

The Welfare Rights Worker`s Tale

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Bright, bubbly, enjoys a laugh – that`s Yvonne. She has a serious side, though, which expresses itself politically through her work on behalf of the unemployed in Milton Keynes. Her concern is based on personal experience. The moral of this tale is that by helping others we can often help ourselves.

I was unemployed in a new town knowing very few people, and I suppose that the thing that started me off as a real resident of Milton Keynes was when I helped to start a residents association. I got to know the local Labour Councillors through that and was quite impressed by them. I`ve been a member of the Labour Party since I was fourteen and was secretary of the Young Socialists in London. They`d just started up a Labour Party branch in the area and I went along. There were only ten or twelve people there but within eighteen months we had a membership of over one hundred. So I was kept pretty busy that year building up the branch – I was membership secretary.

Through the Labour Party I met various other unemployed people. They had a lot of problems because they`d moved away from where their families were. They were completely on their own. Very often they had moved here with firms who had been given generous financial incentives to move to Milton Keynes. In some cases, after a comparatively short time firms were offered even more incentives to move somewhere else and so they`d close their factory down.

The majority of companies who come here bring workers with them because there`s plenty of housing available. When new firms were expected whole streets were left empty, waiting for them to come. But when firms moved on they left the people behind. They`d settled here and put their children into schools. They weren`t able to move on.

The big incentive in M.K. as far as the firms were concerned was that there were no organised unions and that people would accept much lower wages. Milton Keynes was sold on that level. There is no history of industry here, where wages have been negotiated by organised unions. Small firms with a few staff have been encouraged. Even the large firms who take up a huge area, in fact employ very few people because they are really computerised warehouses. They might employ just clerical staff and a few drivers perhaps. There`s no big industry here. The only big areas were things like Wolverton Works which has been wound down a lot over the years. There is no tradition of, say, manufacturing industry, so there`s no organised decent working conditions or wages.

We decided to try and start something to help the unemployed and publicise their plight. So we started the Unemployed Workers` Union. We had a lot of hostility particularly from the T.U.C. who didn`t at that time agree with unemployed people getting organised. They said that they should stay in their unions. But a lot of people

didn't have that opportunity once they'd left their job – like me. We worked very hard, picketing dole queues and so on and got quite a few members. We wanted premises where unemployed people could meet and talk and get help and advice particularly regarding benefits. We managed to get some workers via a government employment scheme and some premises in Bletchley and started the Unemployed Workers' Centre. We had cases of unfair dismissal, unfair selection of redundancy and lots of problems regarding Supplementary Benefit which I deal with a lot now, working for the Welfare Rights Group.

Welfare Rights did a surgery once a week at the centre. They were so busy because of the rise in unemployment, so they took on two more part time workers to help out. I was asked if I wanted to apply, which I did and got the job.

Welfare Rights is an independent organisation concerned with all welfare benefits. After all we are supposed to be living in a welfare state. We deal with everything from pensions to maternity benefits. We now produce a set of leaflets on how to claim benefits – from Supplementary Benefit to disablement pensions. Plus we talk to a lot of school leavers and so get involved with the government's Youth Training Scheme, of which there are many in this area. We inform school leavers of their rights on leaving school. Often they're still given careers talks in school with the assumption that they're all going to get jobs. But of course, as we know, more than half of them don't get jobs.

Unemployment in young people is a big problem because they're going to have such a peculiar attitude to work. They come out of school with hope and ambition and find there's nothing for them to do. At best they get a very low paid job. I know cases of young people working thirty five hours for twenty or twenty five pounds a week. Or they get put on a scheme which is very often exploitation. The amount of accidents among young people working on these schemes is much higher than the national average for working adults. They have a low expectation of wages and when they leave the scheme and get offered a job at thirty pounds a week they think they're doing well. What really concerns me is that in a few years these people are going to want to get married and have a family and there is no way they'll be able to afford to. We're going to see a whole generation of very disillusioned young people, who at the best are going to become very cynical and at the worst are going to be very disturbed and have an unpleasant view of those of us who do have jobs and homes.

I think the idea of Milton Keynes was a very good one. Where we lived in London there was no way we could afford to buy a house. Also just the amount of people in London put us off. Where we were living it was very crowded and we wanted to go somewhere a bit more rural. At first I felt a bit resentful because I thought of myself as a Londoner and didn't want to move away just because I couldn't afford to live there. But having decided to make the move we made the best of it and that kind of enthusiasm seems general here. People have to make friends and get out and about to make a life for themselves. Up until recently there has been no entertainment, nothing organised at all and everything we've done, we've had to do ourselves. But on the whole I like Milton Keynes. I wouldn't move away now. I like the area and the

fact that it is new and that there are new ideas. Some haven't worked, and some, they should have known better, like the dreadful flat-roofed houses. They've been building slate roofs in this country for centuries, they should have realised why.

To begin with there was no culture as such. In any other city there would be a certain tradition even if it was only a museum. Here there was nothing like that but I think they have made the effort to bring in culture from the outside to redress the balance. It does make you feel less isolated if there are some cultural events going on. There's no theatre here. I think because there was no money to build a repertory theatre that they started this business of bringing in professional directors and producers to work with amateur groups and use the facilities in the schools and so on. And in fact I've found that that makes for a much more enjoyable, interesting evening when you go to your local school which has excellent facilities and there's a production put on to such a high standard but using local people and professionals.

I'm a school governor at Conniburrow Middle school and I certainly get the impression that the schools in M.K. are much better than in a lot of the rest of the country. The teachers who came here knew they were coming to a new place and I've found that they are much more flexible. Indeed the standards here are extremely high. Stantonbury is a case in point. People have been waiting for it to fall flat on its face but it has proved time and time again to be an absolute marvel. Even if you take it on the traditional values of their exam results it's been proved to be highly successful. I'm sure this is another reason why people didn't want to move when their firms did because their kids probably wouldn't get such a good education anywhere else.

I'm very concerned that there are no houses for rent being built now. If young people have to move away to find jobs and homes you get left with a place that's full of middle-aged and older people and that way the heart is ripped out of a city. I can't see a vast upsurge of jobs coming here in the near future. We need government intervention to create jobs. We should be aiming to cut working hours without cutting wages. A new attitude to work is emerging because when young people leave school they can't expect to find a job and work there until they retire.

Of course this is a national problem but it is highlighted very neatly in a place like Milton Keynes. People here suffer more because they don't have the old family structure to fall back on.