

Blindcraft – what now?

by Hannah Lister

✘ The 18th of November now seems like a lifetime away after the hype and bustle of Christmas and Hogmanay, but for the 53 employees at Edinburgh's Blindcraft factory, the day is one they are likely to reflect on with bitter-sweet memories. After months of tough Trades Union negotiations with a deficit-ridden Edinburgh Council, and both a virtual (through a petition) and a street-based media campaign spearheaded by my friend Janis McCulloch and me, a victory of sorts was found at the eleventh hour at The City of Edinburgh Council's November meeting. The workers, who have been on a rollercoaster ride of uncertainty for a long time, did their best to 'celebrate' as a three day week and massive 40% pay reduction was reluctantly accepted by the workers and agreed by both sides.

Yet, here they are two months later, stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea. The workers have been told they are to decide whether:-

1. To accept a contract that will trigger the three day working week for a 6 month period, but which will then lead to any redundancy pay calculated after that being based on the three day week.

Or

2. They do not accept the new contract, thus allowing them to take the redundancy pay they should rightly be entitled to whenever they have to take redundancy, and then face closure of Blindcraft again- this time, I fear, for good.

Arguably, this situation is reflective of similar situations across the country, as the recession continues to bite in particular those who have worked the hardest throughout their

lives. So why should Blindcraft be exempt from cuts you may say?

The answer to that lies in the history of Blindcraft, and the work that has been generated by this 200 year-old institution which deserves to be treated with respect. Its workforce has diminished over the years through various unfair cuts – but its principle and its place in our Edinburgh community very much remains intact. It has a fantastic history of giving those who would find it otherwise near impossible to work a ‘hand up’.

The workers are very much a community; people who work hard at their job and never sit about feeling sorry for themselves because of their disability. True, Blindcraft is a business in its own right and should be run as such. But, it is more than a business- it’s a way of life for those who are otherwise going to be confined to a life on the scrapheap.

Make no mistake. The Council will not be able to find 53 jobs for these workers elsewhere during a recession, despite promising to ‘help’ them through retraining. Talk about adding insult to injury. The workers don’t need retraining- they need good leadership and guidance to preserve this fantastic business that makes brilliant quality beds. It needs guidance in expanding its range of products, marketing them properly and most of all, it needs the Council to provide a carrot and stick for public bodies so that they have to use Article 19 of the European directive – the one that stipulates that some contracts must be reserved to sheltered workshops in the community, the directive that is of benefit to businesses like Blindcraft.

The business needs to be re-injected with the passion and drive that any workforce needs. If, as the out of date Blindcraft Edinburgh website states, ‘The City of Edinburgh Council enjoys responsibility for Blindcraft, running it as an autonomous business in its own right’, then why aren’t we

seeing that responsibility, enjoyment and running in reality?

The closure of this business would in my view be an absolute travesty and is poorly thought out. The workers need stability, leadership from a good management team, and innovation to progress into the twenty first century, so that this business can carry on helping those who would find it hard in mainstream employment.



Hannah is in the middle of the photo

The workers want to work, but are being backed into a corner which is unrealistic, pushing them into a position where the business that they have loved, and the community they have built, no longer pays well enough for them to stay. The workers have until the 26th January to reject or accept this unrealistic contract. It is now over to the Council to think again and start to take some leadership on Blindcraft.

Aberdeen managed to do it... Is it really so much to ask?

The Save Blindcraft [Facebook](#) campaign is still running so visit their page if you would like to help in any way.

Hannah Lister is a "final year Politics undergraduate at Edinburgh Uni with an interest in Blindcraft because my boyfriend's dad has worked there for over ten years. I am originally from Manchester, and participate in a lot of charity work- mainly doing half marathons and races for various charities- including Guide Dogs for the Blind."