

Workers - Don't Just Organise, Unionise!

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. There's nothing like the idea of a unionised worker to make the predatory capitalist convulse. For them, precarious employment is profitable. But what if this subjugation and short termism has had its time? As younger generations of workers increasingly see the benefits of a trade union, is the tide turning on those companies who have long exploited workers to swell their bottom line?

Ross Carolyn Jones, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Carolyn Jones Lovely to be here. Thank you for having me.

Ross Carolyn, you are the director of the Institute of Employment Rights. Why does that organisation exist? Surely in 2021 we're all enlightened enough to know that you've got to look after workers, got to pay them well? Unions are a good thing because they keep people together. You have a collective voice. That means that those people can spend into the economy. Surely your organisation should be obsolete by now?

Carolyn Jones I agree. One would think that in the sixth richest nation in the world, that is allegedly the most democratic and allegedly gold plates all employment rights, that there would be no reason for the Institute of Employment Rights. I wish that were true, but unfortunately, it isn't. In the UK, we are a fine example of how a body like ours that argues for employment rights and trade union freedoms is needed because too many people are struggling. This pandemic has exposed the loss of it. So, we've got one million workers on zero hour contracts. We've got over eight million people working in households that are living in poverty. We've got 60 percent of people in households where at least one person works and they're still using food banks. Average wages have not been raised in real terms for over 12 years. There are so many examples I could give of why, unfortunately, the Institute of Employment Rights is still needed. We were born out of Thatcher. Eight pieces of legislation were introduced by Margaret Thatcher and her government to curtail the rights of trade unions. And as we all know, if you don't have free trade unions operating effectively in the workplace, then the imbalance in power means that bad employers are allowed to set the pace. It breeds bad practises like the fire and rehire tactics that we've seen so much of during this pandemic period. So I wish we could close shop and go. But unfortunately, until our employment standards are raised, then the work of the Institute of Employment Rights will continue.

Ross Is it not the case that Thatcher was so driven ideologically that once she had something in the crosshairs, she'd pursue it without any reason or rationale? And just to make a comparison. If you go across to Germany, the Germans and the German governments over the years have realised that a healthy trade union movement is actually a good thing insofar as if trade unions and their workers have spending power, a section of the economy will remain vibrant because people can pay into that sector of the economy. And ultimately, economically, overall, that's a good thing. If you smash people in the way Thatcher did and subsequent ideologues have, if you smash unions and smash people and don't give them that spending power, this is what happens, isn't it, which is inequality goes through the roof and

all the negative side effects that come with that? Are you fighting to say, actually, we've got to revisit this ideology?

Carolyn Jones Absolutely. I think you must have been reading our publications and gemming up on our work, because that's exactly the argument that we make. And of course, when we travel around Europe, lawyers, academics, trade unionists, find it very difficult to understand the system that guides the industrial relations system in the UK. In the UK, we particularly have a low pay economy because following the Thatcher years and following attacks on trade unions, we now face a situation where, what is it, seven in nine people find their employment rates imposed by their employer rather than through negotiation by a trade union. We all know that where unions exists, pay is higher, health and safety is better, quality is better, pensions are better. And in the UK, the figure stands at a pay increase of around eight percent. You put eight percent more money in workers pockets and they go out and buy goods. That provides jobs for other people. That then stimulates the economy all the more. It's a win-win situation. And the way you get that is by allowing trade unions to negotiate in the workplace. This isn't something that just we argue for. The OECD have argued for it. The International Labour Organisation have argued for it. Even the IMF researchers are now saying that the best way to raise people out of poverty and to stimulate the economy is by collective bargaining with trade unions. It's just win-win.

Ross Do you think that workers now are going to organise again and create unions because of the new political landscape that we find ourselves in? And maybe a canary in the wine for that is the Super League. So suddenly you had these billionaire owners from all over the world - and I know that it isn't unionised footballers or unionised fans, but you can see the parallels here. You've got these billionaire owners, globalists, all over the planet, and certainly football was so vital to these fans, they stood up and said, no, enough is enough. Can you see a sort of a parallel, if you like, between fans saying no enough to the plutocrats and workers saying no enough to the exploitative capitalists?

Carolyn Jones I think that's a very good example. And it shows the power of the collective and it shows the power of feet on the ground going out and complaining about how it's won. You know, that Super League football they say it's run by the free market. It's not a free market. It's a monopoly situation. It is the wealthy taking over the small. It is removing competition because where is the competition in the Super League? You can try as hard as you can, but you're not going to be raised up. You're where you are because it's predetermined by money and by a Super six. There are a lot of examples. We would like to see that happen more and more in terms of workplace strikes. The only thing that frustrates me a little bit about the football thing is, you know, we've been arguing against a precarious work and exploitation and zero hour contracts for a good few years. And then Super League gets presented and people are out on the street. I wonder what it's going to take for people to realise and join the dots together to see that what's happening in their workplace isn't natural, isn't the free market just happening. This is a political decision based on political attacks on a political economic ideology that is determining how our workplaces are run. And when people see that bigger picture, one would hope that they would say power is in our hands. We are the ones that create the wealth in this country, in fact, around the world. And we are the ones who want a seat at the table that decides how the workplace is run, how our sector is run and how our economy is run. I think until you get the voice of workers embedded into the

political and economic system, then we're going to carry on with exploitation, super exploitation and a downward spiral in terms of employment rights.

Ross Penultimately, not all things union are wonderful. There is that militant aspect to them. How do you ensure that unions remain reasonable and they don't take advantage of their position in the way that they have done in the past? Because a lot of people watching this will say, yeah, all well and good Carolyn, but actually I've been on the receiving end of militant action. Hasn't been fun.

Carolyn Jones Yes, well, I mean, my argument to that would be trade unions are the largest, most democratic organisations, in this country. They're far more democratic than governments. They have got far more regulations controlling how they operate than companies. The level of regulation and employment law, restricting trade unions has now reached a point, I think, where most people accept that the balance of power has grown against unions. What we find when we take surveys is the unions are very popular and they're growing in popularity in the UK. And if you talk to young people who don't have that myth of winter of discontent and all that in their memory, then they just see unions as good. In fact, the pandemic has highlighted that because more and more people see unions as being the only ones who would save them during the pandemic. So, for instance, when the education unions called people out to say we're not going back to work, people did it. They don't see unions as being overpowering, overbearing or undemocratic. I think they see them as being necessary in our society to bring a rebalancing of power in the workplace. Power has swung far too much in favour of the employers.

Ross Let's finish then with a bit of context, because these younger people coming through, whether they're millennials or however the sort of glib branding you want to give these social groups, when you look across Europe and you see really good workers conditions, good holiday pay, better levels of pay, less precariousness when it comes to contracts, etc, when young people see that, that becomes the threat of a good example, doesn't it? Because they think, well, if they're doing it in Spain, if they're doing it in France and in Germany and the Netherlands, why aren't we doing it? So suddenly, it becomes less about the winter of discontent, wildcat strikes and all that militant stuff, and it becomes about, well hang on, they're doing it, we want that to. Is that awakening starting to happen when we look across to Europe?

Carolyn Jones I think so, yeah. I think people are - well, we tell them it all the time - workers in the UK work the longest hours for the lowest pay, for the shortest holidays, retire the latest, have the lowest pension then workers throughout Europe. Why is that? Why is that? We are the sixth richest nation in the world, and yet we are paying some of the lowest wages in terms of how other people are operating throughout Europe. I think people do in that sense, put the dots together and say we know another way is possible. So they look, for instance, at a working time and the hours that other workers do throughout Europe, far better working hours than we have. They have a better social security safety net than we have here. The answers are there for people to see.

Ross If people are listening to this and light bulbs are going on and people saying, hey, Carolyn's talking a lot of common sense here. What can they do? What can the average

worker do to say, you know, I do want to unionise. I do want to organise and I do want my voice heard because I've had enough of being exploited?

Carolyn Jones Well, there's a couple of things we can do immediately. One is they have to join a trade union because the more people who join a trade union, the more people who vote for trade unions in the workplaces, the better access to unions will get to workplaces and the more they'll be able to represent the interests of workers. So joining the union and supporting that union in the workplace is very important. The second point is that people need to vote and let their political response be heard. So when elections come up, vote as left as you can, let your feelings be felt about where you think politics are going at the moment. I would like to see working class people returning to a left-led political agenda, but we will see how people determine that at the elections.

Ross Carolyn Jones, Director of the Institute of Employment Rights, thank you very much for your time.

Carolyn Jones Nice to be here. Thank you.

Ross Carolyn Steinhoff, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Carolyn Steinhoff Thank you. Thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.

Ross Carolyn, very few people in the UK really know what's happening in the US when it comes to workers organising and unionising. But what we are aware of is that whenever workers rights are talked about or workers conditions, there's a certain company that comes up with monotonous regularity talking about how workers are mistreated or, let's say, compromised when it comes to working conditions. Just talk to us about Amazon, the business, and the recent efforts of workers in the US to unionise, so to push back against what they see to be, let's say, unfair or arguably predatory working conditions.

Carolyn Steinhoff Amazon, I think people feel like it's a new phenomenon because it's so cutting edge and they have this Web service and they're so technology-oriented and those are innovative things. But in fact, really, Amazon is just like companies. I think it was Natasha Lennard, the journalist, called it the East India Company of today, you know, where they really operate in the same kind of way that Dickens wrote about the mentality of pure greed and seeking of profit at all costs and even delight in dominating and and oppressing others. It's the kind of feeling of power, I feel.

Ross But when you talk about unions in the US of A, it's a total anathema, is it not? Because since inception, it's in your DNA to be rampant capitalists, to be laissez faire with regulation, to be Ayn Rand-ian, if you like, because Alan Greenspan, no less, says the optimum state for workers is to be neurotic, marginalised, insecure, precarious, because - and at least he was honest about this - that is the easiest way you could control them. So how do you begin to change that with a union?

Carolyn Steinhoff One of the big components of that way of working that you're just describing, I feel, is the internalisation by workers, by working people, of the belief that just what Alan Greenspan says.

Ross Are you saying the Amazon workers internalise failure, blaming themselves instead of the structure that they're working within?

Carolyn Steinhoff Absolutely. This is the explicit sort of repeated mantra that we hear, you can hear in many different spokespeople. Amazon, any time I've seen interviews with them, they say this kind of thing. It's a demanding job. This is almost there. They have lines that they've memorised and they say these in a very calm and professional, you know, civil kind of tone. Well, yes, it's a very demanding job. And if people can't do it, then it's probably not the job for them. The new employee always comes in. This is the story when you hear them over and over. You know, I've heard this. It's a pattern where they say, when I first started, I loved the company. I thought it was great. They welcomed me. You know, they told me all these benefits I would have. They told me I would be able to advance. And they're paying me fifteen an hour. And I feel great, you know, and the warehouse is incredible. Look at this huge place with all this technology. And then they get to a point over not that long, several months, a year, maybe two years, after a point, they start to just be horrified and realise that none of the things they were promised are coming true. They're not getting any of the benefits. As soon as they have any kind of like their ill, family members ill, there's a crisis, someone falls out with covid next to them standing shoulder to shoulder and they go and try to report it and they can't do it. And they're told, well, if you don't like it, you know, you can always leave.

Video clip, speaker 1 So my name is Cassandra. I work at one of the call centres for Amazon in Phoenix, Arizona. I've been with Amazon since I believe May, 2017. I know it will be my fourth year on May 27th with Amazon. My issues have stemmed around accommodation, accessibility for being disabled at Amazon and their lack of accommodation. Amazon is rather notorious for not accommodating people, but they've particularly dragged my case out for well over a year at this point because I first applied in October, 2019 for accommodation. And what ended up happening is my caseworker ghosted me, like would not communicate with me, would not send out the paperwork, by the time I got the paperwork, the appointments I could get for my doctor were in April 2020. What happened between October 2019 and April 2020? Pandemic. When I called the Employee Resource Centre, which is how you kind of set up everything and Amazon, how you get a hold of H.R., how you get to these workers for accommodation, how you get set up for family medical leave and all of that. But because they outsource their employee resource centre to Cairo and Cebu, they're not really trained and they only make about four dollars an hour. So what ended up happening was I called and they told me I should have called sooner and that I would have to contact my old caseworker, who I couldn't get a hold of, where I have to contact H.R. And H.R. is kind of notorious for leaving your tickets open for a month and then just closing them without solving anything. Basically, by the time I got it submitted, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. When I did have a healthy bench at work, like my heart rate would shoot up to one hundred and seventy and then drop down to 50 beats per minute. Kind of feel like I keep going back and forth between a heart attack and cardiac arrest. What would end up happening is I would have a panic attack and I wouldn't respond very well to people talking to me when this happened and I would get written up for behavioural issues, even though I was telling them that my heart rate was doing wonky things, skyrocketing and plummeting. They went out of their way to prevent me from even getting the accommodation paperwork put in. And they would also write me up and do performance plans every time I have a

health-related instance at work, including one instance where I started breaking out in full body hives because they had hazelnuts in the office, which I'm really, really allergic to. And the OM said even if I was going into anaphylaxis, he would not help me because epipens and benadryl are drugs, and you can't do drugs at work, but I'm more than welcome to leave and get a occurrence or write up through leaving work early, or I could stay and tough it out.

Video clip, speaker 2 My name is Connor. I am a former Amazon employee. I was hired by the company in August of 2017 at one of the fulfilment centres in New Jersey and then I was terminated in November of 2019. So I worked for the company for almost three years and my termination involved at the time I had a family member who was sick and I had to leave work to help take care of them. However, at the time it wasn't a blood-related family member, so Amazon's leave policy didn't cover that. It only covers if you have a family member who is related by blood. However, I spoke with my HR representatives at the site and they said they would approve a personal leave and I left the I left work for a few days. I was later informed by the company that due to the fact that I would be leaving during the peak season, they'd be unable to approve my leave. And I missed too many days of work, so they'd be firing me for a job abandonment. And during this whole process, I had to go back and forth with different teams and Amazon who are contradicting themselves. And I noted that during the whole time there was nobody in the company who their job was to act as kind of an employee advocate. Every H.R. representative, every team member I spoke to, their job was to minimise liability for the company. So there was nobody who was concerned with helping me keep my job. And it was at that time I realised that if Amazon had been unionised, at the very least, I would have somebody whose job it is to hear my side of the story and possibly help me keep my job during the situation.

Video clip, speaker 1 There's actually in the paperwork you sign when you get hired, a part about unions stating that they would prefer you not to unionise. And it goes against Amazon culture to unionise. They really do expect you to sacrifice your life for subsidising the Amazon dream. If they see that you are a problem in any way, whether you're asking for accommodation or you're pointing out the illegal behaviours that they are doing or you're trying to even talk about unionisation, they will isolate you and get rid of you so fast.

Ross What are the tactics that Amazon have used to prevent unions coming into existence?

Carolyn Steinhoff In Bessemer, Alabama, they had repeated multiple times a day, hourlong or more than hour long meetings, mandatory meetings for workers to hear talks by anti-union professionals, telling them they would have to pay dues, telling them that they would have to go on strike right away as soon as the union was voted in. Even if they didn't want to, they would lose their pay. They could get fired, that they didn't need the union because they have a wonderful direct relationship. They put stickers and posters around the facility, including in the inside of the bathroom door, the stall doors, laying out all the reasons why unions were bad and people were harassed by management. They have a whole training for management, which you can find. We see the video that they show training management how to talk to workers to discourage them. If they perceive any kind of union organising or sentiment in a worker, they immediately begin to have the management required to tell them that they shouldn't do it. They had a mailbox outside the facility that to mail your ballot to imply that they could surveil you if you did put your ballot into the box.

Ross It's all very Kafkaesque this, isn't it?

Carolyn Steinhoff Absolutely. Absolutely. They're amazingly brilliant at this kind of roundabout, circuitous, never overt tactics at every turn, in every way. The policies for the workers, where they officially have these fairly liberal policies. But then if the workers try to cash in at any point on sick leave or time off, they're sent through an incredibly elaborate run around to the point where they're then fired for violating some little rule that just got made up right at that moment. And the anti-union efforts, the union busting, was exactly like that also, yes - very insidious, very never overt.

Ross How would you begin to speak to management, though, and say, actually, you know, this ideological drive that you've got and we have in the UK that everything to do with unions is bad? How do you speak to the management and say to them, listen, actually people organising and being in a union, it means that their wellbeing starts to go up. It means that they can demand better pay. It means that their families are looked after in a better way. It means, holistically, we can really look after workers and actually they can come to the table and negotiate and then feel satisfied that they've got a good deal and go away and then we can run a happier ship?

Carolyn Steinhoff When I listen to you saying that, I'm trying to listen from the perspective of an Amazon, you know, like Bezos. I'm hearing in what you're saying from their point of view. And all of that is, like, exactly, that's why we need the union busters now, because everything you said is what they do not want. That's the anathema. That's their nightmare right there. So it's really about leveraging power. That's why the union is essential and that's the only way for workers to change the story, the picture, the situation, because in this extreme version of capitalism, with this incredibly powerful, dominant force from the top and these helpless, desperate workers barely surviving, it's about power. And the only power we have is in solidarity. But I believe what that solidarity is about more than anything is stopping, not continuing, to have that internalised acceptance of myself as a worker deserving this in some way.

Ross Carolyn Steinhoff, thank you very much for your time.

Carolyn Steinhoff Thank you so much.