**Disability – A Capitalist By-Product**

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**This article was first published in Issue Number 98 of the newspaper ‘Big Flame’ in September 1981 (Pages 8-9)**

As physically impaired people, we are now ready to challenge the able-bodied myths and falsehoods about our disability. This article is a contribution to that struggle.

You, the reader, have been bombarded with contemporary social thought (particularly from the medical quarter) which portrays disability as the misfortune of certain unlucky individuals. Because of physical impairments, we are told, people are poor, jobless, dependent on charity and unable to take a fully active part in life. In the course of this short article we hope to show how this is just as false an interpretation of the facts about us, as it is false to lay the cause of women’s oppression within their bodies or the cause of black people’s oppression in the colour of their skins. People’s bodies are not the cause of their oppression.

To understand how physically impaired people have come to be an oppressed and distinctive group, and how our experience has led to a group consciousness of disability, we have had to trace the origins of our oppression and do our own analysis of current social conditions which oppress us, but also point the way to our emancipation.

When we look back at our history we see disability as a product of the capitalist mode of production. Capitalism has not only impaired a vast number of human bodies in its hunger for profit, but also disabled those that it has damaged. The history of capitalism has been one of ever increasing centralisation and intensification of production, in this process the small unit of production was outmoded and replaced by large units using standardised tools and machinery with labour subject to the demands of capital – long hours, working at high speed, travel to and from work and having to move around the country to find employment. The form of social organisation which was centred around production for profit excluded people with physical impairments from the labour process. Unemployed, we were cast onto the scrap heap and forced to be dependent on charity, whether privately or state endowed, for our means of subsistence.

One of the consequences of forced exclusion from employment has been the development of separate and special facilities for ‘the disabled’. Britain has, in the last forty years, rapidly advanced the segregation of physically impaired people. We now experience segregated schools, workshops, housing and care in institutions, transport, clubs, social facilities, and sports. In other words, a whole system of ‘separate development’ has been created – in short, apartheid. An important accompaniment to this process has been the growth of a whole new strata of professionals to take care of our special needs, people with a vested interest in maintaining our dependence on them – the disabling professionals.

A product of herding people together is the growth of a common identity of experience between the members of the group. Not all physically impaired people are forced to experience all forms of segregation – but most will experience some form of it at some time in their lives. It nevertheless forms a fundamental substrata of our existence, it threatens in the background should we fail to manage on our own, and it fertilises a subculture of dominantly patronising and devaluing attitudes that persist throughout our relationships with able-bodied people.

At the same time as the system of segregation was being created, enormous advances in technological developments were being made for capitalist exploitation. For us, the new technology has particular significance: it opens the way to a massive increase in our potential, holding the key to solving many of our problems and our liberation. But the technology that can integrate and liberate is the very same as that which keeps us, along with many others, out of work, dependent on charity, and segregated. The contradiction that is exposed between what is potentially possible and our actual experience has led to our raised expectations, and heightened our consciousness about our situation.

During the late 1960s and early 70s there was a significant upsurge in the level of agitated discussion and activity amongst physically impaired people. It was a period of change, of growing awareness and rising militancy amongst various groups including black people and women.

It was a period when more and more of us were openly identifying ourselves as disabled people and demanding change. Within a climate of post-war prosperity, many of us and our families were living in relative poverty and unnecessary hardship. In a spontaneous reaction, the Disablement Income Group (DIG) was formed to demand much greater financial help from the state. The organisation had massive support amongst physically impaired people and our friends, and with its formation hopes were raised high. In due course, it became apparent to some that our raised expectations could not be met by DIG’s type of struggle: it’s spontaneous appeals for state charity bore little fruit, and the 1970 CSDP Act[[1]](#footnote-1) which had been seen as our charter of rights had done little to change anything. The collective will of disabled people still lacked cohesion and clear direction.

In the early ‘70s, members of DIG were asking why so little headway had been made towards getting a National Disability Income (NDI) and why the grassroots membership were excluded from the preparations of proposed incomes schemes. What arose were two breakaway tendencies. The one to apply greater expertise to the struggle for an NDI which became the Disability Alliance – a body of professionals and ‘experts’ which dispensed with the mass (cumbersome) membership of disabled people. The other tendency was for a ‘consumers’ organisation of physically impaired people to build a united struggle, and which was fundamentally opposed to the creation of an organisation around any single issue. This tendency became the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). The Union, in contrast with the Alliance, set itself to analyse our current condition, at all times recognising the need to encourage disabled people to become active participants in their own struggle for social change.

From its planned approach, the Union developed an understanding of the social origins of disability. It follows from our analysis, for instance, that poverty does not arise because of our physical inability to work and earn a living, but because we are prevented from working by the way work is organised. To put our main energies into a struggle for state charity, rather than for integrated employment, would therefore only entrench our disability further.

Disabled people have to develop their own autonomous movement. This process has begun and needs to be taken account of by people on the left developing a strategy for liberation. Our struggle against disability has to be a broad-based one, against all forms of exclusion and segregation, forming alliances with other oppressed groups with whom we share a common interest in bringing about fundamental social change to free us from the double yoke of exploitation and oppression.

1. The Chronically Sick and Disabled Person’s Act (1970) was a law drafted by the Wythenshawe MP Alf Morris, with help from members of DIG and disabled activists in the Labour Party. Morris’s original version of the law argued that disabled people should have the right to services which helped them to live in the community rather than be forced into institutions, and that they should have a say over what new services local councils should invest in. The Labour Government, led by Harold Wilson and Richard Crossman, were eventually forced to pass the Act, but not before Crossman and his colleagues in the treasury had removed all the spending commitments from it. Without any money to pay for new community services, and with no way for disabled citizens to force their council to provide them, the Act was more or less ignored in most of the country – DPA Team. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)