

# Reclaiming our safe spaces



Jill Mountford, Secretary of the Welfare State Network, described her work as an organiser of WSN's conference in Manchester on 23 March.

I'VE worked for the WSN for 18 months now, teaching for a few hours each week to provide some income to live on. Since the inaugural meeting, on a mid-September Sunday afternoon in 1994 where Tony Benn was the main speaker, we've pulled off some reasonably impressive stuff.

We now have an organisation with over 200 affiliates, the majority of them trade unions, Labour Parties, Trades Councils, students' unions, and campaigns such as Fight Against Cuts in Education, disability and pensioners' rights groups.

The campaign struck a chord with many people. It is already understood by large numbers of workers that the Tory project of tearing down the post-1945 welfare state is designed to create a working class with little or no safe places in a landscape of relentless exploitation of labour under the vicious, anarchic rule of the market.

The hard-won post-1945 safe places, made up of a network of benefits, rights and institutions, represented elements of the political economy of the working class within capitalism. Capital was still able to ruin individual lives, even communities, but not, as before the Second World War, the lives of a whole working class generation.

17 years of sustained Tory assault have changed that; but the WSN has been able to capture the anger and frustration of many activists with a desire to put an end to this assault on the working class.

The second reason for our growth was our fast response to labour movement events. Labour Party conference 1994 came just three weeks after our inaugural meeting. We produced a four-page broadsheet to highlight the cuts and attacks on the welfare state and to call for Labour Party support for building a mass rank and file campaign. The broadsheet developed into a 12 page tabloid size newspaper, called *Action for Health and Welfare*.

We've just completed issue number 12, which is 16 pages. We had enough reports, articles and letters to fill another four pages!

We organised daily sales at Labour Party Conference, and toted it around all the fringe meetings, as well as collecting signatures on a petition. We advocated Labour Party action against the Tories' attacks on the working class. We called a lobby of Parliament on Budget Day (29 November 1994). We have no illusions in what such a lobby can achieve, but we knew we could use it as a focus for activists to come together and feel their strength.

Over 500 people, from pensioners to school students, and all sorts of groups in between, came together to protest against the Tories' cuts in welfare spending.

Tony Benn, Diane Abbott and Jack Jones spoke for us. But it was the speakers from the floor that inspired many of us: pensioners recalling what life was like before the introduction of free healthcare at the point of need.

From the lobby we called for a national petition against the Jobseeker's Allowance [JSA]. Incapacity Action, a group of disabled people fighting the introduction of the new Incapacity Benefit (now in operation, replacing Invalidity and Sickness Benefit) told us how Incapacity Benefit was a forerunner for the JSA and pledged their support for fighting it. We also called a national campaigning conference on the JSA and how to fight it. The conference took place in February 1995, with over 250 activists from trade unions, Labour Parties, unemployed groups, disability campaigns and students' unions.

How do you measure the success of such a conference? Attendance: the make-up of the activists was a good representation of the labour movement. And you measure it also by the practical decisions that come out of it: the setting up of local groups against the JSA, organising local action such as protests and petitioning outside Job Centres and dole offices, getting out and talking to working class people who will be affected by the JSA, explaining why it should be fought. Birmingham Against JSA is organising a demonstration on Saturday 18 April 1996; there's a London demonstration on 9 April.

In April 1995 we pulled off another campaigning conference, "From the Cradle to the Grave." Again, over 250 people came along. We elected a steering committee and made a number of decisions about future actions and campaigns. We voted to back a march on Tory Party Conference in defence of the welfare state. Welfare State Network supporters marched the 58 miles through 10 towns from Bury to Blackpool.

We organised town centre meetings in places like Burnley and Blackburn. With megaphone and a bench to stand on, you

can quite quickly get a couple of hundred people around you. Plainly the march inspired other people to get involved. And it inspired me and other marchers, underlining once more the truth on which the WSN is based: the possibility of building a mass rank and file working-class movement on welfare.

Next came Lobby of Parliament for Budget Day 1995. The lobby ended with us being thrown out of Parliament after occupying the Committee Room in which Kenneth Clarke was hoping to hold a meeting! We sang the *Internationale*.

In December, the French working class showed us all what can be done when they took mass strike action against welfare cuts. Health and welfare is about militant working class politics. They never *gave* us welfare: we had to organise to take it from them.

Supporters of the Welfare State Network, me included, couldn't resist the chance of getting over to Paris for one of the big demonstrations. Hundreds of thousands of people on the streets demanding what is rightfully ours is a beautiful and inspiring scene! French workers were not only interested in their own battle to save pensions, healthcare and education, but showed great interest in what was happening to the working class and the welfare state in Britain. We sold out of copies of *Action*.

By May 1997 at latest Britain should have a new government. Labour leads in the polls by a huge amount at present. But even under a Labour government, headed by Blair and his friends, I believe the Welfare State Network is going to have an important role to play in defending the welfare state. The Labour leadership seem unable to offer anything other than pale pink Tory policies.

The Tories want to remake the working class in the image of the US where a huge underclass rots in Third World style slums inside the cities of the richest country on earth. Where 35 million people have no medical insurance benefits. Where the middle classes build very high fences around their private estates and use thugs to keep the proles out.

The Welfare State Network intends to play a part in the remaking of our class into a strong, confident force that will one day remake society and put an end to the capitalist war of all against all. We will build new society, in which there will be no safe place for exploitation, for poverty or for those who thrive off of exploitation and poverty.

So has it been a good 18 months? Is it worth all the hard work? Without a shadow of doubt! And then there are better things to come.

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