

A revolutionary group with a revolutionary message

(This article appeared in Greater Manchester of Disabled People's Magazine 'Coalition' (2001: pp. 22-30).

The importance of the ideas of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) to the disabled people's movement and wider politics is outlined in this script of a talk given by Judy Hunt. The talk was presented at a joint meeting of the Sue Napolitano Social Club and previous members of Big Flame, a revolutionary Socialist organisation.

OUR HISTORY- The start of the Union.

About a year ago we had a Big Flame reunion, and I was struck by the fact, that about half the small group of people gathered there, were working in some way to promote the integration of disabled people.

I thought, what a big contrast this was to the past. When I joined Big Flame back in 1981, the meetings used to be held in the upstairs of a pub, I remember the complete lack of comprehension when I raised my objections, pointing out that disabled people were being excluded from the meetings. The response was, something on the lines, that it was not a priority because we did not have any disabled members! There was at that time a complete lack of interest by the revolutionary left, Big Flame included, in the disabled people's movement that was then growing. What possible relevance could disabled people have in revolutionary politics?

This was, I believe, a serious error. Disability is highly relevant for socialists and particularly so now, as I shall try and explain.

The Back Ground

The term disability is a capitalist creation. Historically one can say that disability was used to define a category of people unable to work. Disability is about not having control over your life.

The disabled people's movement has been about reclaiming that control, about people having choice, about making your own decisions and realising your aspirations. The disabled people's movement, therefore, involves challenging the social culture that denies people rights of self determination and it's about being part of the mainstream of life.

I have been invited here today to talk about the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. An organisation that was disbanded in 1990. Why, 11 years later, have I been asked to talk about UPIAS? What did it achieve and why was it significant?

Starting the Union

UPIAS was founded in 1972. It was started by Paul Hunt when he wrote a letter to The Guardian inviting disabled people to join with him to form a group to tackle disability.

Before talking about UPIAS, I need to give you a bit of the background. Paul formed his ideas whilst living in an institution. He and other residents had been involved in a long and bitter struggle with the authorities over the right of disabled people to have control over their lives within the institution and for some representation on the management committee. They were ultimately successful and others followed their lead in other institutions.

However, the significance of this particular struggle, that was started by this group of residents at a place called Le Court; was that during the course of their struggle, he and others had already started asking some very fundamental questions about the helper/ helped relationship, and about the powerlessness that they were having imposed on top of their impairments, and about why this was the case.

Early days.

In 1970 Paul and I married, and we moved to London, and we became part of a lot of on-going campaigns, within the disability field; there were campaigns around poverty, struggling for integrated education, around housing support - which didn't exist - that was - for accessible housing with support in the community, about mobility and about employment and about access to further education. So there was quite a lot going on towards the end of the 60's and in the early 70's.

But becoming part of that, (in fact Paul had already become part of it a bit before he left Le Court), he already recognised that the lack of control disabled people had in society generally, was little different, from the powerlessness and dependence experienced in the institutions, so there was a connection there.

It was therefore from people at the most extreme end of powerlessness, one could say, in the institutions, that rather remarkably, an analysis started to be developed about the powerlessness of disabled people` in the much bigger institution, that of society.

However at that stage, in the 60's and early 70's, campaigning was primarily pressure group politics and single issue campaigns. Disabled people were in general not controlling them. There were some organisations in which disabled people, did manage their own affairs, but by and large they weren't controlling the organisations.

The First Meeting

And so Paul decided to invite disabled people to join with him to form their own organisation, to tackle disability in a more comprehensive and global way, and to also take up the issue of oppression of disabled people in institutions; an issue that was otherwise largely being ignored.

It was also about disabled people having an organisation which they could control.

It was therefore from people at the most extreme end of powerlessness, one could say, in the institutions, that rather remarkably, an analysis started to be developed about the powerlessness of disabled people in the much bigger institution, that of society.

The Beginning of the Social Model.

The group of people who responded to Paul's invitation, became UPIAS. Now what was unusual at this time, was that they decided to take some time, about 18 months, to discuss and consider disability before rushing into action, which was the more usual tendency. And so it was that UPIAS became the first disability liberation group in the UK, and one of the first in the world, and certainly the most advanced in the world.

What it had to offer disabled people was, an analysis of disability - fairly basic, but an analysis of disability in which they presented a new concept. They presented disability as a social relationship in which disabled people were oppressed. And in doing this they were overturning the concept of disability as basically a biologically determined condition.

They said that disability was something that could be challenged and eliminated. They were, as the name The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation suggests, in total opposition to Segregation, and not just "for Integration" which was already quite generally applauded. Lots of people were for Integration, but they came out and said "no, we're opposed to Segregation".

They put out a call for disabled people to take control of their own lives and emancipate themselves. They said that self-activity was the means by which disabled people would overcome their passivity and their dependence. And that was to be their route to emancipation.

They also recognised that disabled people as an oppressed group were not the only oppressed group in society, and that disabled people wouldn't emancipate themselves on their own, that they needed to ally themselves with other oppressed groups and struggle for a decent life for all.

The Wider Picture

Now I just want to put the union in context, because why, in 1972, did this group suddenly crop up, why did it occur? Clearly it was a period of growing social movements and ideas of emancipation were around, and they were picking up some of these ideas. But that wasn't the primary reason why it happened in disability.

Going back to the 1970s and before that, the fact was, that the society was systematically ghettoising disabled people into separate facilities. There was a whole programme of building residential institutions, special schools, sheltered workshops, special transport, separate social clubs, day centres etc.

So why and how had this come about? For the historical context for this we need to go back in time and see a progression from the "cripple" to the "disabled person" which was also the passage in time from feudalism to capitalism. And here I'm going to give you just a very very brief introduction to that history and process.

History of the Word "Disabled"

Going right back to the period of feudalism, people worked in the family units and work was much more homebased. Within that context disabled people had a much better chance of being able to work and of being part of the family unit. However, as mercantile capitalism developed and then industrialisation, what you had was the enclosures of the land, and people were forced to move around in search of work. Clearly disabled people become at a disadvantage in that. Another thing, I think we can say, is that the process of industrialisation meant standardisation. Standardisation of machinery, of buildings and so on. So not only did people have to search for work, by moving around, they had to fit into the work environment. And again, disabled people didn't fit in. So they were pushed out quite literally by the work environment. Additionally their numbers were being added to by the work environment for industrialisation was creating more disability.

Once disabled people had become legitimately unemployable, we then had a whole body of **professionalism** occurring with the development of the welfare state...

Segregation and Exclusion.

And so a large group of people were forced into begging, or forced to rely on charity, and eventually State charity for their means of survival.

Over the course of time, the State had stepped in and produced Welfare programmes to care for this group of people who were pushed out of work. That's when institutionalisation starts to creep in, towards the end of the 19th century. With institutionalisation you get the professionalisation of services. And progressively disabled people lost control of their lives.

So, what I want to say is, that by the time the social movement started in this country, there was a paradox for disabled people and there was also a conundrum for society.

The Medical Profession

If we take the conundrum first, in a way, within capitalist societies we could say that disability had represented the weak link in the chain of managing labour. Policing unemployment, and who could be financially supported by the State, had fallen to the medical profession. They became the authority for defining who was legitimately unemployable through sickness, who could be justified for Welfare support - as opposed to the rest of people who could have legitimate short periods of unemployment while they searched for work.

And with that medical authority, disability became annexed to sickness as a medical category, the term "chronic sick" was being used for long term disability. Once disabled people had become legitimately unemployable, we then had a whole body of professionalism occurring with the development of the Welfare state, and with that professionalisation came specialisation, and along with specialisation you had segregation.

This meant a major reconstruction of society. It meant that real integration was realisable, and it meant that segregation was now un-called for. It was like apartheid, it was oppressive.

So this had been the background for the reason why in the middle of last century, the 20th century, we had this whole programme of segregation building up, and it was building up very rapidly in the 60's and 70's.

So by this time, disability and physical impairment had come to be seen as the cause of disadvantage. They were the tragedies of society that needed to be cared for. What we could say was false consciousness, had taken over in people's minds.

Fighting Back

Now we come back to the union and why it was significant. It was significant because it actually tore away that mask of false consciousness, exposed it and exposed the real situation. UPIAS said physically impaired people were excluded because society had organised itself in ways that took no account of them, buildings and work routines were designed around able-bodiedness, and society had been made inaccessible.

In addition to that, they said however that the technological means now existed to reverse this situation, and this was the key. This was what in a sense became the material base for change. With electronics, computers and so on, the means to have access within buildings, and adapted cars to get around in, the means now existed for disabled people to become part of society. Therefore it wasn't disabled people who should adapt to fit into society, it was society that should adapt to include its disabled members.

This meant a major reconstruction of society. It meant that real integration was realisable, and it meant that segregation was now un-called for. It was like apartheid, it was oppressive.

Mixed Understandings

The other thing that was going on at this time was the paradox. The paradox facing disabled people was that one of the branches of professionalisation of medicine that had come in, was rehabilitation. Rehabilitation was training disabled people to be independent. However, the society was barring their independence, it was full of barriers.

So pressure groups had grown up to tackle these barriers. People were frustrated at the mismatch, their raised expectations were being frustrated.

Prior to the union then, consciousness was growing, a rights movement was growing, and aspirations were growing. But people were still dragged down by this false consciousness that said essentially that physical disability was unchangeable, you could modify society, you could do certain changes but actually there were still going to be many who were severely disadvantaged. And so to a large extent, a lot of struggles were for compensation for that condition.

The other thing that people focused on was why that was the case, why weren't people integrated? One of the things people picked on was social attitudes, if we could only educate people maybe they would include us. Maybe it was a psychological barrier and a whole branch evolved around raising social awareness.

Bringing it Together.

But the union said, that once disabled people had been removed from society, a medically biased ideology had developed which justified people's exclusion and segregation. It wasn't the attitudes per se, it was actually the process of being pushed out that created the social attitudes. It was the exclusion from the means to be economically independent, and it was exclusion from work that had produced a whole infrastructure of exclusion; with inappropriate housing, inaccessible transport and substandard education and so on.

It was far too challenging the idea that you could challenge the whole society to change, and it could be changeable.

Now professional workers by this time depended on disabled people's dependence. There was a whole infrastructure built on people's dependence, and to reverse this situation was going to be extremely expensive. So the union faced a very uphill battle at this point. They were a very small group, and they were facing a pervasive ideology, and all the vested interests of professionals, charities and legislators who were going to be resistant to their idea of change.

And they also had an uphill struggle against the false consciousness of disabled people who were resistant, who did not like the ideas. It was far too challenging - the idea that you could challenge the whole society to change, and that it could be changeable.

Spreading the Social Model

The breakthrough came in 1981, which was declared International Year of Disabled People, by the United Nations. By this time, the union had developed a political vanguard, and it took the lead to start to build a grassroots movement. What it did, was to invite the few national groups that then existed in the country, that were actually managed by disabled people, to come together to form a Council. This became the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People, or BCODP as it's known now.

When that happened, the union introduced the BCODP to the social definition as a working basis for the new Council and they accepted it, which was a major step. The same year, 1981, similar changes had been going on internationally and there was a move to form a disabled people's international. BCODP was able to send representatives to the inaugural conference, in Singapore, and one of the members who went was Vic Finkelstein. He was then chair of the BCODP but he was also a member of UPIAS. They took the idea of the social definition to the DPI, argued the case and won the battle to get the DPI to accept the social definition, rather than go back to the World Health Organisation's medical definitions.

This factor actually freed disabled people from being tied to the idea that their condition was fundamentally medically determined. They started looking at it as a socially determined condition, and this was the liberating factor.

So the movement now had its theoretical base, and it started to take off, and it certainly escalated. Lots of groups started to develop, in which disabled people took control of their organisations.

Arts and Culture

In due course, what we had then, was the rise of an Arts and Culture movement within the social movement, where people were developing a positive identity. There was also a whole movement to set up their own alternative services, to counter the dependency-creating professional ones, and a civil rights movement developed. So consciousness was growing, and spreading outwards.

Now we come back to the conundrum, because once disabled people are no longer prepared to be controlled, managing disability and unemployment enters a new phase, and I think that's where we are today. I think it's a big issue.

The Current Day

What we have, is the material and technological means for many many more disabled people to become employed. And we have New Labour's programmes to try to make that happen. However counter to that we also have globalisation, which is continuing the process of intensification of exploitation at a rapid rate, and there, disabled people are at a disadvantage.

In addition, we also have global capital programmes, particularly coming from America, to drive down Welfare programmes to maximise accumulation. And the drive is on individualisation, personalised responsibility and for people to take care of themselves. It's no accident that we now have anti-discrimination legislation. It's not the legislation people were arguing for, it's in fact about giving individuals some means to defend themselves within this competitive world we now live in, with the Market. It also makes a lot of sense why there's a lot more pressure on getting disabled people into employment, it is so they can have the means to support themselves.

Against oppression.

So just very briefly, to recap why UPIAS was important. It had been important for exposing disability as an oppressive relationship, and a power relationship of control. It was these ideas, taken on by the disabled people's movement, that became the important liberating factor in the movement. The disabled people's movement represents a social movement of the most oppressed, the most disadvantaged people in society, with potentially the least control. And there I would extend it, and argue there are parallels for people with learning difficulties, for people who've been through the Mental Health system, and for elderly people - groups who have also been pushed out of the mainstream.

I think that for socialists the disabled people's movement is in fact a very significant movement to take account of. I think it exposes the fundamental controlling aspects of capitalism in society. Disabled people have an inbuilt interest I would say, in seeing wealth redistribution, with a more equitable share-out of work, with flexible working hours, and reduced stress and pressure in work routines, so that more can take part. But they're not the only ones of course who would benefit from that.

I would say that the foundations laid by UPIAS, remains foundations for the movement, and they need development. I think we are very much at the bottom of the ladder, and it's a very long one

They also have an interest in a socialised medical service, and not one paid for by private insurance, for obvious reasons. They will find a private insurance system will not take them on, which is what disabled people are finding in America, a lot are left out in the cold.

Working Together.

I think disabled people have an interest in a mutually supportive society and not in an intensively competitive one, and again they're not the only ones who would benefit from that.

However, like other social movements, I think disabled people have been diverted into a predominantly civil rights defence movement within an atomised service culture. And I think this is dangerous, just to leave it at that. I mean, people do need the defence and it is necessary, but it needs more than that to be emancipated.

I would say that the foundations laid by UPIAS, remain foundations for the movement, and they need development. I think we are very much at the bottom of the ladder, and it's a very long one.

Just to finish off, I think the next phase of the struggle is for disabled people to enter the mainstream and fight along with other oppressed groups, I think that's where we are today. I think disability politics can inform those struggles, from its particular aspect of knowledge and experience.

And so I would end by saying that although the union disbanded 11 years ago, its lessons are as relevant today as they ever were. It was a revolutionary group, with a revolutionary message and one which I think we're only just beginning to appreciate now.

UPIAS material can be found on the Leeds University Disability Studies Archive website at www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies