butter things they actually offer are reasonably straightforward for us to organise ourselves. Are these things really so valuable, that we pay the price of their political interference and sabotage of any dispute that we try and run ourselves?

If this pamphlet has done anything, I hope it has illustrated just one of the thousands of examples showing that worker's strength lies in the workplace not in the full-time officials' union office. But it is not enough to simply "encourage" workers' organisation within the TUC-affiliated unions. The TUC is and always has been a tool to keep workers' quiet, and to make sure that the profit-system isn't rocked too much. We need to build up our own organisations that are controlled and run by workers, outside of the control of the TUC unions or the state, or the system - Revolutionary Unionism. But that's another story. (6)

References

(1) The three sources below give evidence of this:

* Colin Roach Centre/Resistance Survey Results of interviews with 35 textile workers in Northeast London December 1995: Showed evidence of low wages and sweatshop conditions.

* Observer Newspaper article 23.6.96 £45 buys this pretty dress- The woman who made it earned £1 an hour.

* Big Issue article, 13.5.96, The High Street Sweatshops.

(2) There were many reports at the time of repression of Kurdish people by the Turkish State. For example:

* 21/2/92 Hugh Pope. Terrorism, death squads, killing and guerrillas: Violence returns to haunt Turkey

* 3/6/92 Gordon Martin. Turkish bombers destroy six Kurdish villages

* 20.1.98, Daily Telegraph, Saddam resumes ethnic cleansing against Kurds Amberin Zaman details reports of a campaign of ethnic cleansing against thousands of Kurds from territories in Northern Iraq and that Iraqi officials reported that hundreds of Kurdish families had fled to the enclave protected by the Western allies after being threatened with death or indefinite imprisonment.

(3) Articles from the magazine Kurdistan Report:

* Jan/Feb 1995, M15, Special Branch and criminalisation of the Kurds in Britain, Stephen Long

* Nov/Dec 1992, The Press and the Kurds, : propaganda war, Trevor Rayne

* Also, In a Sunday Telegraph article, 23.8.92, Gun-toting Kurds bring terror to the streets of Britain, Nicholas Farrell's notoriously uses unidentified sources to make a catalogue of inaccurate, unfounded and inflammatory allegations against the Kurdish community in North London.

* Also see the Daily Telegraph, 3.2.00 Met pays damages for raid on actors Julia Hartley-Brewer. Report of Raid by armed anti-terrorist officers at a play-rehearsal , and arrest of actors in a play about Kurdistan, Haringey, North London

(4) In February 1996, the Government introduced new social security regulations, which meant that those who claim political asylum were only entitled to state benefits if they had claimed at the port of entry, and that entitlement only extended until an initial decision had been made in their case.

(5) In 1995, 5,070 people were deported from Britain. In 1996 the figure was 5,410 and in 1997 was

up to 6,580. (Control of Immigration, August 1997, Home Office Command Paper reference CM 4431)

(6) The original first draft of this pamphlet included a whole 10-page second section on methods of anarcho-syndicalist organisation in the workplace. To spare you all, I took it out because it didn't seem to read well with the first section. I think that it's fairly obvious that as long as workers continue to work within the confines of reformist trade union workers will make little headway in defending ourselves organisations the system will continue to divide, rule and exploit us in ever more ruthless ways. There would be little point in writing pamphlets like this unless we can go on to look at what the positive alternatives are. We need to form organisations that are not only independent of political parties and the State but that are also revolutionary.

For those interested in reading more on this subject, a good starting point is the Solidarity Federation's Self Ed Collectives' recently produced 24-booklet series, A History of Anarcho-Syndicalism, available from Self Ed, PO Box 1095, Sheffield, S2 4YR.

The Revolutionary 101 website has lots of information and links to revolutionary unions world-wide. Otherwise, you can write to the Solidarity Federation, the British Section of the International Workers' Association, who will send you details about their work in Britain, and any publications they have produced:

Solidarity Federation: PO Box 29, SW PDO Manchester M15 5HW.

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