

Bourne toWrite...

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The Union

by Sue Hitchcock

“Friends, comrades, this is an important time for you to join the Union!” This was not a flat-capped factory worker in the nineteen thirties. This was the nineteen eighties and Rob was a small, red-haired, bearded man, most likely a friend of Jeremy Corbyn, who was a counsellor in the neighbouring borough of Islington. “As office workers your jobs are vulnerable. Computers are coming and they will take over your work. The management will be ruthless making redundancies – probable on a last in, first out basis. I know they always offer the bribe of promotion, but it's every man for himself where they are concerned. Our Union is planning to merge with the Transport and General Workers Union, which will make us stronger. Nobody likes to lose pay by striking, but the threat of it is our main weapon. Join us now and safeguard your jobs!”

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I belonged to the Union and had found Rob helpful when, as a first aider, I worried about the safety of continual computer work. Two women, both coincidentally called “Shirley” worked as data-input clerks, spending many hours on the computer. Within a year of each other, both suffered disasters with their pregnancies. One had a stillbirth and the other had a profoundly disabled child. Rob had liaised with various investigating bodies, although with no legal redress resulting.

Nevertheless, I felt his image of our changing world was faulty and in practice our management resolved the redundancy problem by moving premises, so that an hour's travel each way was added to our day. Needless to say, people resigned of their own accord.

Unions, devised to protect workers in a newly industrialized world, were not fitted for the computer age. Did workers want to continue with the drudgery a machine or computer could do? Ordinary people needed a livelihood and a meaningful life.

Although a machine or a computer is more reliable than a person, a capitalist needs people to whom he can sell his goods. Shopping became a *raison d'etre*. Then protection money became popular – protect your life, your house, your car, your pet, your holiday. Are we so risk averse? We can't know the future so make hay while the sun shines