

In September 2009 Unite the union ordered the Latin American Workers Association (LAWAS) without notice to vacate the office which it had provided the Association with in its southeast region HQ in Manor House, thus ending a five year partnership. This followed an organised campaign by officials against LAWAS, because of the latter's support for an unofficial dispute and support for undocumented workers. But what was the background to this breakdown in the relationship, and the closure of this well known point of contact between latino workers and the trade union movement, and what is the future for LAWAS?

Firstly , some history

LAWAS was reformed in 2003 by Ernesto Leal, Julio Mayor and other Latin American workers in London, many of them political exiles and trade unionists in their own countries. It was in fact the second incarnation of the Association as the first version existed in the 1980s, which is a story for another day. The aim was to address directly the exploitation and abuses faced by Latin American workers in London, and to link these workers to the broader working class movement.

The new LAWAS operated out of cafes and park benches and temporarily in a community centre in Dalston, before being offered a more permanent home by various organisations including Unite (then the T&G), whose offer was accepted in mid-2004. Thus began the partnership. LAWAS was supported by Unite with office space and volunteer expenses, but maintained an independent existence and was never part of Unite's democratic structures.

From its small room in Unite's Manor House offices LAWAS combined advice and representation by workers for workers with a huge union recruitment drive, of which Unite was the main beneficiary with new members running into four figures, concentrated above all in contract cleaning. Word was spread through a publicity drive in the Latin American community taking in radio, newspapers, churches, embassies, public meetings and festivals like the annual Carnival – all of which are still key points of contact with the community. Email bulletins to the ever growing list of members and supporters became and still are a key tool of communication. Some coverage was achieved in British left media, but in the words of a Unite organizer assigned to working with LAWAS, its work was largely 'under the radar' of the union. The response of the community was overwhelming, and LAWAS became known colloquially in the community as the 'sindicato latino'.

At the same time the Justice for Cleaners (J4C) campaign was getting into gear and LAWAS's efforts fed into that, as a majority of the workers who approached LAWAS worked in this sector. A good working relationship was developed with individual J4C organisers and activists in activities which ranged from English classes to organizing buildings, and in general promoting J4C in the Latin American community. Indeed LAWAS's first office volunteer, Jose Vallejo, was recruited within a year by J4C. IN 2007 the J4C organisers branch made a sizeable donation to LAWAS in recognition of its support, especially in union recognition fights and organising the first 'papers for all' march. On the surface LAWAS was a success story which the T&G/Unite was happy to sell and did so, both inside and outside the union.

However, for the many latino cleaners who joined Unite but did not work in the buildings targetted by J4C it was almost impossible to take part in their new union. Lacking a functional branch, LAWAS became their de facto 'branch', but this put LAWAS under an intolerable strain as it lacked the normal facilities of a branch, and because the union often would not assist when collective issues and organising opportunities presented themselves: the National Physical Laboratory and the BBC being just two examples. Where possible these workers and LAWAS did what they could alone. But without organisational backup this was difficult. It often felt like LAWAS was just there to increase membership numbers and take the strain alone of new members with all their problems.

In these circumstances LAWAS made it a priority to educate its new union members. For a long time it was unable to get serious union support despite repeated efforts, so it organised its own English and workplace rights classes, both alone and in conjunction with the College of

North East London (CONEL) and the London Coalition Against Poverty - activities which continue to this day. Finally, thanks to pressure from both LAWAS and key J4C organisers, Unite arranged a pilot English course. LAWAS made this possible by supplying a professional volunteer teacher and enough students to make the pilot project such a success that a large scale programme of education in basic skills was then laid on for cleaners. This programme is now a major showpiece of Unite's educational work.

A similar process happened when a pilot immigration law course were arranged by the Migrant Rights Network for Unite activists following immigration raids. LAWAS drew on its pool of Latin American activists to provide half the students and interpreting for the Spanish speakers. Again, the success of the pilot course led to it being invested in and rolled out nationally.

Links were also forged with the hospitality and domestic workers branches of T&G/Unite; with a host of Latin American solidarity and community groups which evolved into the Coordinadora Latinoamericana; and with other unions such as the CWU and RMT, and TUC initiatives such as the Vulnerable Workers Project. Joint Employment Tribunal work was carried out with community law centres in cases where union lawyers or officers had failed to support members, on one well known occasion because they didn't grasp the legal issues facing migrant workers This was not just an issue with Unite.

In 2008 LAWAS gave unconditional support to a number of inspiring cleaners' campaigns both inside and outside J4C. A public meeting in Elephant and Castle at the end of the year organised by LAWAS and other groups brought together a number of these previously isolated campaigns. A grassroots reinstatement campaign for 5 Colombian cleaners sacked for circulating a leaflet at the National Physical Laboratory (NPL) was in full swing, and was important as the first recent example of a campaign driven by Latin American workers. Those workers as well as others from Schroders Bank, and SOAS spoke of their experiences in struggle. Some raised criticisms of the ways union officials had handled their disputes. But as the Bolivian UCU activist who chaired the meeting stated at the end "despite the criticisms we are not anti union, because we are the union".

The issue of immigration checks and raids was a constant theme at the meeting, as a means by which companies and the government itself were intimidating workers who organised. Unite Regional Industrial Organizer (Jose Vallejo) turned up to make the case for supporting the Strangers into Citizens campaign for a limited amnesty, while the majority present advocated a 'papers for all' position which would not preclude critical support for the upcoming Strangers into Citizens march. Shortly afterwards his boss, regional secretary Steve Hart, in a sign of things to come, warned one of the sacked NPL cleaners that their campaign was being backed by 'extreme groups'. Needless to say, Unite made no effort to support the NPL cleaners campaign beyond the strictly and legally necessary, despite pickets taking place within walking distance of their national headquarters. Was this related to the fact that one of the cleaners main grievances before being sacked had been the use of an immigration raid to break their incipient organisation?

In 2009 official indifference turned into extreme hostility triggered by two issues: LAWAS's support for sacked cleaners at the Willis building in the City of London, and its ongoing commitment to a full regularization of undocumented workers.

In January 2009 a series of unofficial weekly protests by a shop steward and three workmates from the J4C campaign began, after they had been sacked by cleaning contractor Mitie at global insurance giant Willis in the City. The sackings were framed as redundancies after the company awarded the Living Wage but counter-attacked as elsewhere by drastically altering shift times, cutting personnel and smashing union organisation in the process. Union leaders argued they had done all they could and it was the workers fault a deal was not sealed. They disowned the protests, afraid of 'damaging the good relations with Mitie', as one official put it. The workers felt let down and said so publicly after the union withdrew all support. But from then on they concentrated their fire on the two companies, despite legal threats. Other cleaners flocked to the protests, including other ex Willis workers who had found work elsewhere but supported their colleagues' plight.

After four months LAWAS and the Coordinadora Latinoamericana forced a meeting with the Regional Industrial Organiser, in which the official pledged to try and open up a new space for negotiation with the employer, presumably making the most of the good union-employer relationship to find four appropriate. At the end as people packed up to leave, the official proposed a trade off for the support offered, whereby the Latin American groups supporting the Willis cleaners would support the May 4 march for a limited amnesty. Suspecting there was more to this, the groups present argued this was a separate issue and should be dealt with as such.

The offer of support was then quashed in a letter then sent by Assistant General Secretary Jack Dromey to the cleaners involved, which reiterated that no support would be given and making no mention of the aforementioned meeting. In response to this a petition with four hundred signatures of trade unionists was raised at union and community events and branch meetings, and publically presented at Unite's central office in Holborn. Among the signatories were dozens of union cleaners as well as as MPs John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn, and film director Ken Loach.

When the petition was presented those present were filmed and photographed by a sidekick of the regional industrial organizer, until he was confronted and stopped from doing so. This was the first sign of a vicious organised public campaign driven from the highest reaches of Unite, initially against the Willis cleaners and ultimately against LAWAS and indeed any critical voices. Leading the attack was the Regional Secretary supported by the likes of Women and Equalities Officer Teresa Mackay (ironic for a dispute involving mainly ethnic minority women) and their internal allies such as the Regional Industrial Organizer.

Unite officers went into overdrive to convince J4C branch committee members and the wider union, using highly confrontational language to suggest the workers involved were the main enemy: "people need to decide whose side they are on" wrote Hart in a briefing, contrasting the "mass of the cleaners" with "tiny groups seeking to undermine our united campaign". And yet when Willis shop steward Edwin Pazmino presented himself as a candidate to the cleaners branch committee at its first ever elections, he gained a credible 29 out of 80 votes, despite never being informed of the meeting unlike other candidates, who were able to campaign beforehand. And if one thing characterised the Willis protests, and previous disputes led by Latin American workers, it was the solidarity of cleaners from different companies, as reported in the Morning Star throughout the long course of the dispute.

A leaflet was produced in the name of Justice for Cleaners and distributed by officers, despite not being approved by the new branch committee and certainly not its Latin American cleaner members, who along with many ordinary members almost unanimously supported the Willis cleaners. The leaflet trumpeted J4C's successes in organising and education. This was ironic, because it was people like the Willis cleaners, and their supporters in LAWAS and elsewhere who had done so much over the years to create these successes in the first place. Instead fellow official and Regional Industrial Organizer Jose Vallejo was lauded to the point of featuring a colour photo of him on the leaflet, along with members of a youth group hired to wave Justice for Cleaners flags. The 'four cleaners and their handful of supporters' were described as leading a 'scurrilous campaign' which did not have the support of the majority of branch members – an allegation contradicted by the support actually received.

In another incident, a Unite branch which tried to speak about the dispute was silenced at a regional meeting of the 'United Left' faction of Unite, to the disgust of many of those present. At a public meeting later organised by the Labour Representation Committee, fellow trade unionists from Unite, Unison and RMT proposed mediation in the presence of Unite officials, and supported by speakers John McDonnell MP and NUJ president Jeremy Dear. The proposal was ignored.

Why the ferocity of the attacks? This was not the first time union members had criticized official positions, held unofficial protests or presented a petition. The problem was that Justice for Cleaners was a flagship campaign controlled from the very top since its inception, and

image meant everything. While criticisms and unofficial actions were had to be tolerated in sections of the union with a longer history, this new campaign had to be tightly controlled, and if that meant crushing internal dissent by any means necessary, then so be it. They chose to forget the basic point that it is workers who make campaigns, not officials, and sometimes, unfortunately, workers will take their own initiative and also be critical.

The other issue which Unite could not tolerate was LAWAS' support for papers for all undocumented workers. Only two years previously LAWAS had worked closely with J4C organisers on this basis. Now however the official position had changed and dissenting voices again could not be tolerated. On the May 4 amnesty march organised by the Strangers into Citizens, LAWAS and other groups in the Coordinadora raised the slogans of 'no one is illegal' and 'papers for all'. Incidentally among these other groups were the UK branch of Colombia's main opposition party (Polo Democratico) and the main Bolivian and Ecuadorian community groups mobilizing diaspora support for left wing governments in their countries - MERU and Bolivia Solidarity Campaign). Hardly extremists!

In May LAWAS representative Miguel Puerto asked to meet the Regional Secretary Steve Hart in order to find a solution to the Willis dispute. Instead he was met in worst company management style by not one but three officials including Hart, who instead of entering into a positive dialogue launched an all out attack on LAWAS for its support for the Willis cleaners and its behaviour on the amnesty march.

Worse was to follow. Around the same time LAWAS and J4C activist Alberto Durango was arrested in a trap sprung by his employer Lancaster, a tactic used on other migrant workers previously. They were unhappy with his recent activism at the bank. But police and UKBA officials also asked him about his employment at Willis - despite the fact he didn't work there. But Durango and Schrodgers cleaners' public support for the Willis dispute made them think he did. This raised the spectre of a blacklist among cleaning companies. Durango was freed without charges and dismissed. And yet when a picket was held outside the appeal against his dismissal, at which he was represented by a Unite lay representative, his union reacted by ordering an 'investigation' into him and, on Vallejo's orders, refusing him access to educational courses! Six months later there has been no result of this mysterious investigation, nor a lifting of the ban.

Vallejo then went further by claiming at the cleaners branch committee that those involved in cross-union protests against recent immigration raids at both the Willis building and SOAS (University of London), were being sponsored by the cleaning companies themselves. Apparently other unions (Unison and RMT) were "approaching and dealing with the companies before organising their members" and that "the so-called Cleaners for Justice called the members to disobey and as a consequence some were arrested facing deportation. We should ten [sic] have every reason to believe that the organisers of this campaign, Cleaners for Justice are paid by the Cleaning Bosses to attack the cleaners."

It should be noted that Cleaners for Justice has never existed beyond being a slogan used by sacked Unite cleaners to express their desire for a cross-union cleaners campaign, with the workers themselves in the driving seat. This is an ideal which LAWAS has always supported, in place of the foolish competition which led, for example, to Unite not supporting cleaners strikes on the underground in 2008 but then publically claiming the credit for the successes of the strikes while offering no solidarity to those victimised through immigration arrests and the like as a result.

Unite then moved to force LAWAS out of its office. At the start of the year he had presented a relative of his to LAWAS as a new office volunteer. LAWAS accepted in good faith. But it soon became clear that this relative wanted nothing to do with LAWAS and instead was there to act as Vallejo's personal secretary. LAWAS then put forward a new volunteer of its own, as had always been the custom, but was prevented from doing so by the Regional Secretary. Instead the family member came to work an increasing number of days in the office. Volunteers were paid 'loss of earnings' at around \$65.00 a day once they had completed some basic training, but the monies paid to her were never revealed by the union despite requests by LAWAS. This

stood in complete contrast to the rule enforced by Unite officials for five years whereby volunteers had to sign one and the same weekly expenses form for each day of work.

LAWAS held off by making a public statement about all of the above so as not to prejudice Juan Carlos Piedra, a LAWAS and J4C activist who after intense pressure from many quarters had succeeded in getting Unite representation after being sacked for union activity from his job at University College London. Instead LAWAS sought as always to resolve its problems with Unite by requesting another meeting with the Regional Secretary, and was about to do so but was pre-empted. Firstly, Vallejo took control of the volunteer rota on the basis that LAWAS had been advising workers to join other unions. A ridiculous allegation, because workers simply been advised in LAWAS's bulletins to join the union which corresponded to their workplace or occupation – as previously instructed by Unite officials! Still, LAWAS continued publicizing Unite and recruiting into it far more than into any other union. A week later regional secretary Steve Hart, sensing perhaps that a scandal might be on the cards, ordered LAWAS out of its office without notice. Even after that move a meeting was requested to address the situation, but to no avail.

And so an era has ended. But despite the problems, the last year has been a very positive one for LAWAS. The campaigns it supported breathed new life into the organisation and won it many friends across different unions and in the Latin American community. As a result the annual assembly held in August 2009 was the largest ever and a new committee was elected which for the first time represented almost all the main Latin American nationalities resident in London. With its new temporary premises in the National Union of Journalists, it is up to that committee and all Latin American workers to secure the future. This means fighting inside unions, including Unite, so they are led by the members, and joining with workers of all nationalities and backgrounds in doing so. It means working with those officials who are not corrupt and self-serving, and unmasking those who are. And it means recognising the achievements of struggles, but also preserving the right to criticize aspects of these and act independently when necessary.