COVID TROUBLES AT FORMBY HALL

The Covid-19 pandemic has made abundantly clear that our bosses and rulers are only concerned with our well-being insofar as is necessary to maintain a productive workforce.

A member of the Liverpool Solidarity Federation came up against this reality in his job at Formby Hall Golf & Spa Resort. In August he was summarily dismissed for raising concerns about inadequate health and safety measures leaving both workers and customers vulnerable to the virus.

This type of treatment is standard fare in the service sector, where zero-hours contracts and high staff-turnover enable businesses to ignore basic workers’ rights, maximising exploitation and preventing unionisation. In this case, however, the sacked worker decided to stand up for himself and, alongside the Solidarity Federation, demanded just under £400 in compensation for unfair dismissal (equivalent to two weeks notice pay). As an anarcho-syndicalist union, the Solidarity Federation does not challenge bosses through tribunals, appealing to laws written by and for the capitalist class. Instead, demands are backed up by direct action.

Over the following weeks, Formby Hall was picketed several times. Despite the isolated location, legal threats, and police interference, dedicated supporters returned each time more resolute. The group leafleted Formby town centre, gaining public support and drumming up bad publicity for the resort. Creative tactics were used to disrupt business as usual, putting further pressure on the management. These actions were organised among equals, without any directing authority or bureaucracy, drawing support from the Federation across the country.

The dispute is ongoing at the time of writing; regardless of the outcome, however, it has been an important experience for those involved. The person sacked from their job had a chance to defend their dignity and demonstrate to co-workers that resistance is possible. The conflict made evident the dividing line between workers and bosses, whose interests are diametrically opposed. It also demonstrated the excessive approach the police will take to protect private property, so long as it’s in the hands of the rich and powerful. The people taking action gained vital experience, skills, and confidence that will be put to use in future campaigns. Formby Hall will think twice before sacking someone again under the flimsy pretence of having an “attitude problem”.

The struggle was limited by the fact that only one worker was willing to take action; if the workforce had come together then there would have been greater leverage and potential for future workplace resistance. For example, workers have collectively walked off the job over Covid elsewhere, such as council workers in Glasgow and retail staff in Bristol. However, through self-organisation between workers of all sectors in the local area, the Solidarity Federation demonstrated the potential to take action even when workplace organisation is lacking.

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THE 1969 ABERCROMBY RENT STRIKE

This is the second article in a series covering local rent strikes from 1968-1974. Last issue covered the 1968 Speke and Childwall Valley rent strike, which saw up to 4,000 tenants across the city withhold their rent alongside instances of direct action, such as a sit-in, leading to a small reduction in the council’s rent increase. Tenants’ unions had sprung up across the city and were brought together by the Amalgamated Tenants Associations Co-ordinating Committee (ATACC).

By 1969 Merseyside’s general housing policy had shifted towards slum clearance alongside rehousing tenants outside of the inner city to prioritise “development”. At the time an area in Toxteth then called Abercromby, made up of Crown, Grove and Myrtle Streets, were residential areas owned, in part, by the University of Liverpool. Abercromby was in a genuinely slum-like state and was the poorest ward in Liverpool. The university was failing to rehouse tenants quickly enough or to carry out repairs.

The local Abercromby Tenants Association (ATA), at the time a handful of relatively affluent tenants, was flooded with the slum-dwellers and affiliated to the ATACC. At the time the ATA was effectively a single-issue group trying to get rehoused as quickly as possible.

In October 1968, tenants on one street agreed to a total rent strike. By March 1969, hundreds of tenants across 36 Abercromby streets were refusing to pay any rent at all.

The tenants found unusual allies in radicals from the university. Students, asking for nothing in return, provided them with a space to meet, drew attention to their living conditions in student papers along with an exhibition and even tested their water supply after one tenant overheard a local councillor talking of dangerously high levels of lead. University management attempted to pit students and tenants against each other by informing them that the other were communists. When the students were threatened with disciplinary proceedings, management backed down after a threat from the ATA.

The climax of the strike was on May 15th with the visit of Princess Alexandra for the opening of two new university buildings: Senate House and Oliver Lodge Physics Laboratory. The Princess had invited a representative of the ATA to attend the expensive ceremony, but they refused, and instead suggested she visited them at the “Slums of Vine Street”. On the day, tenants lined the streets, with houses decorated with slogans such as “we’ve got an open air loo, have you?” When Alexandra was supposed to be having a tour of one of the “nicer” houses, occupied by a royalist, Ethel Singleton confronted her. Meanwhile 400 students picketed Senate House with placards reading “slum landlord”. The strike went from being completely ignored by the press to becoming national news, being dubbed a “peasants revolt” by CBS in the United States.

In June 1969 the ATA was successful and the council agreed to prioritise rehousing the tenants. Furthermore the unpaid rent was effectively waived, so participants in the strike had saved 9 months worth of rent. In 1972 many of the rehoused tenants found themselves withholding rent again in opposition to the Housing Finance Act. •

Ethel Singleton confronts Princess Alexandra during the rent strike.
MIGRANT SOLIDARITY

Liverpool Migrant Solidarity Network is a collective of people working together to resist the hostile environment that migrants face in Liverpool and beyond. We do this by linking with vital local services working with migrants, and with other migrant solidarity groups in the UK.

During Covid-19 we started fundraising for people that don’t have any access to public funds. People with insecure immigration status are some of the hardest hit by the pandemic. Many have no right to work so are in low-paid, precarious jobs and have to continue to work despite the risk to their health. Many were abruptly laid off from their jobs and left with no income to pay for rent, food or medication. The government’s hostile environment policy also stops many people seeking help and support, as this could lead to their detention or deportation. Thanks to everyone’s donations we managed to give emergency financial support to over 150 families and individuals. Through this process we established regular contact with some of them and, together with services and via mutual aid groups we keep trying to create a welcoming environment where people’s needs matter.

In August we started using the funds raised to support asylum seekers and migrants who are being temporarily housed in remote hotels and targeted by fascist groups such as Britain First. In addition to being targeted by violent hate groups, they are often isolated and without access to anything but very basic resources. During the past month we collected a lot of donations of essential items and used the fundraiser to cover basic needs of refugees currently housed in hotels in Merseyside.

The group’s aim at the moment is to establish long-term support for migrants that does not only focus on material needs. Together with other groups we will start organising a campaign against deportations and we will set up a signing support system for migrants that have to sign at the home office. Signing support systems are put in place to ensure that if a person gets detained when they go to sign, their support network will be immediately notified, and all relevant migration services and solidarity networks will be mobilised to support detainees as much as possible. Setting up a signing support system requires a big group of people and long-term commitment. If you would like to know more and become part of our signing support group please get in touch!

- liverpoolmigrantsolidarity@gmail.com
- facebook.com/LiverpoolMigrantSolidarity
- gofundme.com/f/funds-for-migrants-without-access-to-public-funds
- patreon.com/LMSN

“When a black flag bearing the words ‘no rent’ floats over a single slum, when streets are torn up and barricaded, when from the windows and roofs of the houses there comes a shower of hot water and storm of stones and brickbats, what can the police or bailiffs do?” — John Greaghe

EVICITION BAN LIFTED

As of the 20th of September the eviction ban has been lifted, meaning that struggling tenants could be turfed out onto the streets during Covid’s second wave.

Southampton Solidarity Federation have prepared up-to-date and understandable guides on housing law, including evictions, that can be read at southamptonsolfed.wordpress.com

While there are some legal protections in place, nobody should be kicked out of their homes for being poor. Evictions are also often threatened or carried out illegally. On the 24th of September an illegal eviction of a squatted building in Greenwich, London, was resisted when supporters refused to let the bailiffs enter. During the Poll Tax, legal evictions were also resisted when our class came together to stand in solidarity. If you’re worried about being evicted, knock on your neighbours’ doors and set up a telephone tree. That way if the bailiffs knock, they will be in for a shock!
BEATING THE BADGER CULL

From the start of October the Badger Cull is still ongoing and may be extended. Liverpool Hunt Sabs have been working tirelessly to oppose the cull, for example, by confronting hunters to prevent them from taking shots. If you’re interested in getting involved pop them a message on facebook or send an email to: lpoolhuntsabs@hotmail.co.uk

FAR-RIGHT FOILED IN SOUTHPORT

Over the summer the British far-right coordinated a campaign of intimidation and abuse against asylum-seekers being sheltered in hotels. Sadistic as it may seem to bring further misery to some of society’s most vulnerable people, this was a predictable outcome of the government’s “hostile environment” policy and the anti-migrant rhetoric of British politics in general.

On Saturday 12th of September an anti-migrant march was organised in Southport, sights set on a nearby hotel. However, only five or so fascists turned up – likely due to Merseyside’s notoriety for militant antifascism. The Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network coordinated an effective response, encircling the gathering and drowning out their racist speeches with chants and jeers. Despite police intervention, anti-fascists stood firm until the offenders turned tail and left. Once again, fascist agitation was successfully opposed through self-organised direct action.

Keep up on their activity and get in touch at: facebook.com/MerseyAFN

“Nearly all laws which were originally framed with the intention of benefiting workers, have either turned into weapons in their enemies’ hands, or become dead letters unless the workers through their organisations have directly enforced their observance. So that in the end, it is direct action that has to be relied on anyway.”

Voltairine de Cleyre

The Liverpool Anarchist is written by individual members of the Solidarity Federation, an anarcho-syndicalist union. We aim to publish monthly and welcome all contributions in accord with our basic ideas. We advocate working class direct action to improve our lives here and now while building a revolutionary movement to do away with capitalism, the state, and all other hierarchies.

Send in feedback, comments, and submissions to: liverpoolanarchist@tuta.io

You can find us online at: liverpoolanarchist.wordpress.com

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