

THE NIGHT CLEANERS STRIKES

AUGUST 1972

CONTENTS:

1. THE STRIKES
2. THE PRESS DURING THE STRIKES
3. THE OUTCOME OF THE STRIKES
4. WHERE NOW?



PUBLISHED BY: CLEANER'S ACTION GROUP,
13, MIDDLE LANE, LONDON N.8.

A CLEANER'S VOICE PAMPHLET.

5p.

Section 1

THE STRIKES:

ON SUNDAY night, July 30th 1972, 10 women cleaners employed by cleaning contractors, Cleanagents Ltd., to clean the giant 26 storey Ministry of Defence, Empress State Building in Fulham, London, came out on strike. The demands of their strike were : -
1) Recognition of their Union, the Civil Service Union; 2) a £3.00 per week wage rise and better conditions of employment.

Cleanagents Ltd., Managing Director, Mr. John Rhoda, had, the previous week, attempted to negotiate a £1.00 per week rise with the women until his contract expired, without any consultation with the Union.

Up until a year ago 25 women were employed to clean the building containing 1,200 offices, toilets, stairs, lifts, corridors etc., at the time of the strike the work force had been slashed to 13 earning £12.50 for a 45 hour week (night working!).

After a meeting with the employers on the Sunday night and a refusal from them to consider the proposals put forward by the women, the women left the building to join members of the Cleaners Action Group, Women's Liberation groups and others who were waiting - a 24 hour picket line was set up - and the strike was on.

By Wednesday solidarity with the women was growing, the picket-line was growing and messages of solidarity and donations were pouring in. Late on Wednesday night, Peter Gresham (C.S.U. official) arrived and announced that the strike had been made official that afternoon at a meeting at the Union's Headquarters, and that strike-pay of £10.00 per week would be paid from the following Friday.

A meeting had been arranged for Wednesday afternoon between the Union and Mr. Rhoda for Cleanagents. The meeting never took place through Mr. Rhoda refusing to meet because, he said, he had not been properly notified by the Union - by letter.

Then, on Sunday August 6, 20 women on the Old Admiralty building, Whitehall, also employed by Cleanagents, joined the strike with the same demands for their building.

On Monday a meeting took place between the C.S.U. and Mr. Rhoda - who still refused to change his position. He told the C.S.U. representatives that he was forming a "staff association" (or 'Company Union' - as they are better known!) for the day cleaners on the building and that if the striking women would accept a non-negotiable wage rise of £2.50 he would allow them to join it! He used this fact as an argument for not granting official negotiating rights to the C.S.U. The talks finally broke down and Mr. Rhoda walked out, with no agreement reached.

By now the picket-lines on the Empress State were having their effect. Post Office engineers officially supported the women by refusing to service telephones on the building; dustmen lent their support and the Ministry's bins remained full, and the C.S.U. had official offers of help from S.O.G.A.T. (the print workers union) and the T.G.W.U. The strike on the Admiralty building was now also official.

Later in the week - the Post Office Workers' Union joined in solidarity and refused to deliver mail; milk, bread and beer also went undelivered - the canteen was running out of supplies and things must have been becoming serious inside the building!

By this time negotiations had broken down completely between the CSU and Cleanagents; despite Ministry of Employment interventions, Mr. Rhoda refused to accord the CSU proper negotiating rights.

On Friday August 11, the Ministry of Employment made informal approaches to the TUC to discuss a joint conciliation board in an attempt to end the strike which was now threatening to close the Empress State.

Then, on Sunday August 13, 20 other men and women cleaners came out on strike from Horseferry House annex of the Home Office after the supervisor was arbitrarily sacked at her home by a representative of the employers, Gatlands Ltd., that afternoon. The employers reason was the lowering of the standard of the cleaning on the building - but the reason is more likely to have been an article in the Morning Star exposing the dreadful conditions on the building.

On Wednesday August 16 a meeting took place, chaired by the Ministry of Employment, between the C.S.U. and Mr. Rhoda. The meeting lasted five hours and ended in the following agreement : -

"..... it was agreed that the basis of understanding for a return to normal working on 17th August was as follows:-

- 1) An agreement signed concerning recognition of the Union in relation to night cleaners.
- 2) Basic pay at ESB and OAB be £16.50p pwe week plus 50p night allowance for a normal weeks work with effect from date of resumption.
- 3) No victimisation of employees on either side by either party."

On Thursday 17th the girls were back at work after a big meeting outside the Empress State.

The cleaners on Horseferry House also went back to work after the supervisor was re-instated and a promise of negotiations on wages and conditions was made. But since that time the girls have been out on strike again which resulted in Gatlands losing the contract for the building and the struggle on the building for better conditions is still going on.

Section 2

THE PRESS DURING THE STRIKES

During the strikes more than 35 articles and items appeared in the newspapers and magazines.

Most of the items contained comments both from the official spokesmen of the C.S.U. and from the employers side. In general most of the reporting was fair and sympathetic. The papers carrying the story ranged from the Financial Times to the Morning Star which carried consistent, reliable and sympathetic reporting. We do not intend to deal with all the stories carried by the press - but to concentrate on the comments made by both sides and on facts which may have escaped some of us.

On Tuesday August 1, the Morning Star carried the following comments by Mr. Les Moodie, spokesman for the CSU :- "On Saturday he (Mr. J. Rhoda) told two of the ladies to inform the others of the offer, and asked them to persuade the others to accept it. However, the ladies decided to denounce his circumnavigation, and walked out." He went on to say that the women were in the same militant mood as the dockers adding: "They don't want promises, they want copper-bottomed agreements."

On Wednesday August 9, The Financial Times reported a spokesman for the Ministry of Defence as saying "the dispute was not the Department's but a matter for the Union and the cleaning contractors."

On the following day The Guardian reported Mr. J. Rhoda of Cleanagents as saying that he had offered to meet the pay demand and had given "de facto" recognition of the Union. But if the Union wanted the pay-rise back-dated, he said, then "as far as I am concerned they can sit out there until the contract is ended." He added that he had a fixed price contract, which had barely three months to run, and that to improve the rates of pay or hire more staff would cause his small family firm "acute financial embarrassment". (If this is true - how did he manage to employ 25 women up until a year ago? - his "small family firm" has 4 other government contracts in London alone - it is hardly the duty of the cleaners to accept hardship caused by Cleanagents lack of ability to properly negotiate a price for a contract.)

The Guardian goes on to quote Les Moodie (CSU) as saying: "Mr. Rhoda is obsessively anti-trade union, and not only have I come to a conclusion that he is not prepared to negotiate a settlement but also it is now open to doubt whether a negotiated agreement with him would ever last." Rhoda commented: "The unions are trying to take over the country and discredit the Government."

On Friday, the Morning Star reported Les Moodie as saying: "At the moment we are being very low-key in this dispute, and we have not gone out of our way to escalate it, to give the Ministry of Defence an

opportunity to accept their responsibility. But up to now I fear they have refused to take the opportunity."

On Saturday (12th) the Financial Times carried the following report: "The Department of Employment yesterday began approaches to the TUC to discuss the possibility of joint conciliation on the cleaners' pay and recognition dispute which threatens to disrupt the working of the Ministry of Defence's Empress State building in South London."

The same day the Morning Star reported Les Moodie as saying: "We are astonished that the Ministry of Defence should have allowed the situation to reach the proportions it has in order to defend a Government contractor who refuses to comply with even the innocuous conditions laid down in the Government's Code of Industrial Practice."

On Tuesday August 15, the Morning Star reported on the strike following the sacking of the supervisor on Horseferry House and quoted Les Moodie: "To sack someone after turning up at their private home on a Sunday afternoon is just about the bloody end. However, the real responsibility lies with the Government for handing out lucrative contracts to these people. We don't expect the contractors to be enlightened. They belong to the dark ages."

On Friday, August 18 the press carried the following headlines:- Evening Standard: "Mrs. Mopps go back - with £3"; Financial Times "Cleaners Win £3 A Week"; Morning Star: "Cleaners' Big Victory at the Ministries"; Evening News: "Mrs. Mopps Go Back To Work"; The Times: "Charwomen win their fight for £3 pay rise."

Section 3

THE OUTCOME OF THE STRIKES

The 20 cleaners on the Old Admiralty Building were served "notice to quit" almost immediately on returning to work as Cleanagent's contract there was ended. Some of the women re-applied to the new contractor (Exclusive Office Cleaning Company Ltd.) for jobs but, strangely enough, there were none available. It is understood that Exclusive may employ morning and evening workers. The fact that Exclusive got the Government contract is all the more surprising in the light of speeches made in the House of Commons on July 21st this year.

Mr. Lomas (Labour, Huddersfield West) asked the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will seek to amend his contract with the Exclusive Office Cleaning Company, so that cleaners on night work at his Department receive a basic wage of more than £14.25 a week.

Mr. Eyre: "I have no means of increasing the wages paid under this contract. Cleaning contracts are based on price for the services and not on the number of cleaners or rates of pay: like all other contracts let by my

Department they include in the conditions a requirement that the Contractor observe the Fair Wages Resolution passed by the House of Commons on 14th October, 1946. The Company denied earlier in the year an allegation that its wage rates do not comply with the Resolution, and my Department referred the matter to the Department of Employment."

So, the Government knowing full well that the case of the Exclusive Office Cleaning Co. in relation to observance of the terms of their contract was under review, awards them another contract!

The 1946 Fair Wage Resolution states that the contractor must pay the rate determined by proper negotiations within the industry or, in the absence of such a rate, must pay the accepted rate as practiced by the rest of the industry.

The latter applies in this industry and the rate for directly employed cleaners is £19.65 - a very far cry from contract wages.

Cleanagent's contract on the Ministry of Defence was to end this month but they are still there. Rhoda said he would not re-apply for the contract.

Some time before the strikes began Mr. Jeremy Thorpe, Liberal MP, was quoted in the Times as saying:- he would conduct " a personal investigation into the conditions of women cleaners who work all night scrubbing government offices." He and other Liberal MP's have tabled Commons motion deploring the Government's exploitation of women. It calls on the Government to recognise a fair wage resolution passed by parliament 25 years ago. During the strike Mr. Thorpe visited the Admiralty building and was confronted by pickets from the MOD in Fulham. Since that time nothing has been heard we hope that the question will be pressed.

Lena Jager and Joe Ashton (both MPs) have been campaigning on behalf of cleaners in the House for some time. During the strike Joe Ashton tabled 60 questions on the cleaning contract business.

The outcome of the strikes and their aims was a successful one in terms of winning the agreement with Cleanagents - but due to the fact that the contract on the Admiralty ended so soon after the strike was won it was for them a short-term victory. But nonetheless a very great victory in many ways. The cleaners have found their power that lies in strike action and the added strength of the trade union and Labour movement behind them.

The day the strike began on the MOD in Fulham one of the girls was quoted as saying: (New Statesman) : -

"Who could say we're militant, since we've worked this building for six years without any fuss? But it comes to the point when you can't take any more; you realise that if you don't stand up for yourself no one else will. We need the money and we need our jobs. But we don't give a damn if we lose them if it'll make it better for the women they employ after us."

Section 4

WHERE NOW?

The main tasks before us now are, of course, the continuation and strengthening of the recruitment campaign and building up of communications. The second task is to build on and strengthen the organisation of cleaners within the Unions; to understand and use the facilities provided by those trade unions. The third main task before us, and probably the most difficult, is to campaign for the ending of "contract" cleaning and all the problems it provides.

The first task needs no elaboration for our regular readers, but we would like to say here to anyone reading who is not involved directly in the campaign that there is a great deal that can be done by you. Anyone who works in a building which is cleaned (either by directly or contract employed cleaners) can assist our campaign by getting to know them and discussing with them the question of joining a trade union and their problems. Also talk to your fellow employees - the greatest support that the cleaners can have if they have to resort to strike action is the support and solidarity of people employed in the buildings where they work.

On the second task. At the present time there are more than 1,000 cleaners in a trade union, this is only a tiny fraction of the work force and it has been a long hard fight to achieve this.

The aim of trade unions in this country is the betterment of the wages and working conditions, and the protection of their members. Trade unions are organisations of, for and by workers, which means that trade unions are bodies made up of workers using their organisation to fight for better lives. Unfortunately there are leaders and officials within our trade union movement who are not truly representative of their memberships and on whom it is hard to bring pressure. A trade union must represent its membership and in order to do that job efficiently they must be in touch with their members - through the machinery set up within the trade union for this purpose - it is this machinery that we must understand and use. So, we must not expect too much of our Union, we must help them to help us, we must fight on our own fronts where we can; we must fight within our Union for the right of help and recognition.

We cannot fight properly without organisation - membership of a trade union is not complete without having a branch to attend, where they can discuss their problems and put forward proposals and suggestions. The problem faced by the Union in the case of cleaners is a difficult one - the question of arranging branch meeting, finding appropriate branches for the cleaners to belong to and more.

In London talks are going on with the Transport and General Workers' Union to set up an all-London branch for cleaners - which we believe will go a long way to solving our organisational problems, and we hope that in other cities where there is sufficient membership of the Union to warrant the setting up of a branch that the same will happen there.

The third task is that of the ending of "contract cleaning". Our brothers in the building trade have fought this problem long and hard - the situation is different but it has its parallels. When a contractor tenders terms for a contract on a building, whether it be for one or three years, he tenders at a fixed sum - so the general argument put forward by contractors during wage and condition negotiations is the fact that he's getting a fixed sum for the contract - which (according to them) is fully accounted for in wages, supplies and overheads and so, he is unable under that contract, to improve wages etc. That is a fair enough argument - but to workers faced with increased prices on every front it is just not relevant. If a contractor cannot take these eventualities into account when tendering a price for a contract - that's his bad management and his problem. So the main problem with the contract cleaning firms is the fact that the workers are out of touch with the actual employers and must deal with contractor who must in turn deal with his employer.

The second problem has already been dealt with in this pamphlet and that is the non-adherence of contractors to the 1946 Fair Wage Resolution - which lays down minimum standards for workers employed by contractors on Government contracts. Although the resolution is not "law" it is written into all contracts made for the cleaning of Government departments and so must be obeyed. The case mentioned of the Exclusive Office Cleaning Company clearly illustrates the fact that more pressure must be brought on the Government to ensure the obedience of the Resolution and decent conditions of employment for men and women employed by contractors; and for the withholding of Government contracts from contractors who do not obey these conditions.

Contract cleaning is very big business - this fact is undisputable - despite the fact that some employers say they cannot survive financially and pay decent wages. Most contracts are grossly understaffed and as a result give a poor service to their employers.

Some weeks ago Trust Houses announced that they are going into the contract cleaning business. The following appeared in "The Financial Times" of 20th October 1972: PRITCHARD CLEANERS (HOLDINGS) LTD. publishing their interim statement for the 26 weeks to 2nd July 1972. Group Turnover: £8.8 million.; Group Profit before tax £563,000.; Capital Available to Ordinary Shareholders: £283,000. (Group trading profit before tax up from £368,000 to £563,000 - the first figure being the figure for the same period last year.)

As can be seen - the biggest problems facing cleaners are the existence and operational methods of contract cleaning firms. The service they provide is poor because of their understaffing and continual staff problems because of poor wages and conditions - the logical solution for employers with premises to clean would seem to be direct employment of cleaners to do the job - that is our aim.

We would like to express our sincerest thanks to all the following people and organisations for their support during the strikes: -

- 1) Women's Liberation Groups
- 2) NALGO Camden Branch (Social Workers)
- 3) Kensington Borough Communist Party.
- 4) Kensington Trades Council
- 5) Building workers on the Higgs and Hill site in Fulham
- 6) Post Office Engineers
- 7) Fulham dustmen
- 8) The driver of the Watney's lorry who refused to cross our picket line.
- 9) The milk-man who refused to cross.
- 10) Lorry drivers making deliveries (TGWU)
- 11) The Union of Post Office Workers
- 12) All CSU London Branches
- 13) The TGWU and SOGAT
- 14) Members of the International Socialists.
- 15) Research Dept. Library, AUEW Head Office.
- 16) Tenants Group - Camden IS
- 17) Building Workers - Earls Court
- 18) North Kensington Communist Party
- 19) Observer News (MaryHolland)
- 20) Joy - Beckenham, Kent.
- 21) L.T. Mortlake Garage
- 22) Women supporters in the CP
- 23) "Fellow Women Workers"
- 24) Earls Court Railwaymen
- 25) Morning Star readers in South Marylebone
- 26) Members of staff on the Empress State building.
- 27) Management Studies Centres - Empress State (the staff).
- 28) Members of staff on the Morning Star
- 29) Earls Court and Olympia Exhibition Workers.
- 30) Dockers from the Royal Group
- 31) A very special than-you to the Film Group who entertained us on the picket line. To Clare and Andy who came from Cumberland to stand on the picket and to Sally and Alan for all the help with cars and kids!

If we have missed anyone we apologise - your assistance was no less appreciated !

THE CLEANERS ACTION GROUP

THE GROUP was formed three years ago and now has approximately 50 active members all over the country.

The aims of the Group are: -

- 1) The recruitment of all cleaners into a trade union.
- 2) To offer assistance to those trade unions in coping with the special problems of the industry.
- 3) Decent working conditions and wages for all cleaners.
- 4) The ending of the exploitation of cleaners by the huge contract cleaning firms and also by private employers.
- 5) To bring to the notice of the public the plight of cleaners.
- 6) To support all actions for better housing and education facilities, especially better nursery school facilities.

The Group publishes a monthly magazine "The Cleaner's Voice", which gives news of the campaign and information for the use of the Group in their activities on Cleaning Companies, news and other current events which affect cleaners.

If you would like any further information about the Group please write to us:
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c/o 13 Middle Lane, London N.8. or Tel.: 01-348 3594.