

## Building a future

I am one of the many tens of thousands of construction workers who are currently unemployed. Disunited, we must be patient and wait. Surviving on the State-prescribed pittance as pliant trapeze artistes on the unravelling "safety net" which so enchants reformers. Turning useful people into beggars is a historical, and inevitable, principle of the capitalist system. Perhaps this time, we have got to be extremely patient before capitalist investors decide that the opportunity of making profits from our labour power is a distinct possibility. Until then we must needlessly hang on, suffer quietly, await our masters' call.

Twenty-eight years ago, when I started working as a hod-carrier on the buildings, the economic circumstances were quite different from today. The demand for labour was high, consequently wages and degrees of freedom had been rising. Capitalism was in the boom phase of its cycle, and the construction industry anticipating even larger profits was in the process of restructuring itself. The design of buildings was slowly beginning to change, as were materials. Every aspect of what is a labour-intensive industry had to be cost effective.

Cash-in-the-hand wages were starting to become the norm for bricklayers and hoddies in London. No sick pay, holiday money or wet time for us, after all we were screwing the State, weren't we? Being a nomadic trade—I have had well over 100 jobs—where being a realist is forced on you, the majority took full advantage of the economic situation. It was quite usual for men to jack because there was no crack on the job, tea-breaks were too short, or, because you couldn't get a sub when you wanted it. The sub was very important, its availability was one indicator of an employer's liquidity. It was a simple case of once bitten twice shy. Nearly everyone who has worked for sub-contractors for some time gets bumped, at the first sign the realists abandoned ship before it sank.

The Monday Club was in full swing at this time. If 50 percent of the workforce turned up on a Monday the subbie was in raptures all day about how loyal his "boys" were. Building trades unions at this time were generally recognised as the niche of opportunists, liars, and the bribeable. Consequently, negotiations over wages took the form of "we want another shilling an hour". If it wasn't forthcoming, then the tools were immediately thrown into the bag and the ladder descended. A new start was just a phone call away.

It was fully understood that what we built during a working week was worth more than what we were paid, it was wholly transparent. The remainder being shared by the layers of pimps that thrived through our labours, this too was understood and despised. Creating profits, through the unremitting appropriation of surplus value from its workers, is the sole function of the construction industry. Building homes, etc is purely incidental to the process.

No boom lasts forever. The speculative jamboree of overproduction ended abruptly and inevitably. A few capitalists went bust. The shrewd, and well-connected ones are still there, conniving their way out of their latest short-lived binge. The long boom

was over, and those few freedoms have never returned. The barbed-wire around the sites was in the process of being re-erected, and a new reality was beginning, one that over the coming years would increasingly subjugate the realists.

New income tax laws had been imposed, and were strengthening. Tax was being deducted at source which meant a 20 percent reduction in wages for those without exemption certificates. We were now self-employed--small businessmen no less. A great many workers, inspired by media reports of large sums of money to be earned, had travelled to London. These were among the first to taste the dole. Realists understand that they are disposable. Skint, most of the smaller and more liberal subbies were back on the scaffold with their "boys". The illusion that they had been more than just intermediary workers in the production of profits was still obstinately imprinted on their thwarted minds.

A small elite of subbies were now in a position to more effectively exploit for their masters those who were still in work. Afternoon tea-breaks disappeared and have never returned. Apprenticeships, which had been declining rapidly amongst firms since the rise of the subbie in the early sixties, were now just a source for contrite prattle by reformers. The derisively-paid, and deftly-worked improvers became their replacement. The week in hand was introduced, and the sub became extinct.

Competition between workers became more ferocious than ever. It was common practice when starting a new job to be put to work with the fastest bricklayer on the job; if you didn't keep up, you were down the road before breakfast. Few workers now questioned this, and some gained pleasure from it. Guilt, if you thought you hadn't done enough, and fear of what might happen, became as inseparable from your being as the trowel was from your hand.

A brutal system can create brutes, and the surviving subbies seemed to be in agreement on the type of foreman that they needed to run their jobs. Only the thug would do, no knowledge of bricklaying was necessary. A bully with a watch and few scruples replaced the tradesman. The old boys said that they'd seen it all before, no-one really believed them.

Semi-literacy, and a knowledge of various state institutions, form the background for many bricklayers and labourers. Alcohol, and latterly drugs, are an integral part of the everyday working life for most. When the sack can arrive at any moment, to anyone, regardless of ability, just "to keep 'em on their toes"; where working conditions can vary from working in shin-high mud, to ramshackle scaffolds; where names and faces over the years become a blur, simply because of their frequency. And forming friendships is fraught with problems, then escapism becomes a necessity. And callousness a shield.

It's an upside-down world under capitalism. Those who are most useful suffer the lowest social esteem. But, laze in a masterfully-built mansion, and devise ways of turning human sweat into profit and you are to be admired, knighted even. After all, how would we cope without them, once the plans had been drawn and the footing dug and concreted, the walls built and then plastered, the joist and trusses nailed into

place, and the roof battened and slated. Surely, we would be lost without a parasite to then sell the building?

A common dream, voiced amongst many workers that I came into contact with through the years was to build one's own home. A few achieved it. Some of those have now lost it. The possibility for all to achieve this dream can become a reality. By uniting, together we can begin the work of tearing down the barbed-wire that surrounds our lives, and bring nearer the day when we can establish socialism, and with it our freedom.

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