The Uber of trade unions

THE UK courier industry is “the ideological manifestation of Tory ideology… supposedly the market-place will allow the best people to earn lots of money because they’re worthier” or “have more stamina… can cycle faster… or whatever.” But while riders are told “self-employment is freedom… no one feels lib-erated when you’re earning less than the National Living Wage.”

Mags Dewhurst, bike courier and chair of the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) Couriers and Logistics Branch, told LFB’s precarious work conference how they won a crowdedfunded Employment Tribunal case against CitySprint. She won holiday pay. She described the IWGB as a “small, obnoxious, diverse, low-income union: we use volunteers, I’m one of them… We’re the Uber of trade unions… we disrupt.” In courier companies, “there’s a peck-ing order” with a few riders “brown-nosing the managers… they think they’re earning more, they’re not… We had to get the others, who are pissed off. Got loads of people to-gether, had a meeting, voted to join a union, half the people were like ‘I don’t want to do it, it’s scary… We’re going to get fired if we join a union’.” But as Mags put it, “‘We’re going to get fired anyway,” for being late, using the radio wrongly, losing a package. “People have so little to lose that it’s not such a big deal” to take action. “When you are managed by a smart phone and log in and log out, if everyone decides to log out at the same time it’s quite effective!”

With a public street protest planned against CitySprint for just before Christmas, Mags “got an au-to-mated email” announcing an “arbi-trary pay rise,” the first in 20 years. Other companies then couldn’t use the argument that CitySprint are driving costs down: they ‘caved in… virtually every cycle courier in Lon-don has received a pay rise as a re-sult of what we’ve done.”

Bike couriers “are bogusly con-tracted as independent workers.” IWGB have three more courier cases pending. They’re taking Deliveroo to court over “bogus” employment status, “to get collective bargaining and go on recognised strike.” Foster carers have also set up own branch of IWGB after seeing the struggle of Mags and colleagues on the BBC. Mags ended with an appeal to “join us on the streets” via @IWGB_CLB. © Matt Salusbury

Mamma Mia – time for a fight scene

THOSE in the performing arts “have always been in the gig economy,” says Nicola Hawkins, an Executive Committee member in actors’ union Equity. At LFB’s event on precarious work, she described a “low pay and no-pay industry… the fringe getting worse… 80 per cent are earning less than £20,000 a year” and gave an in-vigorating presentation of the fight scenes.

An actor, musician, promoter, temp, lifeguard for a bit, Nicola re-calls being handed a two-page con-tract while in the ensemble with Mamma Mia in the West End. Her “first professional job” had been working in a bank, issuing contracts, so she read it – and discovered it referred to book-sized West End Agreement, which included stuff she’d not been told about like being paid to attend a costume fitting.

After getting “angry” about the rights of actor-musicians, in some cases effectively doing three jobs, she was headhunted as an Equity deputy (rep) by activists and “started to un-derstand what collective agreements were.” She set up the “Ensemble” Facebook group for musical per-formers. Thanks to her efforts and colleagues’, 175 productions have now signed up to Equity’s “fringe contracts”, meaning hundreds of millions more in wages. There’s been some “good negotiation”, with a “12 per cent pay rise for our members on tour in the next few months”. Eq-uity has grown by a thousand mem-bers a year to its current 40,000, helped by “nurturing student and graduate members”.

When Equity knock on the door, “disorganised employers know something is wrong.” Pointing out that they don’t want to go to court is usually enough to get them to say, “OK”. Employers now believe her when she threatens a walk-out, © Matt Salusbury

It’s time to legislate for decent employment rights for all

NUJ FREELANCE Organiser John Toner, speaking at the LFB’s precarious work conference, said that as a trade union official he’d “always worked for the precarious, only we just call them freelances.” Freelance journalism has “exists since jour-nalism began. Sunday papers would just call them freelances.” Freelance worked for the precariat, only we joyed by the self-employed too. © Matt Salusbury