

REPORT ON TRADE UNION WORKSHOP

This workshop was attended by a great number of migrant/immigrant/refugee and british trade unionists particularly from the hotel & catering, contract cleaning and taylor & Garments industries. The workshop considered a discussion paper prepared by the organising working group of the conference and a number of proposals and demands were presented or raised during the discussion.

During the debate many participants drew a parallel between the struggle of M/I/R workers and the past and present struggles of unskilled, women and black workers whose working conditions and position within the trade union movement we share. The british trade unions came under sharp criticism for their lack of responsiveness to the particular problems facing M/I/R workers and low paid workers in these industries in general. It was felt that trade unions are usually geared to the protection of sectional interests of skilled and highly paid workers and that burocratism, over-emphasis on procedures and so-called industrial relations practices, make them cumbersome institutions unable to understand or integrate the interests of M/I/R workers within a broader conception of working class interests.

Sexual and racial discrimination and general hostility towards immigrants have also been an ugly feature of british trade unionism; this fact led one of the participants - a representative of the trade union black solidarity group - to stress the symbolic meaning of the term black as applying to all those who suffer oppression both in the workplace and at the hands of the union burocracy. Furthermore the issue of trade union economic protectionism and pro-immigration controls policies were raised as an example of way we are officially discriminated and the way in which many trade unionists come to accept the reactionary fallacy that black and immigrant workers are the cause of unemployment.

Nevertheless the consensus was that trade unions are a natural working class method of organisation at the workplace and we must struggle and preserve this right that it is being denied to us by the immigration and employment restrictions to which we are subjected, as well as by the attitudes sometimes taken by the trade unions themselves. Therefore, it was agreed that M/I/R workers must unite with black, women and low paid workers in general to fight for the improvement of working conditions and salaries in the industries in which we work and for real democracy and representation within the trade union movement too. The recognition on the part of the unions of our right to combine trade union and community struggles and of the role that our communities can play within the trade union movement is an essential step towards our effective integration into the movement and for the eradication of discrimination. In this connection one participant drew a parallel between us and the current miners' strike in terms of the way the mining communities have become an essential component of this trade union struggle.

The workshop also considered a number of questions regarding conditions and problems in our industries, being them amongst the worst paid and having the worst working conditions and health hazards in the country. Attention was given to the problem of part-time workers (many of them women) who make up a large proportion of the labour force in hotel & catering and the contract cleaning industries and who often are not protected by any of the legal and statutory provisions that may provide some line of defense for other workers; besides unions have been very slow and reluctant to provide any defense for these categories. Particular issues affecting women workers such as sexual harrasment by employers, anti-social hours, lack of provisions for child care during working hours and lower rates of pay than male workers, were discussed and will be integrated into any future programme of action.

The workshop was also criticised for not paying more attention to the question of unemployment and especially youth unemployment that affect many of our communities. Again it was agreed that this issue ought to be considered and some demands formulated in conjunction with the question of the effects of the introduction of high technology on the employment situation and on the industries we are engaged. Moreover, it was felt that training matters were not properly discussed and should also be taken up by the working group.

Finally, many in the workshop expressed their conviction that the struggle against immigration controls that help to maximise the conditions of exploitation of M/I/R workers, is an integral part of a broader struggle that includes opposition to policies that generate unemployment, the dismantling of the welfare state and against anti-trade union laws; struggle that is essentially aimed at the defense of working class living standards and to the protection of the rights of all workers.

A warning was also issued to the trade union movement that should they fail to combat immigration laws and employment restrictions on migrants, they will effectively be helping to divide the movement in the our industries and undermine the position not only of M/I/R workers but also of many native workers, particularly the young who will, by the combined effect of unemployment and social security cuts, be compelled to increasingly take up employment and share our wages and conditions in the services industries.

In order to further these policies the workshop proposed the following demands and proposals:

programme for low paid workers:

- 1) National minimum wages, 35 hour week and ban split shifts.
- 2) To form wages councils into statutory joint industrial councils.
- 3) Legal protection for trade unions and their members
- 4) Automatic recognition of trade unions in the work place
- 5) Part time workers and home workers must be paid at the same rate as full time workers, and part timers must enjoy the same working conditions in terms of holidays, sick and annual leave. Flexibility in the timing of the holidays we are entitled to
- 6) Provisions for unfair dismissal or industrial tribunals must not be made dependent on the length of employment.

In addition we demand from the trade union movement the following:

- 1) Our right to organise on community and linguistic lines within the trade unions.
- 2) Full representation of black, migrant/immigrant/refugee workers at all levels in the trade unions accompanied by a campaign of democratisation of the trade union movement.
- 3) Trade unions should politically support us against racial and sexual discrimination, immigration controls and employment restrictions and fight for regularisation and prioritise active campaigns around these issues in the trade union movement.
- 4) Support the black, migrant and immigrant sections and the low paid workers
- 5) More active solidarity with workers struggles in the third world and elsewhere, and to investigate and sever relations with trade unions in the third world that are not genuinely independent or representative.

The following resolution was added after the workshop in the plenary session. That this conference calls upon the government of the U.K. to extend the provisions of the sex discrimination and race relations acts to cover small companies, partnerships, and private households in accordance with the equal treatment directives of the E.E.C., so protecting all civilian workers against discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, and national origins and marital and family status.