

the Socialist postbag

Do you have something to say?

Send your news, views and criticism in not more than 150 words to Socialist Postbag, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD, or phone 020 8988 8771, email: editors@socialistparty.org.uk. We reserve the right to shorten letters. Don't forget to give your name, address and phone number. Confidentiality will be respected if requested.

Reclaiming Labour?

I read with interest the letter by Tim Hayward, and Peter Taaffe's excellent reply (issue 686). The Labour Party certainly has some very decent, genuine MPs (like John McDonnell) who work very hard for their constituents, and I'm sure many unpaid rank and file party members constantly strive on behalf of Labour. Sadly I suspect that this genuine effort is not mirrored in the party's upper echelons. I cannot think of one member of the shadow cabinet who could remotely be called a 'left winger'. Ed Miliband told the TUC that they should not strike on 30 November, and should continue to negotiate. Where on earth is he coming from? Talks have been going on all year and got nowhere. Trade unionists are not strike-happy and do not use that weapon unless they are really have to. Now, workers have been forced to resort to the last weapon in their armoury. Can Labour be reclaimed? I can't see it happening.

Lin Black, Swansea

Make childcare free

Your article on childcare costs is right - government cuts have made taking work an increasingly unattractive option for many.

As a childminder I have seen that this makes childcare unaffordable for some parents. As they seek to balance increasing costs, many have to abandon work.

This may not be an option for some as both parents are forced to work to pay off mortgages and increased living costs.

Options may include using family members, especially grandparents, carrying out long childcare hours for free. Looking after grandchildren becomes a burden, not a joy.

The childcare 'industry' is dominated by large nurseries operated by national companies. Pay is very low to keep profits high. All this nonsense about helping people back to work and 'family values' flies in the face of facts.

Dedicated workers who look after children are exploited for liking their work. The unions should be recruiting them with the long-term aim of setting up free childcare available to all.

Sean Brogan

Lib Dems hide facts

The Liberal Democrat party conference's self-congratulatory delegates fail to see how unpopular their party is and why. They are in bed and sharing power with the Conservative Party, helping them push through their neoliberal agenda. This is Liberal Democrat Orange Book policy.

The media don't point that out, but give Clegg air time for his self congratulations. It's easy for the Lib Dems to show their disagreements with the Tories, because the damage has been done, as cuts in jobs and services are biting, hurting the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest.

The Lib Dems supported the Tories where it mattered most, helping them push through their right-wing agenda of public sector cuts, privatisation and tuition fees. But all this is against a back drop of strikes and threatened future strikes, mass demonstrations and protest.

Karl Osborne, Hounslow

Get the message out!

While sitting in a hospital waiting room to see a consultant, I read Peter Taaffe's article (the Socialist 685) on a programme for fighting the cuts.

The consultants gave me a clean bill of health. When I left the hospital I thought "what a great prognosis". And the chat with the doctor was good as well!

I decided to increase my political activity again and get people to read these ideas.

I went door-to-door, speaking to 15 people and selling five copies of the Socialist. Next morning I sold 13 copies at the tube station, despite competing with free papers such as the Metro.

I explained to people that this is a paper about their lives, not one full of gossip about pampered celebrities, and many are happy to buy it.

The Socialist Party has the programme to fight the cuts and we need to get it to as many working people as we can. People can see this system is failing them and are open to what we're saying.

Martin Reynolds

Share out the work

I will keep the recent centre-page article by Peter Taaffe (issue 685) to hand as an example of how to explain the case for socialist policies in concise, clear terms.

Peter points out that work can be shared out - with no loss of pay. This is backed up by figures released by the TUC showing that 5.26 million people in Britain worked an average of seven hours and 12 minutes unpaid overtime a week in 2010. This would appear to equate to about one million job opportunities.

Clearly it is fear of losing a job that pushes workers to do overtime without payment and only an end to the capitalist system can overcome this pressure. Part of the idea of a socialist society would be one where everyone who can works, but no one is overworked.

Pete, Worcester

Window shopping frenzy

I visited the new Westfield shopping centre near the 2012 Olympic construction site.

Later I read The Socialist's page on Britain's economic mess. The photo of boarded-up small businesses looked for all the world like abandoned shops in my local high street in Deptford, where the few big chains include Iceland, Greggs and a couple of banks. Lynn Walsh showed consumer spending is sliding downwards.

Westfield was uncomfortably crowded and there were few spare seats at the coffee shops and restaurants. Upmarket outlets specialised in jewellery, cosmetics, fashion, electronic goods, pricey confectionery, etc. I saw only one supermarket - the posh Waitrose.

The London Evening Standard said 160,000 visitors on opening day easily surpassed the 100,000 expected. I reckon many were just there for a look. Westfield doesn't belie the Socialist but illustrates the wide differences sometimes hidden by bald averages. More articles like Lynn's, please!

Andy Beadle

Film review

Tinker tailor soldier spy

Greg Randall

1973: London is drab, faded by economic decline. The optimism of the post-war boom is gone. The world is split into two opposed systems, the capitalist west and the planned economies of the east, dominated by undemocratic bureaucracies.

In the British intelligence service, the 'Circus', a Soviet mole is suspected: he's at the very top, but who is he? The search is at the heart of 'Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy', the film adaptation of John le Carré's novel, starring Gary Oldman as George Smiley, the spy brought out of enforced retirement to find the mole.

Much of the cold war was fought out via espionage. British national propaganda portrayed 'our spies' as heroic patriots serving a noble cause, while the other side's were violent low-life. Of course, both sides used the same methods of bribery, corruption, thuggery and violence.

As antidote to the official line, the Circus is portrayed as full of self-serving, cynical men jockeying for position. Smiley knows he is in a dubious trade and is troubled by it.

Smiley recounts his attempt to persuade Karla, the Soviet master spy, to defect. Having spent so long probing the soviet system's weaknesses, he is also only too well aware of the weaknesses of capitalism. He can only offer Karla the thought that both sides have as little worth as each other.

Whatever ideal Smiley once held is now replaced by a negative vision and he is not alone. When the mole explains his choice, he served the Stalinist system not due to morality, but the "ugliness" of the west.

None of the characters can sur-



The grubby world of spying

live intact in this grubby world. Relationships and lives are wrecked. The brutality of spycraft is shown by the sparing and shocking use of violence or its immediate aftermath. This is not the Bond movies' fantasy world.

In reality espionage made only marginal differences to the cold war. Stalinist regimes collapsed due to the contradiction between the planned economy and the bureaucracy that deformed and eventually smothered it, not to the work of western spies.

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy dates from a time of mass strikes and social unrest. The western ruling

class sensed that their system was doomed, expressed by West Germany's Social Democrat Chancellor, Willy Brandt who said: "The lights are going out in Europe. In 20 years Europe will either be Communist or Fascist."

No coincidence perhaps that this film comes out now, when the system is again in crisis and is being questioned, when the ruling class is divided and lacking in confidence.

This is a gripping, intelligent film from director Tomas Alfredson. The acting is brilliant, especially Oldman and Benedict Cumberbatch as Peter Guillam, Smiley's protégé.

More whacko ideas from Tories

Derek McMillan

A Times Educational Supplement survey received massive publicity when it showed 49% of parents supporting corporal punishment in schools.

The more significant finding which the tabloids did not cover was that over 80% of parents opposed cutting education spending. I can't imagine why the gutter press wasn't interested in that one!

I have taught successfully without the use of corporal punishment for 32 years. It is many years since corporal punishment was allowed in British schools. In many cases the people who condemn the 'feral youth' of today did not actually get caned themselves.

A sign of the times was when a Sussex private school wanted to use a loophole in the law and carry on caning (sounds like a good film title).

They found the only place they could purchase canes was a sex shop which could also have provided whips and bondage gear. When this got into the papers they thought it was not quite the public image they wanted to portray.

The most difficult pupils I have taught were beaten by their parents. And a fat lot of good it seemed to do them. This does not surprise me. My brother was caned on his first day at secondary school for fidgeting.



Education minister Michael Gove wants caning back in schools

His school had substantially more physical punishment than mine, yet by any standard the behaviour at his school was worse.

Perhaps the culture of bullying was passed down from teachers to pupils. I saw the school bully at my school outside the head's office on numerous occasions. Did he cease being a bully? No, he became a bully with a sore backside.

If anyone suggests that my classroom must be a haven of licensed wrong-doing, do spend five minutes there before drawing such a rash conclusion. After all I would have

sought an alternative occupation if things were like that - an Ofsted inspector for example.

The caning issue is a diversion from the real problem in education: a problem correctly identified by parents who overwhelmingly oppose the cuts. Gove and Co really do want to turn back the clock: unqualified teachers in dilapidated schools for the poor and only the best for the rich.

Of course many of the cabinet's old Etonians will have felt the cane. And it has not improved their behaviour one jot.