The Mental Patients Union, 1973

Lewis Mantus and Madlib colleagues: "Everyone knows I'm mad"

Fighting for madmen's rights

Historical information about the Mental Patients Union, formed in London in 1973 to oppose psychiatric oppression, written by Past Tense.

The Mental Patients Union (MPU), in the early 1970s, could probably be seen as the first service user involvement movement. Founder member Andrew Roberts described the Union's genesis:

"The idea of a Mental Patients Union was first developed by a small group of mental patients and supporters back in December 1972. A pamphlet was produced — which came to be known as the Fish Pamphlet (it had a picture of a fish struggling on a hook on the cover) — that was strongly Marxist in its analysis. Its argument was that psychiatry was a form of social control of the working *classes in a capitalist state, and that the psychiatrist was the "high priest" of technological society, exorcising the "devils" of social distress through electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), lobotomy and* medication. The thinking was that, in the same way that workers formed trade unions, mental patients also needed a union to fight for their rights against political oppression and social control.

There were six of us involved in setting up the union: Liz Durkin, Brian Douieb, Lesley Mitchell, Eric Irwin, me and my partner Valerie Argent, but only Eric, Valerie and I were mental patients. Valerie and I were mainly focused on forming *the union. We didn't participate in the political analysis, or sign the* Fish Pamphlet.

The group planned to hold its first public meeting at Paddington day hospital, where Liz had been a social worker. She had been making contact with the press to promote the cause for a Mental *Patients Union. The idea of the union caught the fancy of Radio 4's Today programme and they* asked her to come and talk about it on the programme on the morning of the meeting. Liz realised they were asking her because she was a soci*al worker, but at a "council of war" meeting we decided we wouldn't take part unless they agreed to interview a patient — and that we wouldn't give them any* information about the patient, whether they were from Broadmoor or whatever. We had this idea that *we'd line up in the studio and say: "Spot the loony." They took three or four hours to ring us and agree* to interview a patient. They needed time to think about that.

In the end, I was the only one of the three of us with mental health problems willing to do it. At the *studio, it was all very civilised. The interviewer's main question was: "How could patients possibly* form a union *– if they were sick, how could they take part in something like that?"* In those days it was radical to suggest that people with mental health problems could do things together as an association.

The response after the broadcast was overwhelming. I gave out my home number on air and from the moment the interview went out, the telephone was ringing.

We had only booked a small room at the hospital for the meeting later that evening. More than 100 *people turned up and there wasn't room for us all. It was chaos and they found us a bigger room.* Some people picked up the Fish Pamphlet and were asking if, to join the union, they had to share its analysis. We told them no, those were just the views of one small group.

We told them the union was about the dignity of mental patients, about being able to speak for *ourselves and not having to talk about "them", because, in those days, if you were* in any group and *the subject of mental patients came up, everybody assumed you couldn't be one* — you talked about "them", not "us".

Andrew Roberts is a member of the management committee of the Survivor History Group

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Mental Patients Union Demands taken from the Declaration of Intent **of April 1973**

We Demand

1. The abolition of compulsory treatment i.e. we demand the effective right of patients to refuse any specific treatment.

   2. The abolition of the right of any authorities to treat patients in the face of opposition of relatives or closest friends unless it is clearly shown that the patient of his own volition desires the treatment.

3. The abolition of irreversible psychiatric treatments (ECT, brain surgery, specific drugs)

4. Higher standards in the testing of treatments before use on us.

5. That patients be told what treatments they are receiving are experimental and should have the effective right to refuse to be experimented on.

6. That patients be told what treatments they are receiving and what the long-term effects are.

7. Also the abolition of isolation treatment (seclusion in locked side rooms, padded cells, etc.)

8. The right of any patient to inspect his case notes and the right to take legal action relating to the contents and consequences of them.

9. That the authorities should not discharge any patient against his will because they refuse treatment or any other reason.

10. That all patients should have the right to have any treatment which we believe will help them.

11. That local authorities should provide housing for patients wishng to leave hospital and that adequate security benefits should be provided. We will support any mental patients or ex-patients in their struggle to get these facilities and any person who is at risk of becoming a mental patient because of inadequate accommodation, financial support, social pressures,etc.

12. We call for the abolition of compulsory hospitalisation.

13. An end to the indiscriminate use of the term 'mental subnormality'. We intend to fight the condemnation of people as 'mentally subnormal' in the absence of any real practical work to tackle the problem with active social understanding and help.

14. The abolition of the concept of 'psychopath' as a legal or medical category.

15. The right of patients to retain their personal clothing in hospitals and to secure their personal possessions without interference by hospital staff.

16. The abolition of compulsory work in hospitals and outside and the abolition of the right of the hospital to withhold and control patients' money.

17. The right of patients to join and participate fully in the trade union of their choice.

18. That trade union rates are paid to patients for any work done where such rates do not exist.

19. That patients should have recourse to a room where they can enjoy their own privacy or have privacy with others, of either sex, of their own choosing.

20. The abolition of censorship by hospital authorities of patients' communications with society outside the hospital and in particular the abolition of telephone and letter censorship.

21. We demand the abolition of any power to restrict patients' visiting rights by the hospital authorities.

22, The right of Mental Patients Union representatives to inspect all areas of hospitals or equivalent institutions.

23.   We deny that there is any such thing as 'incurable' mental illness and demand the right to investigate the circumstances of any mental hospital patient who believes he or she is being treated as incurable

24. We demand that every mental patient or ex-patient should have the right to a free second opinion by a psychiatrist of the patient's or Mental Patients Union representatives' choice, if he or she disagrees with the diagnosis and that every patient or ex-patient should have the right to an effective appeal machinery.

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Another early MPU member, Joan Hughes, picks up the history of the group:

"In England, around about 1972, a few groups of psychiatric patients and sympathetic mental health staff began to make political comments on their situation in society. Effectively, many mental patients

were without civil rights – For example, even the right to vote used to be removed for a mental patient without any address outside an institution

PADDINGTON DAY HOSPITAL

The first group I heard about was a group of patients attending the Paddington Day Hospital in West London. This was reputed to use enlightened methods of treatment including psychotherapy. National Health Service authorities wanted to close it.

There were meetings and discussions among patients and the protest against closure was successful. The Paddington Day Hospital stayed open.

THE FISH PAMPHLET

One of the patients at Paddington Day Hospital was Eric Irwin. He and three professionals, Liz Durkin, Lesley Mitchell and Brian Douieb, thought there was a need for an organisation of patients. They met *together write a booklet called "The Case for a Mental Patients Union". Later they were joined by two* other patients, Andrew and Valerie Roberts.

This group is called the pilot committee for a mental patients union. The booklet is often called "The Fish Pamphlet" because it has a picture of a fish on a hook on the cover. This is to illustrate that the behaviour of someone who is suffering from mental illness may appear mad, but may really be a way of getting over his or her problems.

THE MENTAL PATIENTS UNION

A big meeting to discuss forming a Mental Patients Union was held in the evening of Wednesday 21st March 1973. About 100 people attended this meeting at Paddington Day Hospital. The majority were patients or ex- patients. Most lived in London.

It turned out that this was not the first Mental Patients Union. People came who had previously formed the Scottish Union of Mental Patients. People were present who had tried to form a Union in Oxford and a message was received from another group in Leeds.

The national Mental Patients Union was formed with full membership reserved for patients and ex-patients.

MENTAL PATIENTS UNION DECLARATION OF INTENT

There was a lot of discussion about the content of the Fish Pamphlet. Many patients objected to its use of marxist ideas. It was decided that the Fish Pamphlet could be circulated by The Mental Patients Union, but would not be a MPU publication. The policy of the union would be written independently and voted on at meetings where only patients and ex-patients had a vote. This was called Declaration of Intent of the Mental Patients Union. It begins

"We proclaim the dignity of society's so-called mental patients. We challenge repressive psychiatric practice and its ill-*defined concepts of 'mental illness'"*

DEMANDS

The declaration contained demands.

Some demands were moderate. For example, the right to receive private letters unopened by staff.

Some were long term aims. For example, the eventual abolition of mental hospitals.

Some were impractical. For example, the right to be represented by a member of the Mental Patients Union at mental health tribunals. This was impractical because not enough MPU members were available to be representatives.

The most controversial demands seemed to be the right to refuse certain forms of treatment, such as Electro Convulsive Shock Treatment (ECT) and drugs.

SCOTTISH UNION OF MENTAL PATIENTS

As I have said, when the MPU was formed nationally, it was found out that patients unions had been formed already in different parts of the country.

SUMP, the Scottish Union of Mental Patients, was formed in 1972 by Tommie Ritchie and Robin Farqhuarson. This was the first union of psychiatric patients in the United Kingdom that we have the written records of. Tommy and Robin both helped to form the national MPU in 1973.

FORGOTTEN GROUPS

We know that a lot of history is forgotten or goes unrecorded. One of the aims of a history group should be to trace the activities of patients in different parts of the country before and after the public start of the mental patients movement in 1973.

NATION WIDE

Following 1973, mental patients unions were established in many parts of the country. Hackney MPU acted as a coordinating centre for some years.

Some, like the West London MPU, were very small, others had a substantial membership. Some operated in mental hospitals, other were outside the hospital. Two (Hackney and Manchester) ran houses for members.

Sometimes there was a union in a hospital linked to a union outside. This was the case in Hackney where Hackney Hospital patients established their own union with the support of the Mayola Road MPU. Hackney Hospital MPU may have been the first hospital union to win recognition from the hospital authorities.

A Federation of Mental Patients Unions was formed, at the Manchester Conference, in 1974.

Mental Patients Unions did not all have the same Declaration of Intent. Groups were free to select their own demands from the original declaration, and add others that they wanted.

It needs to be remembered that the main surviving record of the Mental Patients Union are those kept by Hackney for the movement generally.

This means that a lot of local history is still to be recovered – Including the history of MPU groups outside Hackney that carried on after Hackney MPU closed. One group. Dundee MPU is believed to have carried on into the 1990s. Although it changed its name.

HACKNEY MENTAL PATIENTS UNION

In Hackney there were two autonomous MPU's who worked together. Although I was, at one time, a patient in Hackney Hospital, the group I belonged to was the Mayola Road Mental Patients Union. I lived in Robin Farquharson House and was, at one time, the union treasurer and, at other times, its secretary.

As far as I know, no Mental Patients Union ever received any public funds. Hackney MPU was supported by donations from patients and ex-patients, and some associate members and from the rents that those of us living in the houses paid.

Associate members were people like sympathetic social workers and health service workers. There were very few of these and, whilst I was involved, all the active members were patients or ex-patients. Any patient or ex- patient could attend and vote at our meetings. Before anyone else attended, the full members present had to agree that they could.

Without funding and relying completely on our own resources, we provided services. We ran the Robin Farquharson House in Mayola Road for three years. This was divided into individual rooms that *were entirely under resident's control, but it also had an office which served as a crash pad in* emergencies. We often had people staying who were going through a crisis and who were supported by other residents. We also helped and advised people by telephone and letter, and there were any visitors from all over the country as well as from abroad.

We set up two other houses in Woodford to accommodate people and, after a while, these became self managing.

COPE AND WEST LONDON MPU

COPE (Community Organisation for Psychiatric Emergencies) was running in West London at the same time as MPU. Some of its members were patients. others were not. It ran a crisis centre with and published a magazine, and also tried to provide short-term housing. COPE provided a base for *Eric Irwin's "West London MPU". Many people met him there. One of those people was Julian* Barnett, the founder of PROMPT (Protection of the Rights of Mental Patients in Therapy)

PSYCHIATRIC DRUGS

I joined the Mental Patients Union shortly after it started. I took part in many activities but, because of my experience, I was particularly interested in the side effects of psychiatric drugs. In October 1975 I was one of the three people who brought out **A Directory of the Side Effects of Psychiatric Drugs**.

As an analytical chemist, I was able to help a lot on the scientific side and in reading and understanding reports.

My name at this time was Joan Martin. The other two people were Andrew Roberts and Chris Hill, who typed the directory.

MY EXPERIENCE

Let me tell you something, first about my experience of psychiatric drugs and why it is so important that people who take them are well informed about their effects.

One day in 1969 I visited my G.P. and told her about my depression. She said that she could give me *an injection for this and I would soon feel better. She said that the title of the drug was "Modecate",* which I knew nothing about.

I had this injection, walked home and into a cinema to see a film. Midway through the film I felt not sleepy but incredibly depressed. The world was slipping away from me. Everything which was happening around me appeared to be taking place in another world, with which I had no connection.

For the next two years I did not initiate any activities for myself. It was a shadowy world in which I lived and I am not able to describe it. In fact I could observe what people were doing, but not act for myself, except in a desperate way, which soon ended with my entering Rubery Hill Mental Hospital.

I am not against Doctors. It was a doctor who took me off the drugs and restored my health. I entered Goodmayes Hospital on November 1st 1971, having taken an overdose. My drugs were stopped and the first day on which I began to feel better was November 29th, 1971.

Some years later I told a doctor in Hackney Hospital

"I know that drugs do me no good. And the MPU is not against doctors. In Goodmayes Hospital there was someone called Dr Abrahamson. He must have been a good doctor for he stopped giving me drugs, and after two years chronic illne*ss, I suddenly got better."*

SIDE EFFECTS

When MPU was formed, many doctors denied that psychiatric drugs had serious side effects. There are also drugs now considered dangerously addictive that doctors then said were entirely free of problems.

We had been issuing a one-sheet listing the main psychiatric drugs with their side-effects, almost since MPU was first formed. Some people thought this was based on patients reports. But it was based on the official reports of the drugs. We were careful not to be sensational and explained that the side effects only sometimes occurred. The list was so that people would not blame their illness if they suffered the side effect.

We thought this was very reasonable – But many people were very angry about it. Mind re-published it in the first Consumers issue of their magazine, but forgot to include the warning that it was only a list of effects that might happen. This caused a great debate in its correspondence columns.

The side effects directory was eight pages. We researched it carefully, and divided it into different types of drugs, so that people were not confessed by changing names. By this time Mind were frightened to mention side effects, but the Directory was well reviewed by some medical papers. Many drug companies bought copies. We charged them extra.

Orders for the drugs directory soon outpaced the supply and I kept on reprinting it for several years, and even revised it. It is now, of course, hopelessly out of date.

CLOSURE

Hackney MPU closed in 1976. Members who lived in the house moved into two new house. One of *these was run by Matthew O'Hara until his death in June 1980. The Matthew O'Hara Committee: for* Civil Liberties and Community Care was formed in his memory.

I [Joan Hughes] lived, with other members, in the other house (which still exists). We kept the same telephone line and continued to answer calls to the union and correspond with people who wrote. Visitors from the movement in the United Kingdom, Europe and America frequently stayed with us. One of those who stayed was *Judi Chamberlin* from America, a patient activist from the United States. When she was invited to the World Congress of Mental Health in Brighton in June 1985, she was shocked to find no United Kingdom activists were invited – But worked with those who came uninvited.

PROMPT

PROMPT (Protection of the Rights of Mental Patients in Therapy) was formed in 1976. It was not a patients group, although several patients and ex- patients joined. Eric Irwin from West London MPU was one of its most active members. The group used the MPU logo and reprinted many MPU publications, with additions of its own.

PROMPT did not try to provide housing or set up groups in hospitals. What id did do was to provide a telephone advice service for patients and ex=patients in difficulties, unsatisfied with their treatment or living conditions. It also gave considerable attention to campaigning on specific issues such as the abolition of Electro-*Convulsive Therapy."*

For more information about the Mental Patients Union see:

http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm
http://www.ctono.freeserve.co.uk/id90.htm
The Mental Patients Union evolved during the 1970s into PROMPT (People for the Rights of Mental Patients in Treatment), which eventually turned into CAPO (Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression) in the early 1980s. CAPO went on to issue a seminal manifesto which is still regarded by many as inspirational.

Taken from https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2016/03/21/today-in-londons-radical-history-mental-patients-union-founded-to-oppose-psychiatric-oppression-1973/