IN AND AGAINST THE STATE

Discussion Notes for Socialists

London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group

"The changing forms of class struggle give rise to new forms of organisation and throw up new theoretical problems concerning organisation and the party: firstly, an increasing number of socialist militants are members of no party or, if they do join a party, it is often because it has become part of our revolutionary tradition that socialists *ought* to be members of a party, even though they find party membership irrelevant for much of their everyday activity. Secondly, we need a new theorisation of the state which can inform the practical struggles of socialists (party members or not) who find that their relation to the state is not mediated through a party – in other words we need a theorisation of the state as the *everyday class practice of the bourgeoisie.*"

John Holloway, State as Class Practice

"The struggle of state workers is not simply about wages and conditions of work, or restoring the level of services of a few years ago. It has to be about the content of the work we do, too. The state, in order to maintain control over a situation, defines the everyday problems experienced by people in terms which reflect *its* needs and interests. Successful working class demands for better living conditions, whether housing, health services or education, have been translated into the language and needs of the state. They may be 'our' hospitals, schools and council houses, but they have been shaped by the state according to *its* interests, the interest of maintaining the necessary conditions for capital to flourish, not the interests of those who use the services. Questions about the kind of services and whom they are for are central to furthering the interests of both the workers who provide the services, and the consumers on the receiving end, for they are often the same people."

CDP, Gilding the Ghetto

"We have been taught to think of local government as a kind of humane official charity, a service that looks after us 'from the cradle to the grave', protects us from the misfortunes of life, hardships such as poverty and homelessness that fall on us by fate – or are perhaps even our fault. If the town hall doesn't seem to work in our interest we put it down to 'inefficiency' or 'red tape'. It is by no means obvious that a local council is part of a structure which *as a whole and in the long term* has other interests to serve than our own."

"The rent officer, the social worker, the school teacher – these represent the government to the man, woman and child in the 'client' population. Normally, however, and by preference, the state deals not with individuals but with *families*. More often than not it deals with the *woman* of the family. Who answers the door when the social worker calls? Who talks to the head teacher about the truant child? Who runs down to the rent office? The woman, wife and mother. Why the family and why the woman?

Cynthia Cockburn, The Local State

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They were also significant because they asserted that workers have the power and the organisation to take control of their own affairs.

What was important about all these struggles was that in one way or another they not only challenged the economic consequences of capital's exploitation of labour, but the very forms of social organisation which are necessary to maintain this relationship of exploitation.

We see the second phase of institutional change (in the early 1970s) as being associated with the attempt to reassert bourgeois social relations on a more secure basis. The partial failure of the more aggressive strategy pursued by capital in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to a certain regrouping of capital's forces which involved, among other things, a reinforcement of the earlier trends mentioned above and the emergence of two new (and in our view complementary) trends: the development of 'community' as a political category and the strengthening of the repressive apparatus.

Partly in direct response to the unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, partly in fear of the possible social consequences of widespread long-term and especially youth unemployment, partly to bolster up the system of representative democracy so obviously bypassed by much of the institutional development of the 1960s, there developed in the early-to-mid 1970s a whole range of new institutions, varying widely from one to another, but all organised around the key concepts of 'community', 'participation', 'direct democracy': community development projects, community health councils, neighbourhood councils, liaison committees with tenants' associations, parent teacher associations, community advice centres, law centres, and planning workshops. The use of a national referendum too is a related development designed to establish a new pattern of relations between the state and the individual, a more direct relation which, like community bodies, bypasses the party as an organisational medium. The ambiguity of the term 'community' (which may refer either to the already organised 'joiners' of society or to an attempt to involve the 'non-joiners') is reflected in that complementary development, the well-documented rise in the overtly repressive strength of the state.

The new attack

The expansion of the state, and especially of the Welfare State, since the War has been very much a two-sided process. It has brought material benefits for the working class, but at the same time it has meant a far-reaching penetration of social relations by the state form—it has pushed the oppression and fragmentation implicit in state organisation deep into the texture of society. Over this period (and especially in the last ten years), the state has been remarkably effective in maintaining social stability. At the same time, however, this has been at the cost of delaying the restructuring of social relations which is vital for the future of British capital. And so the pressures have gradually mounted for a radical break with the state-sponsored compromise of the past 35 years.

The outcome of these pressures has been a concerted attack on many of those aspects of the Welfare State which had seemed such a firmly established part of modern capitalism. This attack, begun under the Labour government, is now being pursued with great vigour by the Tories. It involves not just a quantitative reduction in state expenditure but an attack on the whole structure of class compromise and its institutional framework—an attempt to reshape the links between trade unions and the state, to abandon forms of regional and industrial aid designed to pacify certain parts of the country, to abolish many of the semi-state bodies promoted in the early '70s to foster 'community participation'. Many of the people we spoke to in the earlier section of this pamphlet and many of the positions socialists drifted into in the late '60s and early '70s are particularly vulnerable.

An attack on the capitalist state by the Tories, the most outspoken friends of capitalism? There is nothing paradoxical about that. Their attack on the state has been selective. An administration that gives generous wage increases to army and police cannot be suspected of intending to dismantle the state. Capital is being forced by its own contradictions to reorganise the *way* in which it rules us, to shift from one foot to the other.

But what should our attitude be? Our services and our jobs are being cut or threatened. State workers are at the heart of the class struggle in a way that they have rarely been before. This is reflected in their growing militancy. But how should this widespread anger be directed?

Of course we must defend our jobs and our services. But there is a great danger that in defending ourselves, we will see only one side of the state and forget the other. In our haste to defend our benefits and our jobs, it is easy to lose sight of the oppressive relations in which they enmesh us. In the struggle against the capitalists' attack on the capitalist state, it may seem tactically necessary to paint an unambiguously good picture of the state, to present the Welfare State as a great achievement of the working class, even as a step towards socialism. This is very dangerous. First, because it causes socialism and socialist struggle to fall into understandably bad repute in the working class. Secondly, because it loses an opportunity to pose an alternative to the Labour-Tory, 'more State'/'less State' pendulum, which keeps British capital so secure. Thirdly, because it is unconvincing: people know the state is oppressive and they are not prepared to fight to defend it, as we have seen both in the cuts campaigns and in the recent election.

We must remember that the attack on the state is not only an attack on the working class but also a change in certain forms of domination and control by the ruling class. It involves a slight withdrawal of the tentacles that strangle our struggles and squeeze us into certain shapes. If the expansion of the state was important in ensuring political stability, then it is clear that its contraction involves certain risks for capital. This is what we must try to exploit. Part of exploiting these weaknesses must be the attempt to develop ways of organising which will pose an alternative to the capitalist state. This is what we shall explore in the final section.

PART THREE

AGAINST THE STATE: NEW FORMS OF OPPOSITION

In what way can this understanding of the capitalist state help us out of our predicament as socialists within and involved with the state? Can it help us to see and use opportunities for acting as socialists not just after hours but actually within our work or within the moments of our contact with the state?

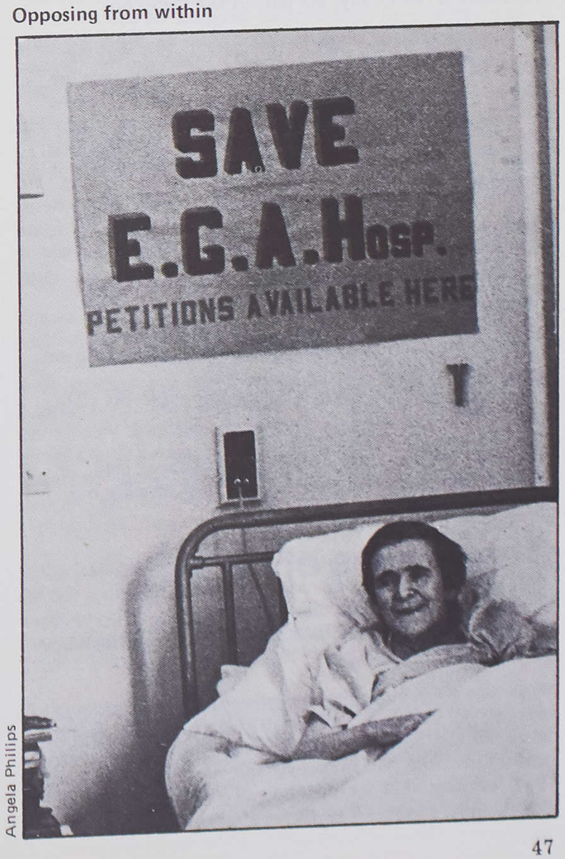
One or two things can be concluded about struggle. First, it is clear that class struggle is not something that happens just at moments when the working class is feeling strong. The theory of capitalism, as we have been discussing it, explains that capital and labour are locked in a structural antagonism, a fundamental relationship of daily exploitation. Our experience, too, tells us that if we don't push back we will be pushed over. So class struggle is an unavoidable, everyday matter. It is not open to choice, it is not some kind of optional extra.

More—this fundamental antagonism does not exist only in industry. It permeates every aspect of our lives including our relationship with the state. Indeed, as we saw, the very existence of the state arises from the necessity to impose and re-impose social relations which deflect class conflict in such a way as to obscure the basic class division in society. It is often hard to recognise as class struggle our many small acts of daily resistance, like getting a relative admitted to hospital, or obtaining an 'exceptional needs' payment. But it is important to remember that it is precisely because the state constitutes us as individuals, patients, parents, families and citizens, pushing us onto ground where almost inevitably we end up fighting back individually, or as ineffectual 'interest groups', that capital is able to impose the social relations which maintain the exploitation of labour.

Nonetheless, we should not get caught in capital's ideological trap. Our daily tussles with the state may appear to be very individualised, but they are essentially a matter of class conflict. Our daily contact with the state is a crucial arena of class struggle.

In the past, however, if as socialists we have concerned ourselves with struggles with the welfare state at all, we have tended to concentrate on questions of resource provision: more and better housing, more hospitals, better teacher-pupil ratios and higher pensions. Increasingly, however, we are coming to realise that it is not enough to fight to keep hospitals open if we do not also challenge the oppressive social relations they embody; that it is insufficient to press for better student-teacher ratios in schools if we do not also challenge what is taught or how it is taught. Socialists involved in struggles over resources are realising that many people choose precisely *not* to give their support to 'fighting the cuts', defending or extending the state

Opposing from within



Angela Philips

apparatus, because they quite reasonably have mixed feelings about the social relations which state institutions embody. What has been missing is conscious struggle against the state as a form of the capital relation.

The theory of the state, as we understand it, shows that there is scope for this. As soon as you abandon the idea of the state merely as an institution, as a function, and begin to recognise it as a form of relations, a whole new way of struggle opens up. It is possible to see many courses of action that can challenge the 'state form' while we stay within the state. That is the point: such actions cannot be taken from outside the state, only from within.

More important, it becomes clear that challenge from within is essential. Because the state is a form of relations, its workers and clients, if they do not struggle against it, help to perpetuate it. We are *implicated* in the imposition of capital's social relations. Without oppositional action, we actively perpetuate and recreate a capitalist and sexist and unequal society, not merely by default but through all that we do. We may not make many of the important, top-level decisions or wield any of the serious sanctions. But in a practical day-to-day sense, state workers *are* the state. It only goes forward on our activities. To a lesser extent, all who are in a relationship with the state, co-operating with its services to reproduce labour power and attitudes in the family, are part of the state too.

The fact that we are part of the state, in one way or another, however, gives us a small degree of power for change. This work of cleaning, caring, teaching, representing, moulding cannot be done by computer. Microchips are not enough to sustain and reproduce capital's social relations. This means we can understand and interrupt the process.

To summarise so far:

* Class struggle is an unavoidable, everyday matter.
* Our daily contact with the state is a crucial arena of class struggle.
* It is important to struggle against the state as a form of relations.
* Being within the state, we need to oppose the state from within.

So, while we may have no choice at all about being *in* struggle, we do have a choice about how to wage our particular part of it.

Three ways of thinking

There seem to be three main philosophies socialists have about the state, three approaches to every-day decisions that have to be made.

One is to get in there and 'use the system for working class advantage'. People adopting this strategy tend to feel it is ultra-left and unnecessarily negative to turn down opportunities for work and for provision offered by the state. Best to make what we can of a bad job. In this spirit, community workers lead working class people to take part in local government participation exercises, schooling them in committee procedure and public speaking, in the hope that they can get a fair deal by stating their case through the proper channels.

A second response springs from pessimism. Some socialist state workers say 'it is mere idealism to suppose that as state workers we are anything but state agents'. They feel there is nothing we can do, or should theoretically hope to do, from within our state jobs. Real, pure, working class struggle can only be waged from outside the state. In this vein, also, people engaged in campaigns may wish to keep state workers well clear of them. "Keep the council's community workers out of our housing struggle." Even in their free time and after-hours, state workers may be unwelcome—for instance in some key office in a trades council or a neighbourhood council.

The third common stance towards the state is that of using the law, or state provision, to enable us to carve out a little corner in which we have freedom to organise things in our own way, a non-capitalist way. We may use state-paid salaries or state permission to set up a 'free school' for a small group of children, or a common-ownership housing scheme or workshop. The idea behind this is that we may be able to make a little convivial, socialist, clearing in the woods, which can encourage us and be an example to others. This may or may not work—but it is not enough.

Indeed that applies to all three of these ways of thinking. In certain instances all of them can be right. Taken as a whole, they are never enough. As socialists, we have consistently underestimated both the necessity and the possibility of opposing from within.

What kind of struggle?

What do we mean by opposing, or resisting, or challenging the 'state form'? We saw in Part One how the reality of working class conflict with the state is that it is not simply about fighting over resources, it is also about resisting oppressive social relations, the way that problems capital has created for us are defined as 'our' problems. It is resisting your doctor's insistence that your illness is your fault. It is deflecting the Social Security's attempts to seek a 'head of household', however inappropriate the circumstances. It is rejecting the way racist practices in state institutions become redefined as our 'language problem'. Given the close connection between class and sexual hierarchies, it is also insisting on our right, as women, to choose when and whether we have children; whether and when to work outside or inside the home; whom to live with. It is, for all of us, defining our sexuality in our own terms.

It is of critical importance, then, that we challenge the state not only as an oppressive apparatus that must be destroyed and replaced in the long run; and not only as an institution which provides us with certain needed services and resources in the short run; but also as a form of relations that has an adverse effect on the way we live today.

The state is not like a pane of glass—it can't be smashed in a single blow, once and for all. We are entangled in the web of relations it creates. Our struggle against it must be a continual one, changing shape as the struggle itself, and the state's response to it, create new opportunities.

Understanding our situation

There are no general rules that we can offer each other about how to choose to wage our struggle, because each situation we experience is different and imposes its own contradictions on us. Perhaps there are questions we can ask ourselves, however, about each set of circumstances in which we find ourselves:

As state workers we can ask:

* What kind of social relations are involved in our jobs? Is there a hierarchy? Do women and men have different roles? Do people of different races have different roles? Could things be organised differently?
* What kinds of categories of people are we meant to relate to? Individuals? Families? Tenants? Patients? Is this way of thinking about them as a group helpful or confusing? Could we relate to them differently?
* How are the problems we are meant to be solving sorting out and so on, defined? Who has made the definitions? Are they problems for the working class or for capital? Could the problems be defined differently?
* What do the people we are supposed to relate to really need? Can we help them say it? Do the procedures we are meant to observe help or hinder this expression? Can we avoid them?
* Are we involved in resource management? Keeping people off buses? Out of nurseries? Deciding priorities? How could we do it differently?
* Does what we do help develop autonomy and self-organisation or passivity and dependence? How could we help people struggle from where we are?

As clients of the state, and in our domestic relations we can ask ourselves:

* How is my problem being defined for me? How would I define it for myself? How can I act on my definition?
* How am I expected to behave? How do I want to behave? What costs will I incur for behaving my way? How can they be minimised?
* Who are the other people who experience the same problem as me? Who is implicated in causing me a problem? Who can give me support in defending my choice? Can I offer them anything?

The answers to these questions that we ask ourselves and each other may help us to understand our role as bearers of capital's social relations and give us a lead to action, helping us see more clearly the choices we have to make.

Material counter-organisation

Asking questions and coming to understand our role as bearers of capital's social relations is an important activity, but it is not an end in itself. Challenging the 'state form' does not just involve entering into arguments about definitions. Our challenge can take place not just at the level of ideas and argument, but also at a material level through counter-organisation.

For social workers this may mean not only confronting the idea that people's inability to manage on a low income is the result of personal inadequacies, but finding ways to embody this analysis in practice, for instance by helping 'clients' organise collectively to challenge the level of benefit they receive, and refusing to give them individual advice about budgeting. For teachers, it may mean introducing collective working rather than competition between students and organising with other teachers and perhaps even with students and parents too to defend this approach. For health workers it may mean not just pointing out the links between capitalist society and ill-health, but fighting for the right to give assistance to others involved with struggles against the causes of ill-health (tenants with damp, workers facing a factory hazard) as part of their NHS work. These actions are *material* because they involve the concrete provision of skills and resources. They involve *counter-organisation* in that they challenge bourgeois class practice.

The link between state workers and groups using state provision can be made most effectively, not by passing motions, but by action. For state workers this may mean providing concrete skills, resources or perspectives which assist the struggle of the 'client' groups—*and* being prepared to struggle within our own context to defend our decision to do this.

The essential point is to find some way of expressing our particular struggles as class struggles, to struggle in such a way that our action does not damage other sections of the working class, but rather overcomes the fragmentation of interest which capital tries to impose. It does not simply mean using class rhetoric, joining in mass pickets. Those things are all necessary, but they are insufficient. Material counter-organisation means thinking of our particular struggles as class struggles and trying to find some way to express that in our material organisation.

Much political debate in relation to the state has focussed on the problems of making alliances between workers and 'consumers'. Progressives involved in 'community politics' for instance, always advocate writing for support to the Trades Council as the first stage in any campaign. The

"Socialism is not a fixed, unchanging doctrine. As the world develops, people's insight increases and as new relations come into being, there arise new methods for achieving our goal."
Anton Pannekoek

Workers and 'consumers' in rare class solidarity: miners support the nurses' strike.

kinds of counter-organisation that we'll describe below, however, do not involve making institutional links between people involved in different relationships to the state, but rather propose concrete activity which by its nature asserts our common class interests.

An important point, too, is that counter-organisation does not mean giving assistance to an abstract class struggle, someone else's struggle. By definition, it is *our* struggle.

Ends as means

As we develop our material forms of struggle we should make sure that they are our own forms, that they do not mirror those of the state and capital. We would like to live in a socialist society, but we cannot yet do so. The least we can do is to organise a socialist struggle, building organisations and practices that prefigure socialism—a socialism free from sexism and racism and other practices in which we oppress each other.

Counter organisation involves asserting our needs, our definitions. In the context of inescapable daily class antagonism, it means rejecting roles, ways of doing things and definitions which deflect and obscure this conflict. Oppositional action involves acting on our own understanding of class realities. At the same time it also means creating new social relations to replace the deforming ones through which the state contains class struggle.

Counter-organisation challenges the traditional boundaries between 'clients' and workers and the non-class categories which we described in Part Two. The forms of organisation we have described involve ways of relating to each other which are anti-capitalist and at the same time, in a partial and temporary way, also socialist and feminist: moves towards collective rather than hierarchical ways of working, new relationships between men and women, between adults and children. It is using the ends which we seek as the means of achieving them. This is sometimes called 'prefigurative struggle'.

This approach leads us to reject the kind of political practice which involves thinking entirely in terms of *demands*. While it is important to demand *resources*, one thing we cannot *ask* for is new social relations: we have

> "We don't set one organisation against another, but rather one type of organisation against another type . . . You don't oppose the bourgeoisie by imitating its organisational schemata."
> *Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Jean-Pierre Duteuil for the March 22nd Movement, in* The Student Revolt, *Panther, 1968.*

to make them. Relationships forged in the struggle are not a pleasant by-product of our activities, but an essential part of that struggle. They also let us see what might be possible in a post-capitalist society.

This is also a politics which recognises the need to re-introduce a measure of imagination into our political practice. The analysis in Part Two explained why so often what we want is not even on the agenda of the state. We want housing that is better than 'adequate' and that meets the needs of all people, not just those of the nuclear family. We want health care which helps us control our own bodies and fight the causes of ill-health; education aimed at encouraging co-operation not competition; a social security system which does not bind women into the family. We know none of these things are possible within a capitalist framework. Yet to limit our action to demands for 'more of the same' is to fail to take the opportunity to challenge capitalism fundamentally by rejecting its agenda, its definitions, its social relations, and thus threaten its stability. It also causes us to miss an opportunity to elaborate for ourselves the kind of social organisation we would like to see.

Relations means sex and race

When you recognise that the struggle you are involved in is against a certain form of relations it becomes clear that anti-sexist and anti-racist actions are an intrinsic part of them. Among the economic demands so often posed by the trades unions, our demands as women or as racial minorities so often seem to be extras tagged on. Now we can see their centrality.

We know that the age-old pattern of unequal relations between men and women has permeated capitalism from top to bottom. The subordination of women is an integral part of the mode of domination that the state is involved in imposing. We have seen how it is implicated by its policies towards the family and women's work, and by the daily practice of its many institutions. So our struggle against sexism and against many aspects of the family that seem to us constraining and deforming is an essential part of the struggle against the 'state form'.

Relationships forged in the struggle are not just a pleasant by-product of our activities

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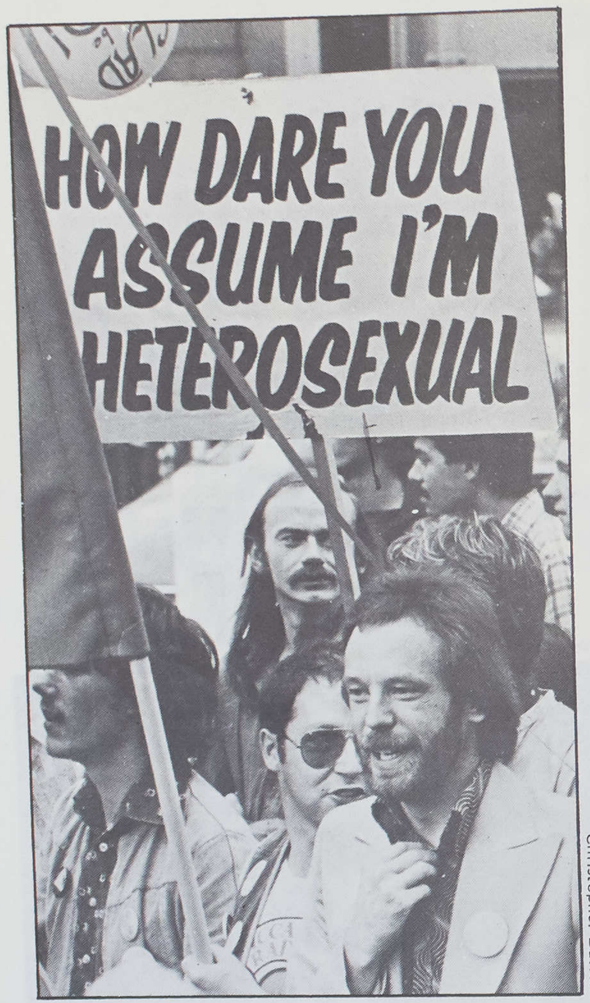


Christopher Davies

An aspect of the capital relation and the 'state form' is challenged every time men and women refuse to define their relations in terms of marriage or try to form continuing alternative types of household. As women in the domestic situation every time we make an autonomous choice about how we live we are acting politically in relation to the state. The question women face is to understand what the choices are and how to defend them once made. The other side of the coin of women's subordination is the not merely dominant but domineering heterosexuality of the culture we live in, which discriminates so painfully against gay men and women and asexual people.

Again, once we focus on the relational aspect of the state we see racism and imperialism within the capitalist system take on a particular significance. The autonomous struggles of Caribbean or Asian people in Britain, and of Irish Catholics, are in themselves an important challenge to the State.

Now we have identified the kind of predicament we are in, the kind of state we are up against and the kind of struggle we want, we should look at what resources we currently have, what help can be expected from traditional forms of working class political organisation: socialist parties, and the trades unions.

Disappointment in the parties

We have always looked to political parties for ideas about how best to struggle, but it is striking that none of the people we interviewed felt that political parties had anything useful to say about the situation in which they found themselves. They seemed to share the view that neither the social-democratic parties ('the state is on our side and we need more of it') like the Labour Party and increasingly the Communist Party, nor the revolutionary parties ('the state is the enemy and we must smash it') had very much to say about what they should do in their daily practice in relation to the state.

Despite the fact that so many people these days are employed by the state, in particular a very high percentage of socialist militants, both kinds of parties have tended to imply that if you do not work on the factory floor, then political activity must be a matter for evenings and weekends. This does not mean that state workers have been discouraged from activity at the workplace, but that in practice such activity has been confined to trade union pressure on pay and conditions. This is clearly an important area of struggle, especially for the low paid—it may be more contradictory for some state 'professionals' who already enjoy high salaries and privileged working conditions. But it is not enough. It does nothing to challenge capital's division of our day into 'work' and 'home'. And how do we find the energy to struggle at all if our 'home' worries are never on the agenda?

Ironically, the political parties seem to ignore reality: the politics of work and home. Work is seen only as an economic relation; home is defined as 'private'. At worst they represent our worries about developing a coherent practice in relation to the state as a diversion from more important political tasks. At best, struggles over such matters as how and what to teach in school; what social work is or could be; what domestic relationships are or could be—these things are valued as an added extra.

In many ways, the failure of socialist parties so far to address themselves to our predicament with regard to the state is understandable in the light of history. The role of the state in class struggle today is not the same as it was in the days when 'classical' Marxist theory was developed. The problems of understanding the role of the state in class struggle posed itself rather differently for Lenin, for example. In the society for which he was writing, workers didn't have the same daily round of contacts with the state educational and welfare agencies, nor did the state scrutinise all wage agreements or maintain such close links with their trade unions. The individual socialist's most frequent direct contact with the state agents was likely to be with the most overtly repressive parts of the state apparatus (police and army) and, although this contact was certainly important, it presented no obvious theoretical difficulty.

Moreover, partly because of the limited extent of state intervention, socialist political activity was much more clearly concentrated in the party. Accordingly, Lenin could base his writings on the state upon the assumption that the party existed as a mediating link between the socialist and the state and that, consequently, the only question about the state was the question of the party's strategy against it.

Insufficient guidance

These discussions were, and still are, of great relevance to socialist practice. The injunction to smash the state is as important now as it ever was. But it is not sufficient. It does not adequately tell the socialist in daily contact with the state what smashing the state means, and how she can shape her daily activity in such a way that it becomes part of the struggle for socialism. For a teacher in a classroom, the nature of the state is absolutely central, but party strategy will be peripheral to her activity in the classroom unless it addresses the problems she faces there. Or again, take the example of council tenants taking action to compel the local council to eradicate dampness in their houses. Their relation to the local authority will generally be one of direct confrontation. Although individual members of a tenants' group may be members of political parties or groupings, the group's struggles rarely take the form of party struggles (and certainly this is unlikely to be the most effective way of pursuing them).

Besides the limited range of issues to which the parties appear able to address themselves, a further disincentive to many people to join them is the nature of their internal structure and ways of acting. The narrow conception of 'the political' which tends to exclude 'the personal' from its scope, and which has affected the choice of issues on which to struggle, has often adversely affected internal organisation too. Parties are in the main based on methods of representation in which the leadership gets detached from the base. Often they seem to be insufficiently aware of what is oppressive for women, black people, homosexuals or people with little formal education. This has limited the practical uses of the parties to many potential members who feel excluded, subordinated or under-estimated within them.

These are some of the reasons, perhaps, why many socialist militants choose not to join a party at all. It is not to say that 'party' is irrelevant. People involved in struggle need others with whom they can develop their ideas, we need mutual support, a class memory. Diffuse, spasmodic and localised activity will not in itself be enough to bring about the fundamental social change that is needed. The parties, though, are contradictory. And in the absence of some major rethinking and restructuring, we are not able to look to political parties for ideas or support in the particular matters explored in this pamphlet: everyday practice in and against the state.

Frustration in the unions

The second traditional channel for class struggle is the trade unions. Many state workers in recent years have become unionised. Public sector union membership has grown dramatically in the last decade. This development is valuable. It has begun to give the lowest paid state worker a new dignity. A black woman hospital worker said to us: "We used to get treated like dirt, but since the union became more active they've got to treat us with more respect."

And union membership has helped some state 'professionals' to begin to see themselves as workers, and to see their relation to the working class movement.

People we interviewed in Part 1, however, found that joining a union was not a sufficient answer for them. The agenda of most public sector unions is long on pay and conditions, but short on matters concerning the content of the worker's job. Questions like the school examination system, the relationship of workers to patients in hospital, or the complexities of the social work relation, do not take up much time in union meetings. More to the point, public sector union practice seldom if ever challenges the social relations implicit in the state. It doesn't challenge

The public sector trade unions are growing in strength all the time. The problem is to find ways of exercising this new-found power in ways which effectively challenge capital, while uniting rather than dividing the working class.

North East Photographers Co-op

hierarchy, division of labour. Often quite distressing sexist and racist discrimination goes without comment. Many state workers feel that they get little help with a lot of the things that, as socialists, worry them about their job. At worst, unions mirror the contradictions of the state organisations in which they have come into existence.

In the wake of unionisation in the public sector, there has followed a rapid growth of oppositional movements within the unions—such as the National Union of Teachers Rank and File, NALGO Action, and Redder Tape (in the Civil Service). Although very important as a challenge to bureaucratisation in the union they have not provided the answer to our predicament about the state. They often just demand the same things as the union demands, but more militantly.

An alternative to strikes?

This relative lack of concern with the service provided, and the form in which it is provided, was highlighted by the winter strikes in 1978/79.

The winter strikes, which involved hospital workers, refuse workers, gravediggers, school caretakers and others, painfully demonstrated the contradiction between the need to defend the living standards of public sector workers and the immediate consequences of this action for the people who depend on the services these workers provide. It was those who could not afford private treatment who were most distressed by the disruption of the hospitals. It was women, especially working mothers, who were most worried by school caretakers refusing to open school gates; and by later action by the NUT in refusing to supervise dinnertime, letting children loose to eat in the chippy and run on the streets.

The leadership of the public sector unions reasoned that pressure put on the people by the interruption of public services becomes, indirectly, pressure put on the state, which will then accede to union demands. But in this way the weakest, already suffering from the mean level of state services, doubly suffer from their withdrawal. Even this perverse strategy is not available to certain groups of state workers, who do not have a ready 'public' to use as their weapon: research workers, for instance, and community workers.

The impact of the winter strikes on the state and on capital was difficult to assess. But many ordinary people, not known for their right wing views, commented that they were hurting ordinary people more than the Government. It became clear that, in future periods of industrial action, more imaginative forms of action would have to be developed.

It is not even as if strikes in the public sector have been shown to be particularly successful in their own terms. We cannot pretend that withdrawing labour has the same effect on the state as on private capital. Precisely because it hurts working class people more than the state, such action does not impose very effective sanctions on the state. Taking the private sector as a model for action is not appropriate.

However, state services, as we have seen, have not developed simply in response to working class needs and demands. On the contrary, they have as much to do with maintaining the capital relation as with mitigating its harsher consequences. There must therefore be ways in which 'industrial action' can damage the state without disrupting so divisively the provision of needed and useful services to the working class.

The effect of the current policies and practices of the public sector unions has been that many people who are really concerned about their work, who chose it precisely because it was 'worthwhile' work, of use to people, often refuse to join a union. It is not only reactionaries who have been non-militants. People feel "if you care for people you can't join in with the union".

The result of the unions' inability to disentangle the contradictions of the state, to recognise that it is the state's resources we need, its relations we don't, has had two harmful effects, therefore. The trades unions are not as big or as strong as they otherwise might be. And 'clients' of state services have not been able to give their wholehearted support to union action.

Heralded by the press as a 'wreckers' charter', NUPE's leaflet sets out some new ideas about fighting the cuts aimed specifically at hitting at management.

- **Work to rule and refuse to cooperate with employers who are making cuts.**
- **Rearrange work schedules — without discussion with employers — to offset the effects of cuts.**
- **Refuse to work with private contractors.**
- **Hold meetings, demonstrations or token strikes at times when it will hurt the employers most.**

These are just outlines of what can be done. The most effective tactics will depend on the kind of work being done by our members and the nature of the cuts the employer is trying to make.

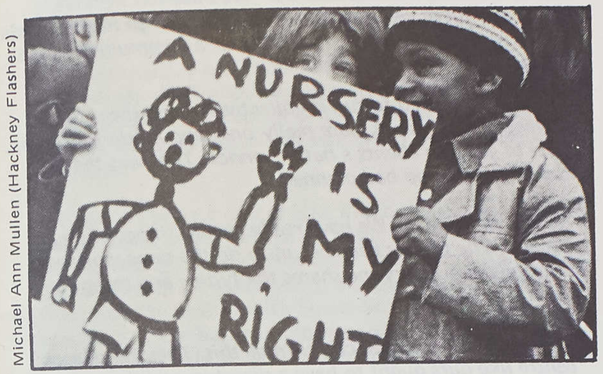
HOW IT CAN WORK

If you are confronted with cuts — get your Union Steward or Branch Secretary to organise a meeting where all of the workers affected can discuss the most effective action. A few examples will show how:

1. The number of town hall cleaners is cut. Members decide to reduce their workload to compensate for the cuts. They agree that the council chamber, committee rooms, mayor's parlour and offices of the senior council officials will not be cleaned.
2. A hospital is understaffed because of cuts. Catering staff re-arrange work schedules which make it impossible to provide refreshments for any meetings held at the hospital. Nursing staff insist on adequate cover for wards at all times. Porters find it impossible to undertake any jobs other than those strictly laid down in their official duties.
3. Catering staff at town hall hold a token strike which makes it impossible to serve meals to the council members' dining room when the council is meeting.
4. School meals staff, when numbers are reduced or hours cut, refuse to accept extra work or to work faster. The serving of meals is delayed, clearing up is delayed and classes cannot resume on time.

These are just a few examples but they show how NUPE members can force employers to face up to the consequences of any cuts they make.

Autonomous struggles



Michael Ann Mullen (Hackney Flashers)

We saw that (especially in the 1960s) struggles sprang up outside party and union frameworks. We mentioned the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Women's Movement, the actions of racial minorities and of students. We saw that what was significant about them was that they were not limited, as parties and unions so often are, to negotiating the best terms possible within a totally unacceptable mode of production, but rather that they challenged and confronted capitalist social relations by raising questions that are entirely unresolvable within it.

It is no coincidence that, in order to do this, they stepped outside conventional forms of socialist organisation. To oppose relations you need to develop new relations of struggle too.

A second important characteristic of these movements is that they assert that the first step in entering struggle is to understand and act on our own, first-hand experience. This contrasts with the parties, which, drawing their membership from a wide range of people, in many types of situation, offer them a line, and the line is brought to bear in the analysis of each new situation as it develops.

The respect for first-hand experience has, for instance, been an important underpinning of the present pamphlet. It is reflected in the way we have tried to begin a discussion of theory and tactics with the carefully recorded words of people who are actually involved. Listening to what people have to say and helping others to hear it is the only way to understand capitalist relations. They are essentially personal.

Because it more effectively challenges relations, autonomous struggle can sometimes be more threatening to the state than party and union practices—so often pitched at the level of resources: demands for more pay, or more houses.

However, many of the struggles that have gone under the name 'community action' have illustrated the weakness of autonomous organisation. It is based on first-hand experience of bad housing, homelessness, the indignities and impoverishment of 'claiming', the rip-off of supermarket shopping and so on. But too often it has not moved onwards from the sharpness of the personal experience

> "We try to listen and learn from working class people. Even reactionaries have perspectives which can be synthesised into an analysis. We think it's important to be wary of simplistic responses to people's complex and contradictory experiences of the state. What I found in my rank and file trade union work in an earlier job is that they seemed always to be putting out a party line. There was no attempt to learn from people or relate the 'line' back to people's experience. I think this is what I have learned from the women's movement. Respect for people's experience and willingness to learn from it. It's there in people's experience that the contradictions come out. This is what I call a feminist way of building an analysis.
>
> What we are trying to do is first to encourage people to articulate their experiences of problems and needs and to feed back our analysis to the people we have learned from. The point of this process is to legitimise people's assertion of their own needs."
>
> *Joan, Community Health Council worker.*

to a realisation of the source of the predicament. Community organisations have often been small and short-lived, competitive and divisive. They have failed to understand the nature of the state and have sometimes been co-opted by the mechanisms the state has produced to integrate them. A consciousness of class was often missing.

Secondly, just as what the party and the union have to offer is so often 'after hours' activity, attending meetings and distributing leaflets rather than actually transforming the way we do our job from nine till five, so autonomous struggle has often been more a question of consciousness-raising than material counter-organisation.

Oppositional possibilities now

None of the people we talked to in Part One were involved in any particularly dramatic forms of class conflict, yet each was able to identify some space within the conditions of their relationship with the state in which they could resist or challenge the forms of relations imposed on them.

Sometimes they suspected the possibility was there but had not known how to use it , or had felt the costs too great or that they did not have sufficient support from others.

From the experience of these people, as well as from our own experience as 'clients' and workers in the state, and from the stories of others we have talked to or read about, we can begin to piece together some examples of oppositional action which illustrate the variety of ways in which the 'state form' encompasses us and ways in which we can begin to resist it.

We realise that these struggles, in themselves, are not enough.

They are often small, fragmented and isolated. We use them to illustrate possible tactics to challenge the state form of relations, not as an overall strategy for superceding capital ism. They and a growing network of struggles like them are essential, but their significance depends on the extent to which they are integrated into the general struggle for socialism.

Overcoming individualisation

The state tends to individualise us, to diminish our aware ness of having a class interest. We can *only* reassert our class identity therefore by collective struggle. Often it is the most productive course of action too.

The teachers we talked to, particularly Mary, had found that when they organised collectively it was possible to give each other support to work in a way which challenged prevailing attitudes in the school. Teachers of different subjects start- ed using their free periods to sit in the classroom for each other's lessons, so that they could discuss problems together afterwards. This was done without the knowledge of the school authorities. The arrangement helped the teachers to develop socialist ideas about their work and to combat the isolation they otherwise felt.

Mary also worked in a department with a number of other socialist teachers. Collective commitment to certain activities like showing films against racism enabled them to widen the scope of what they were able to do. "Because the whole department decide to do something, there is no way they can stop us doing it."

Simply to refuse to act individualistically and to insist on collective organisation can be clearly threatening to state institutions that are themselves bureaucratically arranged.

The law centre workers told us: "We have ten workers. Originally there were official appointments: so many typists, so many receptionists, a book-keeper, a community worker and a number of solicitors.

Although we tried to run it collectively even then, the collective discussions were really only about administration, how to give the clients a better service. That was the way the original group had planned it.

Now it is different. We have really shared things out more equally. The typists have begun to do the same work as everyone else. Everyone shares the typing and reception work, the chores.

There has been official criticism of this. They think each centre like ours ought to have a director, and there should be a central management committee. Collective running upsets them. They want one person in control so that they can contact that person regularly and make them respons ible, sack them if necessary.

There has been a whole lot of discussion among the workers about whether we should co-operate in this, do it the way the sponsors want us to. Some of us say "No, we've got to be anarchic, fuck them up every which way we can, so that they take notice that we're here'."

So often, we are asked to compete with each other as indi- viduals or familes. Sometimes people see through this trap and find another way of doing things.

Tenants at Sporle Court, an unhealthy block of flats in Battersea, were all hoping for transfers to better estates.

Workers facing redundancy occupy a social security office

Peter Harrap

With help from the local Peoples Aid and Action Centre, they employed a doctor to interview and examine all the people living there, seventeen familes in all.

A report resulted which demonstrated that every one of them required rehousing on medical and medico-psycho- logical grounds on account of their housing condition, and they were able to use this in support of their transfer campaign.

Perhaps the private corner into which the state and capital has driven us most relentlessly in the household of the nuclear family. So it is from there that every little step out- wards towards a de-privatising, a social sharing both of functions like dealing with Social Security, but also a spreading of the burdens and rewards of care, can be a challenge not only to 'state form' but to one of the found- ations of capitalist organisation.

Rejecting misleading categories

The state habitually addresses us according to categories which, though not entirely false, in that they do reflect an aspect of our real situation, are nonetheless misleading and (as with individualisation) tend to obscure the reality of our identity.

It is impossible altogether to reject these categories, since they refer to part of our experience. But we can in our struggles try to supercede them and act on more widely shared interests. This has often been recognised by people involved in 'community action', who have tried, for instance, to forge working links between council tenants and direct labour building workers, or to bring owner-occupiers and tenants into joint action over housing improvement.

Officially-preferred categories so often confuse and set us against each other. Some groups have successfully resisted this divide-and-rule tactic.

One Active Pensioners group, for example, are unusual in defining 'pensioner' as anyone in receipt of a state pension.

So as well as old aged people, disabled younger people can be members of their group and their special problems included in campaigns.

The category of 'community' is itself ambiguous. In so far as capitalism tends, with its brusque processes of develop- ment, redevelopment and decline, to ignore and trample on people's attempts to forge a sense of belonging, community is something to fight for. But it is a concept often used in official discourse apparently to localise consciousness, to minimise any sense of class, by fomenting rivalry and parochialism.

The Home Office Community Development Project was an interesting example of a state programme, whose inten- tion in this respect was diverted by the workers in it.

Many were socialists, and many more became so as a result of what they learned during the course of the project. They

John Smith (IFL)

Towards class-conscious action

were appointed to twelve different local authorities around the country, mainly, though not exclusively, in areas of inner city decline.

They were expected to study and analyse the problems within their respective communities and try to develop community self-help to overcome them.

Instead, they rejected the definition of 'community' proposed by the state and its implied boundaries, and compiled joint reports, comparing and analysing on a national level so that the problem of each area came to be seen for what it was — a product not of misfortune or fecklessness, but of capitalism.

Defining ourselves in class terms

The reality that is obscured by individualisation and the misleading categories preferred by the state is that of class. The aim of socialists in the state is therefore to reveal the class nature of society and the state and to find material ways of expressing this class awareness in their struggle.

In 1976 the West Yorkshire Transport Executive announced cuts of £50,000 in the bus budget. This was accepted by the local branch of the T & GWU on assurance that neither jobs nor earnings would be affected. Neither was any initia- tive to be taken against the cuts by the Leeds Trades

Council or political parties.

The Leeds Campaign Against the Cuts approached PLATFORM, a small rank-and-file group of bus workers in the city. All agreed that the proposed cuts would affect both bus workers and community. There would be loss of jobs, cuts in take-home pay and that half of the population entirely dependent on public transport would suffer as services deteriorated.

It became clear that public transport was an issue on which strong links between workers and consumers were needed. A joint Public Transport Group was set up on which they would work together.

Bus workers found that public protest about inadequate services helped them to put pressure on union officials to consider more militant action against the cuts.

They also found that, as they were able to point to inadequate staffing, lack of spare parts for buses, bus users began to understand the connection between government cuts and why 'No Number 86 turned up the other night'.

Organising a campaign together they leter prevented fare increases of 24 per cent and plan in future to use the tactic

Occupying a hospital bed to protest against empty wards

Angela Phillips

of refusal to collect fares, in which they feel the combined class strength of bus workers and users can best be applied.

Especially for 'professional' state workers, to identify the class structure of the conflict is not enough. It is also a question of deciding personally which side you are on in the struggle and making it material by what you do.

This has occurred in many different incidents, as when state social workers have reinforced tenants' barricades against state force; or when probation officers have refused to give court reports on squatters.

The class-conscious choice of tactics must surely be extended to strikes in the big public sector manual workers' unions.

The tactic of dealing 'only with emergencies' is not always feasible. It is difficult to distinguish emergency cases from routine cases. Everyone in receipt of meals-on-wheels will suffer without them, each one is an emergency. It is because of this that so many state workers in caring jobs, such as home helps, refuse to strike at all.

A strategy of continuing to provide resources while refusing to impose the 'state form' on them may be far more threatening to the state than withdrawing labour. It will involve non-cooperation with management, refusal to recognise hierarchies and orders, the introduction of collective decision-making and new kinds of relationship with 'clients'.

Defining our problem our way

The state, as we've seen, tends to define things we experience as a problem in terms which we don't recognise. When we complain, the finger is pointed back at us. We have to insist on defining our problem our way and refusing to shoulder the blame when it rests not with us but with capitalist ways of producing, and capitalist social relations.

How often, when we are ill, we are made to feel guilty. 'I am at risk of lung cancer because I'm addicted to cigarettes; I have liver disease because I can't resist drink.'

Area Health Authorities have a 'health education' budget allocated for teaching the public about self-help, about self-discipline in diet, drink and smoking.

The Community Health Council workers we talked to said "At first we thought that health education was liberal nonsense. But then we saw that it is possible to use these resources instead for alerting people to the true causes of illnesses and addictions.

Through official 'health education' it has been possible to explain to people the environmental sources of cancer. They've seen how the stress of work and worry caused by capitalist relations can cause mental illness. And that a lot of over-eating is encouraged by advertising.

As a collective activity, identifying the true causes of ill health is one of the most consciousness raising things there

YOUR BUS SERVICE

London Transport is aware of the increasing delays and inadequate service on many of its routes.

Unfortunately we are unable to do anything about the situation at the moment. In fact, to be completely frank, we don't give a damn.

As long as we are in control of your movements and as long as you have to take what you can get (and not what you WANT) - and, of course, as long as we don't pay a decent wage to the bus workers - you'll have to wait like everyone else.

box XX 197 King's cross rd London WC1

Defining the problem *our* way

can be."

When children regularly refuse to attend school, the education authorities seek the cause and put the blame on the child and the family.

A group of Educational Welfare Officers fought first for the right to have meetings alone, without superiors present, to discuss their work collectively.

Out of these meetings and the shared experience of similar problems, they came to understand that truancy is not a problem that arises in the home or in the child, so much as being a problem for the school, created by the school.

In doing so they made a choice as to whose side they were on. The next step was to try to develop more appropriate responses to truancy.

In housing, when the council tenant complains to the council of dampness in a flat or house, frequently he or she meets with the response 'It's your own fault.'

Groups of tenants in Glasgow and Edinburgh insisted on rejecting the council's definition of their problem and insisting on their own.

In Glasgow they organised a demonstration outside the council's show house on the estate and threatened to open up one of the damp, inhabited houses as an alternative show house. They carried rotting materials into the council chamber.

In Edinburgh, where dampness had been prevalent in many council flats, causing sodden walls, fungus and ruined clothing as well as ill-health, the council blamed the lifestyle of the tenants. They instructed them to heat their homes 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and to leave their windows open at the same time.

Joint Damp Action Groups formed to bring tenants together from a number of estates. They compared notes with the Glasgow tenants. They tried for three years all the normal procedures of letter writing, lobbying and deputations. Then they organised a mass complain-in, designed to bring the housing maintenance section to a standstill. They occupied the Housing Committe and threatened a rent strike.

In Glasgow and Edinburgh, although they have not yet won the struggle for damp-free houses, these groups have made their definition of the problem stick. Glasgow did award rate rebates, even though they were small ones. Edinburgh has allocated approximately £¼ million to treat damp houses – not enough, but an admission of responsibility.

Stepping outside the brief

The state fragments responsibilities in such a way that different people and different official bodies have the job of dealing with one part and only that part of our problems. Poor housing and poor health are defined and treated as separate problems, even though we know how closely they are related. These divisions of competence mean that the underlying cause of many of our problems, the capitalist social relation, is obscured. We ourselves often fail to see and respond to the problem as a whole.

As state workers somehow we have to find ways in our struggle of rejecting these arbitrary divisions and organising is such a way as to bring the totality into view.

Not in the job description: disrupting an Area Health Authority meeting

Andrew Wiard

CHC workers said: "We are meant to be attending to the NHS. But we feel there is little to be done about health through the NHS. Health problems arise through low income and poor living conditions and hazardous work. A CHC should say 'Stuff the NHS, we are going to work on questions of health and safety. We believe that exposing and understanding what is making people ill in this community is more important than helping the management to run the NHS'."

They stepped outside their brief, identifying a certain factory as a source of health hazard. A doctor was employed to visit the factory, where the workers were struggling for union recognition.

The doctor was asked by the women workers to examine them. She made a report for their use in their struggle, showing the extent among them of skin disease and other illnesses due to working conditions.

Refusing official procedure

By the ritualised practices in which it involves us, the state tends to prevent any direct disruptive expression of our needs. This dampening process seems to be the result of 'representation', of committee procedure, of the formula of 'the right to speak' or to participate, confidentiality.

Many productive struggles against the state seem to include a refusal of such state procedures. The process of choosing a representative and giving over to her or him the power to negotiate, excludes the majority from taking a full share in decision-making, and it distances and co-opts the representative.

CHC workers and Council shifted from proper observance of state procedure to direct action, with good effect. The Area Health Authority announced the closure of a local hospital. 'First we forced the Area Health Authority to consult local people. We had to take them to court over it. But finally, after all the consultation, the Minister did confirm the closure.

So we saw that consultation had not worked. The Minister had turned us down. But everyone was angry. We said to ourselves – instead of going through these fruitless procedures of consultation we should make it clear to the AHA just how strongly people feel. We must stop writing letters to the Minister, calling meetings, discussing documents. Instead we will set up a campaign.

CHC workers contrasted their experience of campaigning with the demoralisation of endless correspondence and negotiation. "There is so much to be gained by breaking out of the mould. Being on a picket line, on a demonstration gives you a feeling of solidarity, and a better awareness of your own power."

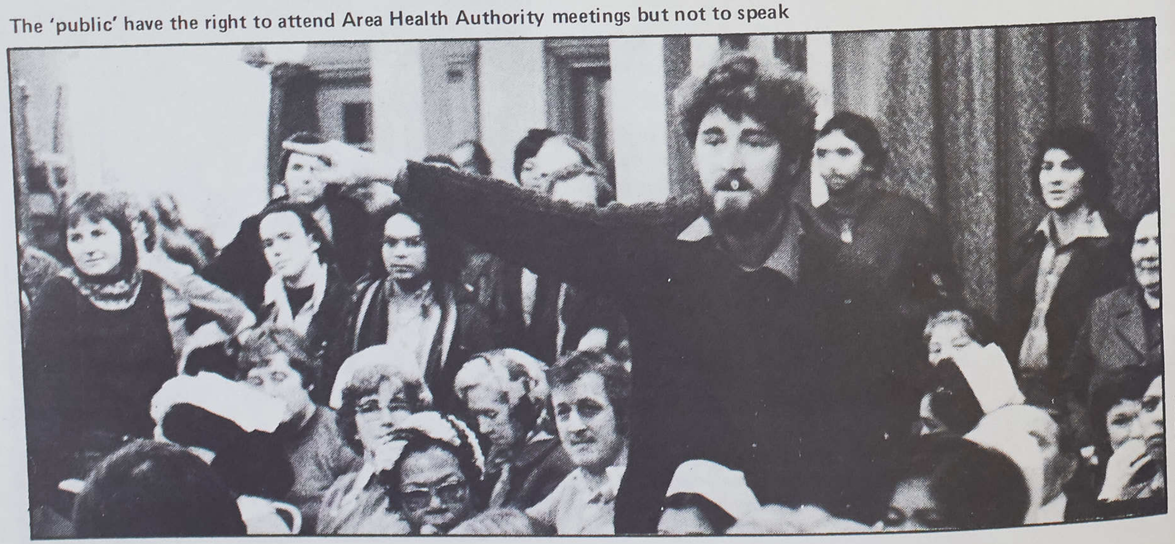
The experience of many law centre workers of using legal resources offered by the state has led them to conclude that the law, as a promise of equality, is a sham. Besides, the procedures often tie people up and slow them down.

Law centre workers we talked to were advising a group of tenants fighting a redevelopment scheme.

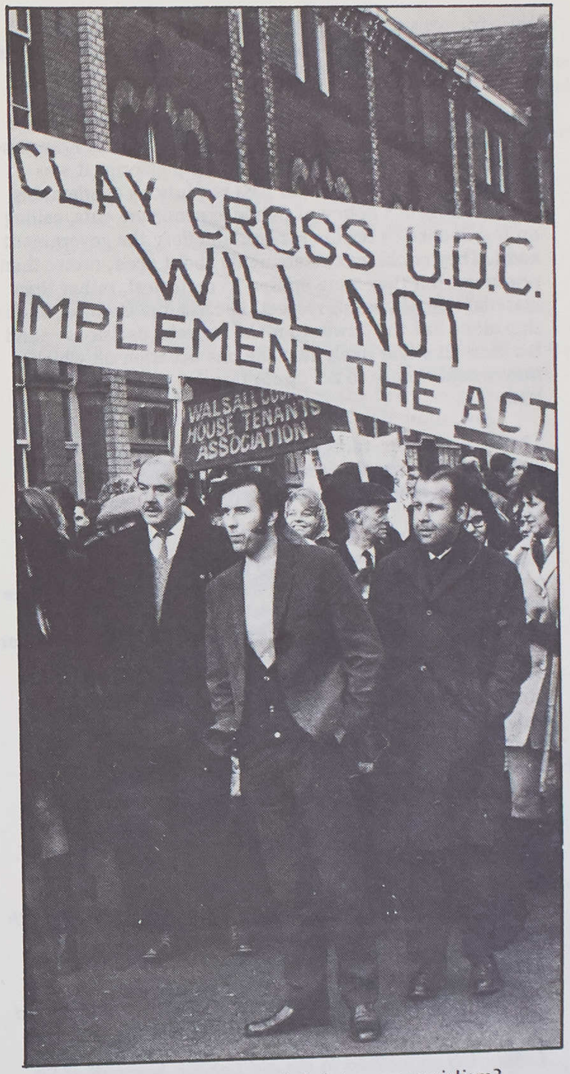
Faced with a choice of continuing to play along with the legal process for small returns, or to expose the fraud, they decided the best course of action was to abandon hopes of legal appeal and instead to physically face the bulldozer in passive resistance with the tenants.

They chose this course both as a way of dramatising and strengthening working class action, and exposing the limitations of the view that justice can be secured by legal procedures.

The 'public' have the right to attend Area Health Authority meetings but not to speak



Andrew Wiard



Simon Danby (CDP photographs)

"What is a left *oppositional* strategy for elected members? Where and when does opposition fade into managerialism? What should be the minimum conditions for our support?"

Rejecting managerial priorities

The state is a hierarchy — or more accurately a system of hierarchies. People working in the state often find that there are rules about sticking to the correct level. Councillors are frequently not allowed access to lower officials and vice versa. The contact between Councillors and the bureaucracy is often kept to a high level, where it can be controlled. Likewise, in schools, we saw that in some cases the rules prevent classroom teachers having direct contact with parents.

Councillors and people working in the state have sometimes found therefore that an effective challenge to 'state form' and a necessary step in organising, is to find material ways of breaking with hierarchical relations, by making contact above and below level, and across departmental boundaries, and to insist on the right to meet without superiors present.

Within the hierarchies, the way to power over decisions is achieved by climbing upward. Social democratic parties use this ladder to get to the strategic salients from which they hope to influence things in favour of the working class. But we saw in Part One how they take on management responsibilities as they climb, and are soon required to abandon the working class, or at best to become unreliable allies. The struggle within and against the state is not a gradualist game using managerial discretion.

The talks we had with backbench Labour councillors and

their friends and supporters in the Labour party, led us to think that there was a clear distinction to be made between oppositional and managerial space.

There was a certain amount of useful opportunity-value in being in the Council, but this lay in the chance of dramatising the current situation from a public platform. It was possible (just) to promote or pass resolutions condemning the government's policy of public expenditure cuts, calling on the Council to restore services and defy the government audit. They could make statements about *need*, rather than resources. But they were limited to rhetorical, rather than material struggle in this respect Because the Council Leadership alone had the power to make material decisions — and for them, it seems likely that the one occasion on which they would choose to act oppositionally would be their last.

The backbenchers, recognising its limitations, still felt that their best role was to dramatise the difference between oppositional and managerial priorities in Council affairs.

Here and there opportunities arose where an oppositional form could be built into council procedure and achieve a certain durability. An example was the appointment of race relations advisers to certain directorates — black officers whose role was to monitor and challenge the normal mangerial process.

In the history of local government, a handful of moments stand out as times when the passing of the management buck stopped dead.

In Poplar in 1921, George Lansbury and other councillors refused to accept the instruction of central government to reduce benefit payable to the already starving unemployed. They went to gaol for their decision.

Half a century later, in Clay Cross, Labour councillors, with full support from a working class area, refused to implement the rent increases imposed under the 1972 Housing Finance Act. They submitted after a long struggle to personal surcharge and were dismissed by the central state and replaced by an appointed Commissioner.

Labour left councillors in the old London borough of St. Pancras in 1956 lowered council rents, had the Whip withdrawn by their own Party and were surcharged personally in the amount of the deficit their action caused in the council books of account.

More recently, the Area Health Authority in Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark has refused to implement public expenditure cuts in the local health service. As a result they have been sacked and the Secretary of State has appointed special Commissioners to make the cuts.

As socialists inside the state, or having a particular concern with the state, we are a long way from knowing clearly what our expectations of elected members on the left should be. What is a left *oppositional* strategy for elected members? Where and when does opposition fade into managerialism? What should be the minimum conditions of our support for social democratic candidates?

If we do not know clearly what we mean by an oppositional strategy and are not ready to give them support in it, we cannot expect elected members to make a class-conscious choice and act oppositionally.

Alternative organisation in struggle

Counter-organisation must be creative. Given some energy and imagination, the way in which our struggle is organised and fought can not only be an opportunity to test and develop socialist ways of doing things, but can in itself challenge capitalist social relations and therefore pose an important threat to the stability of capitalism.

The 'work-in' (as an alternative to the strike, or to accepting redundancies) has been a response to the withdrawal of capital from firms, the closure of factories and public offices.

In the public sector, as cuts begin to affect whole units, the kinds of work-in organised at Plaistow, Hounslow, the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and other hospitals, will become a relevant form of action.

In Hounslow, a 66-bed general hospital was threatened with closure in 1976. It began a campaign that year. It developed as a work-in during 1977, and the hospital managed to continue in operation until past the closure date.

In October, however, the hospital was raided by the authorities in the night, private ambulances hired by the state came and stole away the patients, and beds and furniture were left overturned.

After the raid, the hospital was occupied for a further year until the AHA finally agreed to admit to the inadequacies of their current services and the need for a community hospital on the site.

The work-in at the EGA women's hospital started in November 1976, not only keeping the hospital (threatened with closure) open for the use of women, but defending the choice of better social relations within it.

Workers and patients asserted the right of women to be treated by women if they so choose, and have attempted to develop alternatives such as the 'Well Woman Clinic' there. Now the Government have agreed to continue to provide some services for women at the hospital.

Common threads

These examples, then, fragmentary and inconclusive as they are, are nontheless illustrations of *counter-organisation* in opposition to the 'state form'. In their way they are all *oppositional* — they reflect an understanding of the daily experience of disappointment in reformism and gradualism. They are all based on a awareness of *class conflict*, and take class sides. They are *material*, rather than limited to exhortations and resolutions. They are material in another sense too, in that they avoid idealism: they are based on first-hand experience of predicaments, not on the altruistic effort of some politicised people to help others. The struggles described here all *challenge the capital relation* and its *state form*, and they do so by *prefiguring socialist organisation* within the struggle itself, so far as this is possible.

Costs and contradictions

As we saw in Part One our relationship with the state is always contradictory. We are always liable to lose something. The basic contradiction is that as 'clients' we need the resources the state offers and that in satisfying this need we are necessarily held into the state form of relations. It is no good disscussing struggle as though we were fighting from a well-provisioned, well-armed position. It is precisely because we are *not* that we are organising struggle at all. Capital may be in crisis, but often we are in poverty too. So what we can afford to lose will always be limited, and will have to be calculated against what we can hope to gain.

As state workers, we are often in control of material things that other people need, (health care, housing allocations, SS benefits, transport). In choosing how to act to challenge the state we are limited by the hurt we may inflict on other working class people by doing so.

We are limited too, by the fact that we need our jobs, and that any action which poses any real threat to the state will probably lead to attempts to get rid of us.

The balance of choice will not always (or ever) be decided, though, from our individual situation alone. The scope for localised, limited struggles, the extent to which oppositional space can be identified and exploited, depends to a large extent on the balance of class forces more generally. It is different at one historical moment from another, and history is made day by day and week by week, not a century at a time. Our struggles are part of the process of making history and at the same time the form and content of struggles and their degree of success are determined by history. So it is essential that we be aware of what is going on around us, internationally, nationally and in the next department. The same position in the state structure will have different possibilities at different moments in time. An individual's or group's power to bring about change toward socialism does not depend just upon their position and actions, but on the balance of class forces at any given time.

Many marxists, for instance, in the upsurge of the student revolt in Germany in 1968, were swept to the position of professor in universities, where they had the power to develop socialist education. As the socialist tide retreated, people in lesser posts lost their jobs. The professors, with security of tenure, remained, high and dry. They still held the salient but their power to bring about change had been curtailed by the retreat of the struggle around them. So our actions are important for other people too. We may think we are acting on our own behalf, but what we do changes the balance of class forces for others.

Laurie Sparham (IFL)

Opposing a Tory state

The ideas we have developed about struggle within the state have come out of our experience over the last ten years: a decade characterised especially in the first five years by apparently liberal, if contradictory, state initiatives.

In the early seventies many of the new developments, from community work to intermediate treatment, were stabs in the dark on the part of the state. These early experiments in new forms of integration and co-option were in many ways fringe initiatives and the abundant oppositional space they offered has been widely documented.

In recent years, as the state has been able to offer less and less by way of concrete resources to the working class to maintain the capital relation, the flood of initiatives reflecting the changed mode of domination has increased and become more main-stream. Learning from its early experiments, the new forms in the state, from devolution and consumer councils to workers' participation in industry and school community managers, are much more sophisticated and highly controlled. Our oppositional opportunities are contracted.

Now we have a Tory government which at the same time as promising unprecedented cuts in welfare spending has increased spending on the state's repressive activities. In this situation, have the things we have learned from the struggles against the state in the last decade any relevance? How appropriate are the ideas we have set out in this pamphlet to the coming period?

One of the first consequences of a Tory electoral victory has been the demise of many 'quangos'. Public expenditure cuts have provided the rationale for an attack on law centres and advice centres. Socialist research will be made more difficult. Pockets of oppositional activity are being threatened as the initiatives that were tried out by the state in the foregoing period are abandoned—the Home Office Community Development Project and community development in other boroughs such as Wandsworth, are examples.

In this situation we may have to defend 'participartory' mechanisms however ambiguous they are, if they offer better opportunities for opposition than autocratic and secretive processes of management. There is a new danger in our situation though, that of appearing to endorse, as we struggle for the retention of certain state services, the state itself. We may become caught up in a defence of the 'state form' as well as of state provision. We may find ourselves driven into defending forms of management and decision-

making which we rightly feel ambivalent about, just because they are preferable to forms about which we feel even worse.

Defending oppositionally

It seems important that where oppositional space is threatened we seek oppositional ways to defend it whereever we can. A university teacher whose women's studies course comes under attack, for instance, faces a choice. She can write a letter to the professor justifying her activities on the grounds that this is a 'specialist option'. Or she can organise a collective response from students and other teachers asserting their right to be offered the course they want.

So often when threatened with cuts or closures we rush to justify ourselves in terms of our usefulness to the state. How often community projects, advice centres or other experimental projects plead 'Don't close us down. We save you money by promoting self-help, we keep people off the streets. We are no trouble really!' And how often has this strategy not only failed, but led to demoralisation too.

To defend our activities on the basis that they are wanted and needed by working class people rather than that they fulfill the state's needs and expectations may seem at first sight much more risky. But we may receive more organised support this way, as well as making our politics — our analysis of the state — very clear through our actions. We must defend the provision we want to have in a way that strengthens rather than undermines the alternative social relations — the alternative ways of relating to each other and to the state — which we are trying to develop.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that Tory rule will mean an end to oppositional space generated by changes in the mode of domination in the earlier period. If the Tory cuts are not to bring about an immediate political crisis, they will have to be accompanied by many more sleights of hand of the variety of the Great Debate in education and the Supplementary Benefit Review. In the coming years, oppositional activity may prove more difficult to organise, but if the Tories carry out their public expenditure plans they may well find themselves in difficulty in continuing to ensure the effective imposition of the 'state form'. Through counter-organisation we may be able to make it even more difficult for them. In altering the mode of domination — decreasing the allocation of resources to 'participatory' and 'community' bodies and increasing it to the police and the armed forces — the Tories are taking a risk. They are shifting weight from one foot to the other, which may mean that we have a chance to catch them off balance.

Union fights to save Quangos

An important component of the Tories' ideological attack has been their view that there has been too much state intervention and too much 'socialism'. The popular support in the working class that helped to bring the Tories to power in the 1979 election is built on a profound dislike of the state. People are reasonably angry with the state. They are angry not only at the niggardly nature of its provision but above all at the oppressive and tedious form of relations it involves them in. They place their anger alongside and in alliance with the quite different distaste for these 'welfare' aspects of the state felt by the bourgeoisie. If we as socialists simply defend the state, as provider of services, rather than opposing it for the relations it represents, we will be failing in dialectic as well as failing to respect the good judgment of working class people based on a wealth of daily experience.

A mass, class-based movement

While reactionary, Tory Government policies are also radical. They appear to offer a way out of the stalemate of the last few years. They are explicitly opposed to centralised bureaucracy and state control, both of which the Tories have cleverly associated with 'socialism'. These policies are attractive to working class people because they speak to their experience of the state.

By contrast, the Labour Party and the Labour Movement appear to take a much less radical stand, focusing on a defense of the welfare state. Groups to the left of the Labour Party, while pushing for more militant action do not differ fundementally from this approach. Think of the slogans: 'Save our Hospitals', 'Defend jobs and services'. While many labour movement activists have an historic attachment to the welfare state which they see as a major victory, the mass of people are aware that they are not 'our' hospitals or 'our' services. These are not our institutions but *theirs.*

A socialist movement which responds to the Tory attack on the welfare state by taking a defensive stand will not get mass support. Effective socialist opposition to Tory policies must involve helping people grasp what socialist forms of organisation might be like. As we fight back, we need to clearly distinguish what we want from what we have had in the past: the 'socialism' of the welfare state. However horrible Tory policies, people will not join in the struggle unless they feel that they are part of a movement for something different. Wherever there is resistance we need to look for practical ways of giving our struggle a socialist content and a class basis: insisting on our needs, defining things our way, spelling out how we would like it to be.

We recognise that we are arguing for a new approach to socialist politics and that it leaves many urgent questions of political practice still to be answered. That is why we have called what we have written 'discussion notes'. What is clear is that if a mass, class-based movement for socialism is to emerge we need new strategies which do not divide us from ourselves and in practical ways embody a socialist vision in opposition to the capitalist state.

The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group are a small group of people in state employment who came together as members of the Conference of Socialist Economists.

Formed in 1970, the CSE is committed to the development within the Labour Movement of a materialist critique of capitalism in the Marxist tradition.

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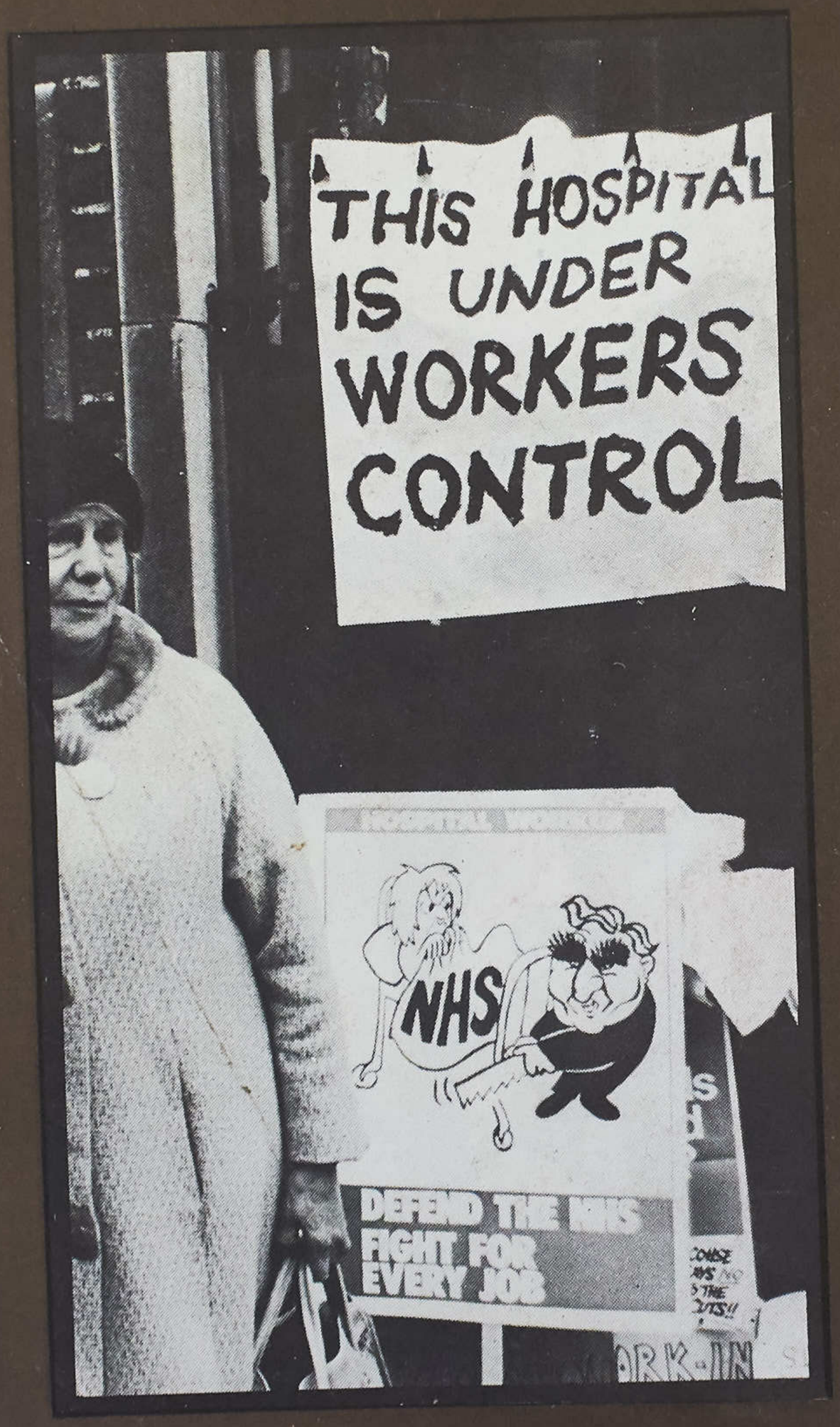
"Although the state may appear to exist to protect us from the worst excesses of capitalism, it is in fact protecting capital from our strength by ensuring that we relate to capital and to each other in ways which divide us from ourselves, and leave the basic inequalities unquestioned."



The current attack on the welfare state has shocked and frightened many people. But there are few signs of widespread working class resistance and socialists are confused about the way forward. *In and Against the State* has been written by a group of socialists in state employment for others who are seeking new forms of political practice as state workers, 'consumers' or 'clients'.

The predicament of people who – as teachers, bus conductors, parents, patients – experience the state as contradictory is documented in six conversations which show how the state provides services we need but does so in a way which is alien and oppressive. The authors argue that the capitalist state is best seen as a *form of relations* in which we are intimately involved. 'After-hours' socialism is not enough. It is both possible and imperative to carry our opposition to capitalism into our everyday contact with the state as employees and 'clients'.

For socialists the strategy of simply defending the welfare state is doomed to failure. If a mass movement for socialism is to emerge, we need to make it clear that what we want is different from what we have had in the past and develop new forms of class-based action which begin to embody what it is we are fighting *for*.

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