

# Campaigning for civil rights

By Les Dean

I'VE BEEN campaigning around civil rights for disabled people, mainly through my union, Unison, which has a very good disabled members section. Through that I was campaigning on basic trade union issues, but the issue that has galvanised us all over the last year, and made the disabled people's movement a national force, has been civil rights.

That campaign has grabbed public attention, largely because of the direct action of disabled people. We have chained ourselves to trains and buses, crawled up the steps of the House of Commons, stopped traffic in the centre of London.

Another important factor in building the movement was the Government's crass mishandling of the civil rights issue. Roger Berry, a Labour MP, brought a Private Member's Bill calling for civil rights, which the government opposed. Instead of submitting it to a vote they filibustered, and the Bill ran out of debating time.

The furore which followed that episode forced the government to realise disabled people wanted rights. To be seen to be doing something they introduced their own bill — the Disability Discrimination Bill. This is a good name for the bill, people think, because, for the first time ever, it *legalises* discrimination against the disabled. In its original form, it lays down "circumstances in which less favourable treatment is justified."

Employers can discriminate against disabled applicants for jobs if they are "unsuitable" or "less suitable" than other applicants, or if their disability "impedes or would impede the performance of any duties." Together with the scrapping of the 3% disabled employee quota this is tantamount to saying disabled people should not be able to work for a living, but should rely on inadequate benefits, (also under attack through the Incapacity Benefit legislation!) stay at home, out of society's sight.

Shops etc. can refuse service to disabled people "in order not to endanger the health and safety of any person."

The only criterion for making those judgements need be "reasonable opinion", that is, nothing more than the prejudices against disabled people already held by society, with no regard to what disabled people need or want.

Now the bill is in the Lords, and there are big debates about our attitude to it. Jack Ashley helped to amend the bill in the House of Lords. He's saying: "We've put in all these amendments, we've really improved the bill, the government isn't going to be able to take these amendments out, we're making some progress here. Let's win what we can."

That's one end of the spectrum of the argument. At the other end people say that the legislation legalises discrimination

against disabled people. Unison takes this position and opposes the bill.

DISABLED PEOPLE are not organised in an adequately coherent way, but they are becoming more so around the civil rights issue. The great thing about the last two or three years has been the flowering of grass-roots organisations right across the country. People are doing things they would never have done before: demonstrating, organising pickets, putting pressure on politicians.

It's exciting, because you're challenging the assumptions about disabled people. What's expected of us is that we sit at home, do nothing (*can't* do anything), and wait for someone to come round and make us a cup of tea. We are not *supposed* to be active in society. We're passive victims, people feel sorry for. Now we are taking positive action!

It is like we've broken out of a prison — the real prison of our own homes, and also the prison of other people's expectations.

There is an umbrella campaign linking the different groups fighting for civil rights — from the charities like RADAR and disabled people's organisations like the British Council for Disabled People, to grass-roots organisations.

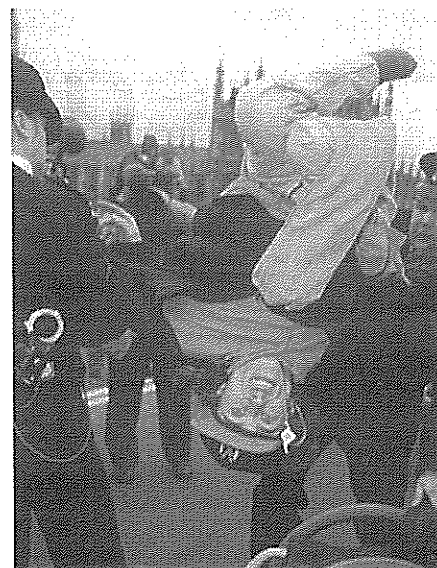
The problem with the campaign is that it is dominated by organisations which started off as charitable trusts of one sort or another and had a very Victorian, philanthropic style; organisations whose purpose was to give things to poor disabled people, people who needed to be looked after and cared for. Of course, this is the whole ideology that we are trying to change.

Such organisations have solidarity with disabled people, but they are staffed by paid workers who don't usually have direct experience of disability. Their ideas are not necessarily the same as those of people at the grass roots of the campaign.

Such organisations have changed over the years. For example, the Spastics Society changed its name to Scope, because they wanted a name that wasn't so obviously, excruciatingly, awful! But these changes have largely come about in response to grass-roots pressure. Individual activists working at the grass roots of the disabled movement have altered people's thinking, and the way people relate to disability.

WHAT DO we mean by full civil rights? Put simply: we want to take part in all aspects of society in the same way that anyone else can. At the moment we can't, not because we are disabled but because society isn't geared up to deal with our difference.

In terms of the separate issues that make up civil rights, there is a reluctance to prioritise one particular issue over another. There is a very important reason for that. The disabled people's movement is very diverse. We need to include everybody's concerns and find demands that unite us.



The slogan "civil rights now" unifies everything, and has given something for all of us to struggle around.

People who are not disabled are getting interested in these issues. The debates we have had — what do we mean by civil rights? what is a "disabled person"? — are slowly becoming issues for the wider labour movement. At the first Unison conference, some people were pretty hostile to the demands of the disabled members section, particularly when we complained about access. But this year the attitude was very different. The conference discussed and passed *all* our motions.

ONE OF our motions said a Labour government should enact full civil rights for disabled people in its first term. This is a very basic question of equality. If Labour won't do this, it is sanctioning discrimination against disabled people. This attitude wouldn't do for black people or for women, and it won't do for us.

Although civil rights legislation can't do away with prejudice and discrimination it sets down civilised standards society should aspire to. It gives individual disabled people a standard against which to judge employers and service providers, a framework of legally enforceable rights.

Any Labour government led by Blair will no doubt argue that it would cost employers, industry, public services etc. too much to put full civil rights into practice straight away — the same kind of argument Blair makes against setting a minimum wage.

We have to win the argument that a Labour government can fund equality through cuts in military spending, and taxing people the Tories made rich or richer while, at the same time, they were impoverishing and ignoring disabled people.

The action of disabled people themselves has forced the labour movement to take up our campaigns. We have to keep up pressure inside the unions and on the Labour Party to give us our human rights. Nothing less will do. ■