



Cleaners' Fightback

A Workers' Liberty cleaners' bulletin

www.workersliberty.org • awl@workersliberty.org • 0207 394 8923

Our strikes can win



The coordinated 48-hour strike by rail cleaners is the latest battle in a growing revolt of cleaning workers — some of the lowest-paid, most highly-exploited workers in the economy.

Our jobs involve cleaning up dust, grime, litter, graffiti, food and packaging, fag ends, endless free newspapers and leaflets, booze, vomit, and even excrement. Without us working to keep the trains clean, they couldn't leave the station. The railway system needs us just as much as it needs drivers and signallers.

We face low wages, precarious working conditions, and are often frozen out of the sick pay, pensions, and bonus schemes our colleagues are entitled to. We face bullying and harassment from managers, and cleaning contractors often use our immigration status as a weapon to silence us and stop us from standing up for ourselves.

By striking, and by striking together across the country, we are sending a clear message to cleaning contractors and the rail companies that hire them that we will not be bullied or silenced, and that we demand decent pay and conditions, and dignity at work.

Our strikes have a huge significance for the rest of the working class. The Tories want to change industrial relations in as much of the economy as possible so they more closely resemble the conditions we face — chains of contractors and sub-contractors, competing with each other to see who can pay the least and cut the most corners. If we can force our bosses into respecting our rights, it will give other workers a huge boost.

This bulletin was produced by members and supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, a revolutionary socialist organisation. Workers' Liberty believes that the cleaning workers' revolt can be part of a wave of "New Unionism", a 21st-century equivalent of the mass movements of dock workers, match women, gas workers, and others in the 1880s and 1890s, in which groups of workers that many had considered "too hard" to organise took strike action and won huge improvements to their working conditions. Workers' Liberty believes that the struggles of cleaners and other hyper-exploited workers can help shake up the labour movement today, and transform it into a movement that can fight for a society where no-one is forced into a life of back-breaking, alienating work just to make ends meet.

If you are interested in those ideas — get in touch!

John Lewis cleaners win!

Cleaners in the rail industry are not fighting alone. Cleaning workers in universities, museums, shops, and other sectors are also fighting alongside us.

On 19 November, John Lewis agreed an immediate and backdated 9% pay rise following cleaners' pledge of industrial action through their unions, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

The increase, backdated five months, takes their pay to £6.72 per hour at three central London sites, and £6.50 at one outer London site. Supervisors will now get £8.00 per hour and £7.84 respectively.

This shows that even the threat of industrial action can force concessions. We can win!

• More — www.iww.org.uk

Workers' Liberty is a revolutionary socialist organisation active in the British labour movement fighting for an alternative to capitalism and Stalinism based on common ownership, democracy and workers' control. For more information, see www.workersliberty.org or email awl@workersliberty.org



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The next steps: how to win

Our battle won't be won overnight. Our union, RMT, has already declared its intention to strike again over the Christmas period. What kind of fight do we need to beat the bosses?

Coordinate the fights: if we synchronise strikes on all our disputes, cleaners will feel less isolated. Employers will find it harder to organise strike-breaking, as it will be less easy to borrow managers from others contracts, and agencies which supply strike-breakers (even though this is unlawful) will be overstretched. Coordinated strikes will have more impact, attract more publicity, and apply more pressure. We should also develop a cleaners' charter of common demands for cleaners in different industries, which can be a focus for political as well as industrial campaigning.

Industrial unionism: unions should organise cleaners alongside other workers in their industry. Unfortunately, a minority of union members sometimes talk down to cleaners, adding to a feeling of being undervalued. This must stop. All workers, whatever our pay grade or skill level, have common interests against the bosses.

Self-organisation and rank-and-file control: we have to control and lead our own disputes. This means elected strike committees in each depot, station, or workplace making decisions about where to go next.

Organise, organise, organise!: unions need to get out round workplaces and recruit cleaners, using materials in the various languages we speak. The RMT's reduced membership rate for cleaners (£1 per week) is also helpful. Unions must identify, train, support, and defend cleaners' reps and make branches accessible to cleaners. Unions should fight for pay and conditions claims that reflect cleaners' priorities and struggles.

Protest and political campaigning: we need regular protests and direct action targeting the employers, the contractors, and the political decision-makers. In the case of London Underground, Docklands Light Railway, and Tyne & Wear Metro, the ultimate employer is a local government body. Campaigning has forced Transport for London (in 2008) and Newcastle Council (in 2012) to endorse the Living Wage, which boosts cleaners' pay once contracts are renewed.

By building campaigns on these bases, we can consolidate our strikes into a national movement that can win real change for cleaners in the rail industry and across the economy.

The cleaners' revolt

Rail cleaners are part of a national movement for decent pay, conditions, and dignity at work that involves cleaners from a range of different industries. These are just some of the other cleaning workers fighting alongside us:

University of London — cleaners have organised a "3 Cosas" ("Three Causes") campaign to fight for sick pay, pensions, and holiday entitlement. They are members of Unison, although shamefully their union branch has so far been unsupportive. They are employed by Balfour Beatty.

John Lewis — organised in the IWW, these cleaners struck over the summer and have recently won a pay increase (see the other side of this bulletin!). They are employed by ICM.

British Museum — PCS and Unite cleaners at the British Museum struck in October and November to demand bosses drop plans to outsource their contracts.

British Medical Association HQ — IWW cleaners employed by Interserve at the HQ of the professional association for doctors are campaigning for the London Living Wage.

Société Générale — SG is a major European bank with its British headquarters in Tower Hill. Cleaners there, who are members of the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) are fighting for a living wage. Like many London Underground cleaners, they are employed by Initial.

Tower of London — IWGB cleaners employed by Mitie at this world-famous tourist attraction face low wages and harassment from managers. They held a demonstration at the Tower on 3 November.

Barbican — Mitie cleaners at the concert venue and art-space held a "Love Music, Hate Poverty Pay" demonstration on Saturday 24 November.

Across all these workplaces and disputes, the same issues crop up again and again: poverty pay, no sick pay, bullying and harassment from managers.

A political campaign for a cleaners' charter — that guaranteed living wages, decent sick pay, and dignity at work across all industries and contractors — could unite our struggles.