

Footnote: The Trouble With Trade Unions

Trade unions act with the just intent of bringing pressure to bear on the corporate capitalist who exploits them. However, the nature of the only means open to them to exert pressure results in more harm being done to the innocent bystander than to their corporate master. [PDF]

A Painful Incident

In 1978 I was putting together a computer system for a client and writing the bespoke software to go with it. This was before the days of powerful personal computers. I had to buy naked disk drives and a controller and install them in an equipment console together with the processor, and attach a printer.

For this project, one of the things I had to buy was a suitable equipment console which would house standard 19-inch rack mounted electronic units. I found a suitable one in the catalogue of a large North London manufacturer who specialised in such racks, cabinets and consoles. I went to see them. The console I wanted was one of the manufacturer's standard products. I therefore expected to be able to buy one from stock and have it delivered straight away.

They would not deal with me on any terms other than 'cash-with-order'. I paid them expecting immediate delivery. They then told me that they did not even start to manufacture a copy of this standard item of theirs for me until I had paid in full and that my cheque had had time to clear. They told me that, provided my cheque cleared, the console would be delivered to me in a fortnight.

Three months later it had not arrived. There had been a union strike. They had my money which they would not give back. The factory was completely idle until the dispute with the union was resolved. I could not afford to buy another console from elsewhere. I had to wait. So did my client. The small pale print on the back of the manufacturer's order form absolved them from any problems caused by union action.

Eventually, after 4 months, a truck came to my house. Two men got out and dumped the console in my driveway. I had to sign a delivery note. They asked how long I had been waiting. I told them 4 months. They seemed extremely pleased. Naturally, that company never got any further orders from me. Neither was I averse to passing on the word in the industry about what had happened.

Being without a working system for 4 months, most clients would have sued me for compensation. This would have lost me my house and home and destroyed my business. I would have had to get a permanent job with an employer. My wife would have had to go into [mental hospital](#) permanently because I could not have looked after her any more. Our daughter would have been taken into local authority care. We would never have got her back. It was providential that my client on this occasion was a company partly owned by my wife's brother-in-law and sister who were very understanding about the circumstances.

Nevertheless, the union workers were pleased. They had of course merely caused their big corporate employer a slight inconvenience. It was their employer's small pay-in-advance customers whom they had really hurt - people who had nothing to do with the dispute, and certainly had no control or influence over it.

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Conclusion

Admittedly, it is the only way open for dispossessed workers to exercise any power against their unrelenting exploitation by their corporate masters. But as a mechanism, it is so indirect and decoupled that it ends up hurting innocent bystanders far more than it annoys their employers. It is as if the police were to open fire with a rotary cannon in a crowded street in order to make sure they stopped an armed gang from escaping. There would be far more innocent casualties than guilty ones. The only way for the dispossessed to combat the powers of exploitation is for them all to be in one single global union.

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