

STRUGGLE UNIONISM VERSUS THE CLEAN START CAMPAIGN

Don Franks *The Spark* 17 August 2006

Clean Start is a union campaign claiming to improve commercial cleaners' lives by signing building owners up to a set of 10 Principles. Funded by a million dollar United States union donation, the international campaign is operated in New Zealand by the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU).

A *Spark* article of mine, "Clean Start or dirty deal", started a debate about this campaign. I argued that "as it presently stands, Clean Start appears as little more than an offer to help discipline the workforce in exchange for companies' agreement to carry out their legal obligations under the Employment Relations Act" (*Spark*, 15 May 2006).

"Clean Start or dirty deal" was reprinted in the *Workers Charter* paper's June issue. The following *Workers Charter* paper carried two feature articles in support of Clean Start and five letters on the subject, two supportive of the *Spark* article and three against. In addition, SFWU Clean Start campaign organiser Kirsty McCully emailed me her unofficial personal opinion.

Not one of these letters or articles in support of Clean Start addressed the specific complaints of "Clean Start or dirty deal", which homed in on

Clean Start Principles 7, 8 and 9.

Principle 7 is a union office promise to moderate future wage demands: "Unions will consult with any owners who adopt the principles about proposed collective bargaining outcomes to determine their financial impact and agree on any necessary phasing in of cost increases so as to minimise the cost to those owners." Principles 8 and 9 are union office-imposed restrictions on rank and file strike action: "Unions will consult with owners prior to taking any action against a contractor" and "will establish a procedure for the binding settlement of disputes."

Instead of addressing these unpleasant facts, Clean Start defenders took refuge in generalities and rhetoric. SFWU secretary Jill Ovens claimed that Clean Start principles are "a tool around which cleaners... can raise common issues such as low pay, heavy workloads, lack of job security and insufficient hours to make a living." She then signed off her letter, "But at the heart of the campaign is a universal message - cleaners demand justice and respect! They should be supported by those of us on the left."

Clean Start Principles 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 10 are preoccupied with cleaning standards, tenant satisfaction, labour efficiency and staff training. Neither they nor any other of



the 10 Principles address cleaners' justice and respect, or other workers' issues listed by Jill.

SFWU organiser Jen Natoli wrote: "Mr Franks should get the whole picture before he discounts one of the most ambitious global campaigns for cleaners in decades". Jen explained that "The brochure Mr Franks read uses less militant language, to appeal to the broadest base of 'business types'. We make our strategic plan by starting with low level actions that appeal to the widest group and then escalating our militancy throughout the campaign." How "business types" have suddenly become "the broadest base" and how a document which appeals to them also helps the low-paid workers they exploit Jen Natoli does not make clear.

Socialist Worker member Grant Brookes' "Justice for Cleaners" was the only *Workers Charter* paper comment which tried defending any particular Clean Start Principle. Grant claimed:

"[Clean Start] Principles include the requirement for contractors to provide pay and conditions 'which reflect the industry standard' and not to undercut each other in a race to the bottom."

Clean Start Principle 5 says that contractors "should" make such provisions, but does not mention undercutting. However, no Clean Start Principles "require" contractors to do anything.

While Clean Start "(aims) to set a fair but commercially sensible benchmark for the whole industry" not even that modest prize is guaranteed. Clean Start emphasises that its Principles "are not a contract enforceable by either party or any third party". It's a strange kind of "socialist" who suggests to workers that this empty lawyers' talk is a plus for them.

SFWU Clean Start campaign organiser Kirsty McCully wrote to me:

"Cleaners can't win a big fight like the fight for pay parity unless they unionise more of their sector, mobilise their communities and become more confident and organised. Clean

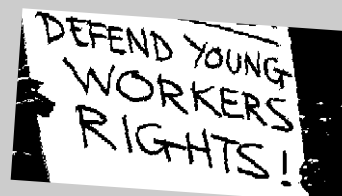
Start is intended as a step in that direction - it's an attempt to bulk up the union so that it has the muscle to fight for bigger and better things in the future."

I replied: "I had a very brief conversation about these issues with Wellington SFWU organiser Alistar Duncan, who made the same sort of point. I agree that greater union density is a critical need. But you don't bulk up muscle by lying down. To make concessions in the hope that the boss will think you are harmless does not build up an army. What it does build up is a legal and ideological relationship of 'partnership' that will tie your hands in future struggles. The very real concessions of the Clean Start principles are barriers to wage rises and rank and file action; they will come back to haunt the union signatories.

"The literal bulking up of muscle involves a degree of

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pain and risk. The history of the labour movement from the Tolpuddle Martyrs onwards suggests that, like it or not, union gains invariably exact a similar price. As can be seen in recent fast food industry struggles, its possible to build up union organisation without making Clean Start type concessions to the enemy." □

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