

UNION OF THE PHYSICALLY IMPAIRED AGAINST SEGREGATION

AIMS

The Union aims to have all segregated facilities for physically impaired people replaced by arrangements for us to participate fully in society. These arrangements must include the necessary financial, medical, technical, educational and other help required from the State to enable us to gain the maximum possible independence in daily living activities, to achieve mobility, to undertake productive work, and to live where and how we choose with full control over our lives.

POLICY STATEMENT

1. DISABILITY AND SEGREGATION

Britain today has the necessary knowledge and the advanced technology to bring physically impaired people into the mainstream of life and enable us to contribute fully to society. But instead of the Country's resources being concentrated on basic human problems like ours, they are frequently mis-spent, for example, on making sophisticated weapons of destruction, and on projects like Concorde and Centre Point. So despite the creation today of such an enormous capacity, which could help overcome disability, the way this capacity is misdirected means that many physically impaired people are still unnecessarily barred from full participation in society. We find ourselves isolated and excluded by such things as flights of steps, inadequate public and personal transport, unsuitable housing, rigid work routines in factories and offices, and a lack of up-to-date aids and equipment.

2. There are a few individual examples of severely impaired people being able to overcome many of these barriers by the use of sufficient resources in the right way. They prove that integration is possible. But as a group we are still often forced to put up with segregated and inferior facilities. We get sent to special schools, colleges or training centres. We are systematically channelled into segregated factories, centres, Homes, hostels and clubs. If we do manage to become mobile, it is often in antiquated tricycles or specially labelled transport. All these segregated forms of help represented progress in years past. But since the means for integration now undoubtedly exists, our confinement to segregated facilities is increasingly oppressive and dehumanising.

3. RECENT ADVANCES

The struggles of disabled people and their relatives and friends, together with advances in technology and medical science, have it is true resulted in larger numbers of us participating more fully in ordinary society in recent years. Some of the barriers which segregate us have been partially overcome or dismantled. So a good proportion of people with paraplegia, or those who are blind, for example, have become able to work and to lead relatively active lives which would have been hard to imagine less than 50 years ago. These developments have meant a positive shift in the attitudes of some able-bodied people as they have responded to our presence amongst them.

4. Such advances show that general attitudes can be changed for the better. They also point to our increased participation in society as the principal means for achieving further change. But they cannot blind us to what remains the basic reality of the position of disabled peopleÆs as a group. This society is based on the necessity for people to compete in the labour market in order to earn a living. To the employer of labour, the physically impaired are not usually as good a buy as the non-impaired. We therefore end up at or near the bottom of this society as an oppressed group.

5. LOW BARGAINING-POWER

When we do succeed in getting employment, our comparatively low productivity means that we have low bargaining-power when it comes to negotiating decent treatment and facilities. Our position is similar to that of many people who are middle-aged or elderly, who have had break-downs, or are æmentally handicappedÆ, black, ex-prisoners, unskilled workers, etc. We are usually among the first to lose our jobs and be cast on the scrap-heap when it suits the æneedsÆ of the economy. If we are lucky we may be drawn in again, to do the worst paid work, when business starts to boom once more. If we are unlucky, then we could face a lifetime on the degrading, means-tested poverty line. If we are very unlucky we may be consigned to a soul-destroying institution.

6. INSTITUTIONS - THE ULTIMATE HUMAN SCRAP-HEAPS

The union of the Physically Impaired believes that 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. Thousands of people, whose only crime is being physically impaired, are sentenced to these prisons for life - which may these days be a long one. For the vast majority there is still no alternative, no appeal, no remission of sentence for good behaviour, no escape except the escape from life itself.

7. The cruelty, petty humiliation, and physical and mental deprivation suffered in residential institutions, where isolation and segregation have been carried to extremes, lays bare the essentially oppressive relations of this society with its physically impaired members. As in most similar places, such as special schools, there are some staff and volunteers doing their best to help the residents. But their efforts are systematically overwhelmed by the basic function of segregated institutions, which is to look after batches of disabled people - and in the process convince them that they cannot realistically expect to participate fully in society and earn a good living. This function was generally appropriate when special residential institutions first came into being, since in the competitive conditions of the time many physically impaired people could not even survive without their help. But now it has become increasingly possible for severely impaired people not just to survive, but also to work and become fully integrated, the need for segregated institutions no longer exists in the way it did. They have become seriously out of step with the changed social and technological conditions of Britain today.

8. SUPPORT FOR RESIDENTS' STRUGGLES

The Union of the Physically Impaired regards the neglected issues of institutions as of crucial importance in the field of disability. We therefore place great emphasis on supporting the struggles of residents in existing residential institutions for better conditions, for full control over their personal affairs, and for a democratic say in the management of their Home, Centre or Unit. The Union strongly opposes all attempts by the authorities to impose restrictions on visiting; to fix times for getting into and out of bed; to limit residents' freedom to come in and go out when they wish; to enforce medical and nursing opinions, or to transfer residents to other institutions against their will.

9. The Union sees a need for a Charter which will focus on basic rights often denied when people are dependent on others for personal needs. Disabled people living in institutions will be offered help if they wish to organise locally in defence of their rights. The Union will develop an advice and mutual-help service to assist with negotiations, formation of residents' committees etc. When asked, we will mobilise support and publicity on a national basis for those involved in particular struggles.

10. ALTERNATIVES NEEDED

The Union is opposed to the building of any further segregated institutions by the State or by voluntary organisations. We believe that providing adequate services to people in their own homes is a much better use of resources. We also call urgently for the provision of non-institutional

alternative housing, for example, along the lines of the Fokus scheme in Sweden, which makes genuine progress towards secure, integrated, and active living for disabled people who need extensive personal help. The Union will try to assist anyone who seeks to move out - or stay out - of an institution. But we fully respect the feelings of individuals who regard institutional life as their best solution at the present time. We understand also that some disabled people will disagree with our views on segregation, and we hope that they will organise to put forward their arguments too.

11. REAL CHOICE

The Union's eventual object is to achieve a situation where as physically impaired people we all have the means to choose where and how we wish to live. This will involve the phasing out of segregated institutions maintained by the State or charities. While any of these institutions are maintained at a huge cost, it is inconceivable that we will all receive in addition the full resources needed to provide us with a genuine opportunity to live as we choose. This point applies not just to residential homes, hospital units, hostels, villages and settlements, but also to other kinds of segregated facilities. As long as there are vastly expensive special schools, colleges and day-centres, heavily subsidised workshops and factories, and separate holiday camps and hotels, there can be no question of sufficient alternative provision being made to ensure that we all have a real opportunity of equal participation in normal educational, work and leisure activities.

12. DISABLEMENT OUTSIDE INSTITUTIONS

Our Union maintains that the present existence of segregated institutions and facilities is of direct relevance even for less severely impaired people who may expect to avoid having to use them. Those of us who live outside institutions can fully understand the meaning of disability in this society only when we take account of what happens to the people who come at the bottom of our particular group. Their existence and their struggles are an essential part of the reality of disability and to ignore them is like assessing the condition of elderly people in this society without considering the existence of geriatric wards.

13. It is also true that the kind of prejudiced attitudes we all experience - other people being asked if we take sugar in our tea is the usual example - are related to the continued unnecessary existence of sheltered institutions. Those who participate with us are indicating that they think we are not capable of participating fully and making our own decisions. They are harking back to the time when disabled people had to be sheltered much more, and they imply that really we ought to be back in our rightful place - that is, a special school, club, hospital unit, Home or workshop. Physically impaired people

will never be fully accepted in ordinary society while segregated institutions continue to exist, if only because their unnecessary survival today reinforces out of date attitudes and prejudices.

14. MEDICAL TRADITION

Both inside and outside institutions, the traditional way of dealing with disabled people has been for doctors and other professionals to decide what is best for us. It is of course a fact that we sometimes require skilled medical help to treat our physical impairments - operations, drugs and nursing care. We may also need therapists to help restore or maintain physical function, and to advise us on aids to independence and mobility. But the imposition of medical authority, and of a medical definition of our problems of living in society, have to be resisted strongly. First and foremost we are people, not æpatientsÆ, æcasesÆ, æspasticsÆ, the ædeafÆ, æthe blindÆ, æwheelchairsÆ or æthe sickÆ. Our Union rejects entirely any idea of medical or other experts having the right to tell us how we should live, or withholding information from us, or take decisions behind our backs.

15 We reject also the whole idea of æexpertsÆ and professionals holding forth on how we should accept our disabilities, or giving learned lectures about the æpsychologyÆ of disablement. We already know what it feels like to be poor, isolated, segregated, done good to, stared at, and talked down to - far better than any able-bodied expert. We as a Union are not interested in descriptions of how awful it is to be disabled. What we are interested in, are ways of changing our conditions of life, and thus overcoming the disabilities which are imposed on top our physical impairments by the way this society is organised to exclude us. In our view, it is only the actual impairment which we must accept; the additional and totally unnecessary problems caused by the way we are treated are essentially to be overcome and not accepted. We look forward to the day when the army of æexpertsÆ on our social and psychological problems can find more productive work.

16. THE RIGHT KIND OF HELP

We know that as a small, weak, minority group, disabled people cannot achieve a fully human life by their own efforts alone. We need and welcome the help of sympathetic able-bodied people. But the basic problem we face is our exclusion from full social participation. It follows that this oppressive situation can be put right only by disabled people actually taking a more active part in society. The efforts of professionals and other able-bodied people are therefore really constructive only when they build on and encourage the self-help and activity of disabled people themselves. This is

why our energies as a Union will be directed mainly towards discussion and common action with other disabled people. Neither we as a Union, nor able-bodied people, can solve other disabled people's problems for them. Those problems will be correctly tackled precisely to the extent that we all as disabled people become involved and active in our own rehabilitation.

17. THE NEED FOR A UNION

Disabled people everywhere are already struggling against their isolation, segregation and other forms of oppression. Every day each of us has to face our own individual problems. And we are now increasingly getting together in groups to tackle more effectively the problems we find we have in common. This is shown by the vast growth of disability organisations in the last 25 years in Britain. Our Union takes this process of coming together a stage further. We are not restricted to one aspect of physical disability (e.g. mobility or incomes), nor to people with one medical diagnosis, nor to those in one locality. The Union exists simply to offer help to all physically impaired people in the fight to change the conditions of life which oppress us and to realise our full human potential.

18. ACTION

Various kinds of action in support of disabled people's struggles will be undertaken by the Union as resources become available. Apart from publishing pamphlets and an open Newsletter, we will mount action campaigns on various issues. We will build up information and advice services, and organise financial, secretarial and other forms of practical assistance. For example, individuals may ask for help in fighting bureaucratic delays and inefficiency, or a refusal to provide equipment, aids or other kinds of service. Other people may want assistance in tackling organisations about the provision of ramps or lifts in buildings. Residents in institutions may seek help and national publicity if they are victimised by the authorities. People in sheltered workshops or centres may ask our support in their struggles to improve their appalling rates of pay. The Union will succeed only when it helps to achieve real benefits and improved conditions for disabled people.

19. GUIDELINES FOR ACTION

But our actions will become more effective if we make sure that we also learn from the practical struggles which take place. So an essential part of the Union's task is to develop increasingly clear guidelines for further action. We will not do this by careful discussion about what we and other disabled people are doing, and about the real nature of the problems we face at a particular time. We need to learn from our failures and successes, and

so develop arguments and a theory which have been proved to work - because they do actually bring about practical gains for disabled people. In this way the value of our practical experience will be multiplied many times over, as the essential lessons learned from it are made available to other disabled people now and in the future.

20. TERMS OF MEMBERSHIP

Full membership of the Union is open to residents of Britain who are significantly physically impaired and who accept the Policies and Constitution. Full members are expected to take some active part in Union affairs, since the Union is firmly based on the conviction that as disabled people we can only make real progress through actively struggling for change. Members will of course have different capacities at different times, and æactiveÆ here means at least some involvement in discussion of policy. We are sympathetic to the fact that some potential members may have problems of communication, and the Union will give encouragement and help in these circumstances. However, disabled people who feel they cannot at present contribute in this way may keep in touch by subscribing to our open Newsletter.

21. Able-bodied people who agree with the Union Policies and Constitution can become Associate members. Associate members may receive the internal Circular, the open Newsletter and other publications, and may take part in meetings, discussions and other events. But they are not entitled to vote on Union affairs, or may they hold any Union office. Genuine supporters will recognise the need for us to control our own Union and so develop our powers of decision, organisation and action. They will understand too, that since we experience daily the actual reality of disability, we are less likely than able-bodied people to be deceived about the true nature of our oppression and the radical changes necessary to overcome it.

22. OTHER OPPRESSED GROUPS

The particular forms which oppression takes in this society differ somewhat for each distinct oppressed group. Some, such as people who are called æmentally handicappedÆ, or those æmentally illÆ, clearly have a great deal in common with us. Full membership of our Union is however based simply on the fact of physical impairment. This is because we believe the important thing at the moment is to clarify the facts of our situation and the problems associated with physical impairment. But it is fundamental to our approach that we will seek to work with other oppressed groups and support their struggles to achieve a decent life. What all oppressed people share is a vital interest in changing society to overcome oppression, and the Union is therefore anxious to join in common action to achieve such change.

23. DEMOCRATIC CONTROL

Democratic control of the Union rests with all full members, and policy is decided on a majority basis after thorough discussion in a confidential Circular or at General Meetings. Full discussion of policy by members is necessary if we are continually to develop our action and thinking along the right lines. But once decisions have been made, members undertake not to oppose them publicly while they wish to remain in the Union. Both elements in this combination are regarded as essential for genuine progress - thorough internal discussion by members, together with a refusal to indulge in public criticism of Union policies.

24 Day-to-day decisions on Union affairs are in the hands of an Executive Committee, elected by, and responsible to, all full members. The Executive Committee holds the Union's funds. It arranges for the production of the internal Circular, the regular open Newsletter, and of occasional pamphlets and other publications. The Committee also speaks and acts officially for the Union on the basis of agreed policy. The overall task of the Committee within the Union is to facilitate the active participation and development of all members.

25. SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

Special-interest groups within the Union will be formed by members concerned with a particular aspect of disability. Examples may include residents' rights in institutions, incomes, employment, special education, provision of aids and equipment, housing alternatives in Britain and overseas, medical and technical research, rehabilitation. Within the general principles of the Union these groups will work out actions and ideas based on their special interests and experiences. Reports by them on particular topics will be published in the name of the Union from time to time.

26. FINANCE

All registered charities receive valuable tax concessions, but they are not allowed to campaign directly for political change. We regard political involvement as essential if disabled people are ever to make real advances. So in order to protect our independence of action we are not registered with the Charity Commissioners. Nor do we intend to appeal for funds publicly in the name of the Union. We believe the time has come for an organisation in the disability field which does not depend heavily on public fund-raising. We shall be free to speak and act on the basis of Union members' views

rather than those of financial supporters and noble patrons. Union expenses will be met by subscription, by donations, and by such means as the sale of literature.

27. OTHER DISABILITY ORGANISATIONS

The Union aims to ensure that all the organisations concerned with disability become fully democratic and responsive to the real needs and wishes of disabled people. We therefore seek a much greater say in all the organisations which affect our lives, both by Union members as individuals and by other disabled people. Any official Union representatives appointed to Committees of other groups will promote Union policies and report back regularly to members. In addition, the Union will keep a watchful, independent eye on the policies and practice of all disability organisations. We will try not to duplicate effort, and will welcome constructive comment and help from other groups. We will ourselves offer support and co-operation whenever possible. But the Union will not hesitate to speak out freely, and act independently, when we believe the interests of disabled people require it. It will be for disabled people as a whole to judge whether or not we are correct.

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