

CAMPAIGNING FOR CARE

in social services

4

DEVELOPING JOINT ACTION AND USER COMMITTEES

An isolated group of workers fighting a lone battle for their jobs and service is easily picked off. So it is important to develop links with other workers and organisations and to build support both among those who use the service and outside before threats to your jobs actually materialise. It takes time to arrange meetings, for common interests to become clear and to build mutual trust and support. Don't leave it too late. Your aim should be for any threat from the council to cut, close or privatise to be met with a public outcry, as well as support and action from those who use your service, from other workers and from the community.

In this section we suggest ways in which alliances can be built with groups of workers outside the council, with community organisations and with the users of the service. We also give some examples of where joint action by workers and users has been organised. But experience has shown that it's not always easy or straightforward to build such al-



Wandsworth Photo Co-op

liances — it's important to remember the reality of people's experience and traditional ways of organising:

HOW?

● Joint action won't just happen — it has to be worked for. You will have to take the initiative in making contact and may need to try several times before effective links are built.

You will have to argue why there should be joint action and explain the benefits:

— the threats facing you are part of a wider attack which threatens all jobs, services and the quality of our lives;

— we all share the same interests: we all need housing, health, social services, education;

— we need to share experience and information and learn new tactics;

— we need to heal divisions that sap our strength.

● You will have to tackle a strong inbuilt set of ideas about the workplace, the job, the trade union. People do see themselves differently at work and in their lives at home as users of services. This means going beyond traditional trade union concerns like wages and conditions, and it means fighting to break down deep divisions, which the Tories are trying to intensify, between workers and 'ratepayers', between groups of workers, between workers and unemployed people, etc.

● People have little opportunity to express their views as users about how public services are run or as workers about how people make their jobs more difficult. So initial meetings bringing groups together can be quite aggressive. They need to be carefully planned and controlled: experience shows that once people have given vent to their anger, an understanding of the other point of view can develop and there is a real basis for working together.

WHICH ORGANISATION

Different organisations offer different types of alliance: voluntary organisations of the traditional kind may offer you support in putting pressure on the council. Grass-roots community organisations like tenants organisations, womens groups, pensioners groups, parent-teachers associations, unemployed action groups and claimants unions, nursery campaigns and local community campaigns are more likely to work with you in campaigning and joint action, while trade unionists in other workplaces may be willing to make plans for mutual support for union action.

And if you can build up a group of

supporters specifically for your service from those who depend on it, they may well turn out to be your strongest allies. Clearly, with social services this presents more problems than with some other local services, because many clients use the services because they are not able to be active. However experience has shown that pensioners and many others are often willing and able to take action when given some support and encouragement. There are also many relatives and friends of users as well as potential users who will know how crucial your work is and who are likely to be willing to lend support to your demands and action.

● It is vital that links go beyond a few activists, eg convenor or senior steward and secretary or chairperson, of a community organisation. Though contact may start with a few individuals, it is important that more people are involved in meetings, and go as delegates, so that both sides receive full reports back.

● Joint action won't just be built on words and resolutions. It means active support for each other's struggles — going on pickets, attending mass meetings, etc. If you want their support, you must actively support them too.

● There may be some situations where there are strong political differences and/or conflicts of interest between trade union and community based organisations which will prevent any working relationship from working.

ure on council's residential and domiciliary service workers whose jobs have come to include more and more nursing tasks. Similarly, cuts in social service provision affects the burden on health services. The Government has used the privatisation of hospital ancillary services — cleaning, catering and laundry work — as a testing ground for its statutory tendering plans for local authorities. There are many lessons to be learned from the experience of tendering in the NHS — and about how and when unions can successfully challenge the tendering process.

Further, the companies that do win contracts in the health service in your area will be establishing local offices and seeking local government contracts too. Thus the NHS unions are crucial contacts in the fight against privatisation.

★Contact can be made with NHS stewards locally: NUPE, NALGO, GMBATU certainly have many members in the NHS as well as local government. COHSE and ASTMS also cover sections of the hospital workforce, and should be involved.

BUILDING ALLIANCES

● With National Health Service workers and Campaigns

Cuts and closures in the NHS have a direct effect on social services. They put additional press-



★ Exchange information about local developments and threats, as well as private contractors who are sniffing around for contracts. Arrange to publicise information about the NHS in your newsletters and ask that the NHS stewards do likewise with your information.

★ Discuss ways of providing mutual support: again there will be problems, because active union members are engaged in their own campaigns. However, on occasions where a show of strength is necessary — at a lobby or on a picket line, it should be possible to involve members. NUPE members from local authorities have certainly attended mass pickets at Barking Hospital in support of the domestics' on strike there against private contractors. Refuse collectors, drivers and postal workers have refused to cross workers' picket lines.

● **With other Labour Movement organisations**

Trade unions throughout the public sector are currently or have been engaged in fighting cuts and privatisation. In the private sector, too, recession has led to struggles over pay, redundancies, etc. The government attack on trade union rights, its plans to abolish Wages Councils and much of the employment protection legislation are common ground for action among trade unionists

★ Take the issues affecting your department to the Trades Councils to gain support from other local trades unionists and to work out common ground for action.

★ Make contact with other trade unions directly via Branch Secretaries

★ Explore the possibility of setting up a Public Sector Alliance with other local trades unions for campaigning and mutual support. This has been done effectively in Coventry, Dagenham and other areas.

★ Send information on threats to your services to local Labour Party Branches and the General Com-

Health Emergency Campaigns and NHS support campaigns in many areas have brought together health service unions and users and supporters of the NHS to fight cuts & privatisation in the NHS.

Over the last year such joint campaigns have played an important part in supporting NHS workers' action and occupations to prevent hospital closures, in exposing and challenging local health authority plans for cuts, and in both the fight to keep private contractors out of the NHS and the failures of contractors when they have taken over services.

mittee of the Labour Party. Offer to send speakers and draw up model resolutions for Branch to pass committing the local party to a policy of opposing cuts and privatisation. It will be useful for putting pressure on labour councillors, securing commitments in election manifestos, and, where the Branch is active, for winning active support for your campaign. Support from L.P. activists during the miners' strike showed the potential support in Branches for trade union campaigns.

● **With voluntary organisations**

There are likely to be a whole range of local voluntary organisations providing some kind of service related to social services. Most are concerned to add to what the council provides and not to replace them. Many also act as pressure groups and may have some influence with councillors and the local press: Look out for: MENCAP, MIND, Age Concern, Task Force, Family Service Unit, Voluntary Service Councils, groups for the disabled, blind, deaf, ethnic minority welfare organisations, Women's Aid.

★ Inform them about any threats to social services you fear or expect and the implications for the service.

★ Ask for support — offer to visit their meetings/offices.

★ Explain how they can support you:

1. Distributing information to their contacts & widening the base for support

2. Putting pressure on the council to maintain the service

3. Making statements to the local press, radio, tv

4. Reaching agreement with your stewards not to take on extra work or responsibility now carried by local authority workers which the council may propose to hive off

★ The larger well established voluntary organisations tend to have a paid and often unionised workforce and your best initial contact may well be through shop stewards. Smaller organisations which consist solely of volunteers may well respond to information about threats to the service and write letters to councillors, etc but do no more than that. They are worth trying, but tread carefully.

(**MAKING CONTACT:** Lists of voluntary organisations should be available from at least one of the following sources:

Public Library, Town Hall, Citizens' Advice Bureaux, local advice/resource centres, Councils for voluntary service, volunteer bureaux, social services offices.)

● **With users and the wider public**

Remember — everyone is a potential user of social services and most people will seek help, advice or support from social services at some time in their lives — though they may not realise it. Use this fact to win public support for social services. You can start with organised groups — pensioners groups, nursery parents, parent-teacher associations, women's groups, tenants groups, ethnic minority organisations, residents' and community associations.



Some local organisations may have extensive mailing lists and send out information for you — resource centres, Community Relations Councils, Voluntary Service Councils, Community Health Councils.

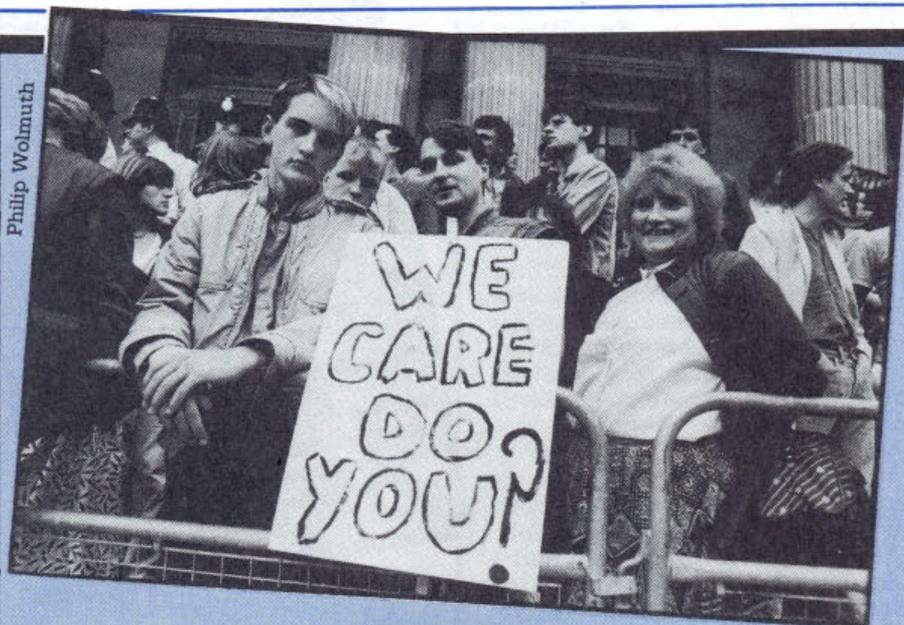
- Send them leaflets about the service: many won't know what home helps, care assistants, wardens etc actually do. Tell them about the threats to your service.
- Offer to attend meetings to speak about threats to the service — or invite them to a public meeting.
- Tell them how they can support your campaign:
 1. By publicising your information
 2. Putting pressure on councillors, and press statements
 3. Providing support for any action workers might take: e.g. lobbying council meetings.
- Ask for their assistance in setting up organisations of users and friends of the service to defend it.

HOW CAN USERS SHOW THEIR SUPPORT?

Even people who can't get to meetings or join your lobbies and pickets can give support in other ways:

- ★ Have petition forms available for your clients, their families, friends and visitors to sign, together with your leaflets explaining your job and the threats.
- ★ Ask clients (or relatives, as appropriate) if they would give an interview to the local press or radio about the importance of the services they use in their lives. If you can't get local media interest, record interviews — or just quotations, on paper or tape (or even video?) and use them in publicity — to the councillors, press and public.
- ★ You can print or duplicate protest cards or letters for people to sign and send off to the Leader of the council or Chair of Social Services.
- ★ For more active users and supporters, you can suggest writing letters to councillors, the local press, local MPs.
- ★ If you have enough active supporters, try to form an organisation of 'friends' of the service to help publicise your cause, actively support your campaign activities, and join in drawing up demands and alternative ideas for how the service should work.

Philip Wolmuth



EXAMPLES OF JOINT ACTION

WANDSWORTH

Council tenants and trade unions have had varying degrees of success with joint campaigns against council plans to privatise: estate management, estate caretaking, catering in social services residential homes, cleaning of public toilets, refuse collection and street cleaning. Alternative plans for caretaking and estate maintenance were produced. (Contact: Marlene Heron 01-788 1199 or Mike French 01-788 7113.)

BENEFITS

Over the last few years CPSA members in local DHSS offices have worked with claimants unions in campaigning against racist checks on claimants and the work of the special 'snooper squads'. Now, 'Action for Benefits' has brought together civil service unions and other groups to fight government plans for benefit cuts.

BRITISH TELECOM

Following a public enquiry into the privatisation of BT last year, representatives from the POEU, UCW, STE, Women in Telecom, Post Office and the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom are now working together on issues facing the whole telecommunications industry. An alternative plan for BT's renationalisation is being drawn up and a strategy for identifying and combatting threats to jobs and services from multinational corporations and new technology is also being planned. (Contact: Communications Unit 01-633 5958.)

MONITORING CONTRACTORS

In Sheffield DLO unions and tenants' organisations have produced a checklist for TU and TA members to monitor the work of private building contractors and work co-operatively on the issue.

TRANSPORT

Public transport campaigns in Newcastle, Sheffield and London have brought together transport workers and user groups in fighting bus deregulation and privatisation threats.

COUNCIL HOUSING

Tenants in Tower Hamlets, Wandsworth and Hammersmith have campaigned jointly with trade unions against estate sales.

■ In Camden and Hackney tenants and DLO workers have worked together to improve repairs services. In Hackney, tenants occupied District Housing Offices as part of their campaign. (Contact: Terry Robinson 01-739 3631.)

WESTMINSTER

NALGO and NUPE helped launch a monthly Bulletin aimed at defending and improving services. Close links with the community helped stop the closure of a public library recently. The Bulletin now has a circulation of 15,000 copies monthly. (Contact SWS, 01-968 4454.)

■ NALGO and NUPE have also formed a joint committee to share information and plan joint action. (Contact: Colin Robertson 01-229 6572.)