

UNION FOCUS ON HOUSING AND HELP

The Union exists to struggle to overcome disability. In UPIAS terminology disability is defined as "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities. Physical disability is therefore a particular form of social oppression." (1) To overcome disability therefore, is to remove one form of social oppression.

It is usually the case that, the more severe the physical impairment, the more acute the oppression. Severe loss of bodily function means extreme difficulty in adapting to a world structured to serve and perpetuate the interests of our able-bodied oppressors. Many Union members are severely physically impaired and are particularly disadvantaged by the way our society organises its housing provision. If, in addition, a physically impaired person needs the help of another human being to survive then frequently the oppression we call disability can be seen at its worst. As we say in the Union Policy Statement "...the reality of our position as an oppressed group can be seen most clearly in segregated residential institutions, the ultimate human scrap-heaps of this society." (2)

We say this because our society has chosen not to organise secure housing and help arrangements within the community. Instead, the preferred option is the systematic segregation of dependent physically impaired people who have no means of support into a variety of State or voluntary run institutions. The legal, financial and social apparatus to facilitate this apartheid has its roots deep in the Poor Law and the passage of time has done little other than reinforce this oppression. It is a form of apartheid as inevitably propped up by the rigidity of its own paternalistic dogmatism as anything South Africa can produce.

The batteries of professional and other workers who have a vested interest in maintaining the momentum of our segregation have developed a firm grip on public attitudes - and the public purse. Those who choose to speak on our behalf, can only doublespeak as they slavishly submit to these interests. People like the former Minister for the Disabled can at once sponsor a legislative "new deal" for disabled people whilst at the same time releasing £5m for a crash building programme which has produced the worst crop of medically dominated institutions since the Victorian boom years - the "young chronic sick units". Arch segregationists like the Cheshire Foundation can glibly talk about integration here at home whilst providing the organisational base for the "spontaneous" spawning of more and more of their segregated asylums abroad. Bringing these vested interests to heel; ensuring that they can no longer carve fine careers for themselves off our backs, is one of the main tasks facing the disabled peoples' movement.

As we work together for integration, we must be unafraid to speak out clearly against our oppressors. Only we, who know the daily reality of disability can speak with the authority derived from direct experience. The forces ranged against us are well organised in the interests of the status quo. It is not in the interests of our society for the casualties of our system to be seen publicly on parade. Any attempt on our part to fight our way back on the same competitive, Darwinian terms would be to as much fail those who are presently able-bodied as we would fail ourselves. All of us are potentially if not actually physically impaired. We cannot afford, for anyone's sake, to allow disability to continue to be built into our social fabric.

To match the power of our oppressors, we have to organise our own strengths. This is what is happening with the formation of the British Council and with all the other national assemblies which together will form the Disabled Peoples' International. Collectively, disabled people throughout the world have the power to overcome the disability imposed on top of their impairments by able-bodied chauvinists. But this collective strength must be organised and harnessed. People like Leonard Cheshire can afford to claim to make a virtue of spontaneity in the unplanned growth of his segregated empire (3) but we cannot. He has a real choice as to where he might live - we do not. Unlike us, his survival does not depend on help with basic bodily functions. And yet he dabbles in that most fundamental area of our lives - accommodation and help - and speaks with authority in our name.

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The Union exists to struggle for the liberation of the oppressed... The Union exists to struggle for the liberation of the oppressed... The Union exists to struggle for the liberation of the oppressed...

It is usually the case that the more severe the physical impairment... It is usually the case that the more severe the physical impairment... It is usually the case that the more severe the physical impairment...

It is very difficult because our society has not yet provided... It is very difficult because our society has not yet provided... It is very difficult because our society has not yet provided...

The purpose of the organization is to provide... The purpose of the organization is to provide... The purpose of the organization is to provide...

It is our hope that the organization will be able to... It is our hope that the organization will be able to... It is our hope that the organization will be able to...

To make the power of our organization we have to organize... To make the power of our organization we have to organize... To make the power of our organization we have to organize...