

Solidarity with health workers

- Junior doctors' strike
- Student nurses walk out

Dave Carr

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt, in a last ditch attempt to avert a new junior doctors walkout, has told the BMA doctors' union that the "door is open". It might be open but given the track record of this government, it's unlikely anyone's indoors - and if they are they certainly won't be listening.

This government is determined to ram through changes to junior doctors' contracts leading them to work excessive hours and have their pay slashed. 97% of junior doctors voted for strike action - for the first time in over 40 years - showing the huge anger and resentment over these unfair and unsafe contracts.

Privatisation

However, the Tories aren't listening, in the same way they didn't listen to health workers and the public when they pushed through the Health and Social Care Act which opens the door to privatisation of the National Health Service (NHS) in England.

But if Hunt and the Tories won't listen to what everyone is saying, then they have to be made to listen!

In solidarity with the junior doctors, student nurses will walk out and join the picket lines for one hour at 10am when doctors strike on 10 February.

Nurses are also fighting the Tory government over its plan to axe study grants for student nurses in 2017 and instead impose loans. The prospect of nurses graduating with a lifetime of debt will make recruitment to this vital job even harder - at a time when there is already a critical shortage of tens of thousands of NHS nurses.

But the burden of defending the NHS and defeating the government's privatisation and austerity agenda can't be left to one group of workers to fight alone. Workers in other trade unions should coordinate action in solidarity with the junior doctors. After all, it's the same week that the Trade Union Council has called for a week of action against the new anti-trade union bill.

U-turn

This government with its pro-big business, anti-worker agenda is hugely unpopular - and it's also weak. It has recently been forced into a major u-turn over undermining legal aid work.

Let's unite to show Hunt and the rest of the Tories the door!

Tax the 1%

Sam Morecroft

We all know the score. Put your hand in the till at work, you're gonna get sacked. Snatch someone's purse or wallet and you'll likely have the police after you. Hold up a bank and you'll get 15 years in prison, minimum, just like that.

Robbery comes with consequences - for us. But not for them. When it comes to the super rich - the people who own the likes of Google, Vodafone and British American Tobacco - they're free to rob taxpayers blind. They pay virtually no tax, and face no more serious consequences than a cheery handshake and a knowing smile from Chancellor Osborne and the rest of the Tory millionaires.

Despite the huge wealth these corporations possess, the reality is they are allowed a free pass in Britain and around the world.

More importantly, that's what austerity is all about - getting rid of everything these billions of pounds of avoided tax should be paying for. Austerity is about allowing the super-rich to rob us blind, while their politicians butcher the jobs and services we rely on.

It's time to fight back. It's time to take the wealth off the 1% and put it to good use, democratically planning a society fit for all to live in.

- Close the tax loopholes and reverse HMRC cuts - collect the £120 billion avoided tax
 - Nationalise the banks, big business and tax avoiders under democratic control
 - End austerity - take the wealth off the 1% and invest it in jobs and services
-

Bedroom Tax ruling: The fight to scrap it must continue

Cathy Meadows, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Scrap the Bedroom Tax, Defend Council Tax Benefits campaign

Words alone won't get rid of the bedroom tax. "I'm registered disabled - will I still have to pay bedroom tax?... Is the bedroom tax illegal, now?"... "Has the bedroom tax been stopped?"

Some of the questions desperate people (struggling to survive after nearly three years of the tax) asked me after the Court of Appeal recently ruled that the bedroom tax unlawfully discriminated against two households.

Liable

I had to tell people that the bedroom tax is still here and even if the government loses an appeal, the ruling only affects two specific groups - severely disabled children needing overnight care, and victims of domestic violence living in specially adapted accommodation.

Not only that, until the households in that group prove they are exempt, they will still be liable for the bedroom tax.

The process of proving exemption is usually time consuming, stressful, may have to involve social services and other agencies as well as advice agencies and/or solicitors. What a waste of time, energy and peace of mind for some of the most vulnerable in society.

The bedroom tax does not address the causes of the housing shortage (lack of social and affordable housing being built), and neither does it address the increased housing benefit bill (caused by landlords' exploitation of housing shortages and poverty).

Instead it creates poverty and debt, affects people's mental health, and has even led to suicides.

When I heard that Jeremy Corbyn and the leader of our Labour-run council were only "calling" for the bedroom tax to be scrapped, my heart sank. Where's the fight? Where's the urgency? Does anyone seriously believe that you will get the government to do a u-turn on the bedroom tax by "calling" for it, or even by hassling the prime minister in Parliament?

Words without action are ineffective and can give people false hope. If Labour is serious about getting rid of this bully's policy, Labour-led councils have the power to do it.

Labour councils

Just imagine if all Labour-led councils announced a 'no evictions' policy and non-pursuit of people in rent arrears because of the bedroom tax.

This would be an immediate massive relief for households currently having to choose between fuel, food and bills. It would also empower them to begin a non-payment campaign.

If councils also mobilised community groups, campaigns, homelessness organisations, women's groups, disabled groups and trade unions to support the campaign, any shortfall in their funds caused by non-payment could be demanded from the government. This is the kind of strategy needed to get rid of the bedroom tax now.

A cruel and vindictive tax

Frances McCormack, facing eviction the next day due to the bedroom tax, hanged herself in the same room where her son had committed suicide in 2013, an inquest was told.

Beside her body was a handwritten note which addressed Tory prime minister David Cameron on the hardship caused by the tax.

Introduced in April 2013 by millionaire Tory minister Iain Duncan Smith (who lived rent free), low income social housing tenants lose housing benefit if they are deemed to have a 'spare room'.

As a result many vulnerable tenants have faced eviction and homelessness. And far from reducing the housing benefit bill as the government claimed, the overall bill has soared as low income people are forced into the hands of private landlords.

Air pollution destroys more lives and homes

Ellen Kenyon Peers

Have you noticed the buds on the trees? The sweet smell of cherry blossom in the air? The rush of colour in the fields? If so, you're not the only one to notice a worrying trend of ever-earlier spring blooms due to increasingly mild winters.

One week into January, part of London had already breached its hourly emissions cap 19 times. Guidelines allow no more than 18 such breaches in a year! It'll take more than a diesel-electric 'Boris bus' to fix this mess.

King's College London reckons nearly 9,500 people die prematurely every year due to London's filthy air.

Climate change has hit us hard, with seemingly endless flooding in the North, made worse by insufficient defences. Three 'named storms' have wrought havoc across the UK and Ireland in as many weeks destroying homes and businesses.

In spite of political fallout, this was a dream come true for some Tories. Former Treasury minister Mark Hoban will earn £150,000 a year as chair of Flood Re, the government's phony flood prevention scheme. Additionally it's only open to homeowners, an increasingly diminishing percentage of the population.

The government's long-term strategy is to "cut emissions as cost-effectively as possible" - which appears to translate as 'not at all'.

Remedy

But there is a remedy for market misery. Nationalise energy and transport under the democratic control of workers and customers. Mass investment in green technology and infrastructure, to create jobs and cut emissions. Only socialism can lay the foundations for a greener future.

Conservatives have no interest in collecting corporation taxes

Emma Clark

As millions of ordinary people in Britain suffer from austerity imposed by the Tory government, big businesses are taking the easy way out.

The bedroom tax and tax credit cuts are forcing thousands onto the breadline. Yet Tory ministers took part in a series of 25 secret meetings with internet giant Google.

They have negotiated a minimal 'sweetheart' tax deal for the tax-avoiding advertiser. Google will pay just £130 million of backdated tax - of the estimated £2 billion it owes. This is not a luxury the Tories grant to the ordinary worker.

The truth is that the Tories have no interest in collecting the corporation tax owed by these firms. Their tax cuts could cost businesses nearly £8 billion less a year by 2017. This is enough to raise the minimum wage to £10 an hour - something the Treasury says it can't afford.

Pockets

Much of that money will make its way into the pockets of Conservative politicians and donors. The chancellor's own family firm, profit-making Osborne and Little, hasn't paid a penny of corporation tax in seven years.

They even appointed former Tory MP and bankers' lobbyist Angela Knight, a director of several 'financial services' companies, as an "independent" government tax adviser!

We need to nationalise companies taking advantage of the system. Criminalise the loopholes, and raise the tax rate on corporations and the super-rich. And we need to kick out the politicians helping them steal money from our jobs and public services.

Them & Us

Lording it up...

Spare a thought for stricken peers who can't survive on their pitiful £300 a day allowance. Baron Farmer of Bishopsgate has spoken up for insolvent lordly colleagues. The Tory hedge-fund manager doesn't claim his daily fee, relying instead on an estimated £150 million personal fortune.

But he has described the rate - more than a minimum-wage worker on 35 hours would earn in a week - as "modest and even inadequate".

No doubt lords can be seen slumped in hallways at the Palace of Westminster, threadbare ermine on their backs, tricorne hats held out for pennies. "Will pass laws for food," read their battered cardboard signs.

The Socialist is touched by the plight of members in Parliament's unelected upper chamber. We are launching an appeal fund to abolish poverty in the House of Lords - by abolishing the House of Lords.

To donate, visit socialistparty.org.uk/donate, or send cheques payable to 'Socialist Party' to PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD. Please give generously.

...at tipping point

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the Houses of Parliament, waiters who serve MPs are victims of tip theft. Serving staff at four Commons restaurants only get to keep

cash tips. If diners pay with plastic - as most MPs do - the catering department mysteriously never passes them on.

Waiters throughout the country will be familiar with this abuse. General union Unite successfully campaigned to stop Pizza Express thieving an "admin fee" from card tips last year.

But paying waiters all their tips could affect the highly subsidised prices MPs demand to make up for their niggardly £67,000 salaries. Perhaps they could start bringing sandwiches from home?

Unfit homes and couch surfing - the wonderful Tory world of private renting

Lily Levin, Private tenant, London

It fills me with disgust, but not much surprise, that the Tories voted against a rule requiring landlords to keep their properties 'fit to live in'. This rule could help protect working class people from squalor - we wouldn't want that now would we?!

Disaster

When I first came to London I moved into a three-bedroom house with four other student actors. My ground floor bedroom window wouldn't close. The front door was broken. The bath, sink and toilet were blocked.

One of the others put their foot through the ceiling from upstairs just by walking along. What a nutter. The electric box exploded in another's face.

The kitchen smelled like something extremely dead. We never found out what it was. And finally, as is traditional, there was mould all over the ceilings and walls! All our letters and photos to the landlord and letting agency were ignored. Seven years and nine moves later, I've seen it all.

I have just ended a six-month couch surfing stint. I was offered an acting job for very low pay. The project could not get funding - also courtesy of the Tories - but it was an incredible piece, so I took it. I had to 'not live anywhere' to afford to work.

What was supposed to be six weeks turned into six months. I couldn't find anything within my budget which was 'fit to live in'.

Four months in, my trio found a place. We did this by raising our budgets by £100 each, and lowering our living standards by a century or two. But it was worse than we thought.

Without furniture and tenants, there was nowhere for the squalor to hide. Cigarette ash on the kitchen surfaces; the traditional mould; a kitchen drawer full of mouse droppings; a mouse, obviously; front garden full of rubbish; back garden full of armchairs and a fridge; kitchen tiles all smashed and loose; broken shower; leaky bath; stale smoke from the previous tenants.

'Choice'

We were told we had the right to forfeit the contract and get all our money back - but should we 'choose' to, we had to be out by Saturday. That was two days away and only a week after we moved in.

Grace period? Nope. Help? The agency took us to one viewing which they knew was both out of our budget and out of our search area. I was couch surfing for a further two months.

Film review

Witty take on credit crunch misses problems at heart of capitalism

Pete Watson

'The Big Short' is a story about the 2008 world economic crash. You won't find the unemployed or the homeless in it. But what you will see is the fraud, corruption and greed of finance capital at its worst.

The film is entertaining and witty as it seeks to explain the deliberately obscure world of high finance. Much of its humour comes from the eccentricities of its main characters.

It is difficult, however, to sympathise with individuals who made millions of dollars from a crash which led to misery for billions of workers.

The plot follows the true story of three groups of US banking "outsiders" who could see the financial system was about to crash.

Lenders had been selling mortgages to US workers who they knew could not afford long-term repayments.

They hid this 'sub-prime' debt in packages called collateralised debt obligations (CDOs) for sale on the finance markets.

They even invented the 'synthetic' CDO, which made money by betting the CDO market would continue to make a profit.

The Big Short nicely sums this up with a scene at a Vegas gambling table. The protagonists aimed to make a fortune by betting CDOs would fall in value - known as short selling.

The trillion-dollar CDO market was - as Marx would describe it - fictitious capital. (This bit isn't in the film!)

Real capital is based on workers making products and running services. Capitalists only pay back part of the value workers create as wages - keeping the rest as profit.

Fictitious capital is money expanding itself through 'speculation' - betting on real wealth - or speculation on speculation. As the economic upturn turned into its opposite, this great credit swindle was found out.

The outsiders tried to warn the financial establishment that CDOs were about to crash. What they found was a gravy train of financiers, 'regulators', mortgage brokers and credit assessors - whose interests were to cover up the truth.

Big institutions like Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns crashed, but the taxpayer bailed out the system. In the USA alone, nearly nine million people have lost their jobs and around seven million their homes since the credit crunch.

"Only kidding!"

The film went on to say that, of course in the years after 2008, the state prosecuted hundreds of brokers, broke up the banks, and strengthened regulation... It then delivers the punchline: "Only kidding!" In fact, only one minor banker faced prosecution.

In 2015, US banks started to market CDO-like packages once again. Capitalist competition requires this endless quest for ever riskier, ever more short-term profits.

The Socialist Party calls for public ownership of the finance sector, to plan resources for social need instead of gambling to enrich the 1%.

Arrested 'Heathrow 13' climate activist speaks

The courts are making an example of climate protesters. 'Plane Stupid' activists face jail for demonstrating against third runway plans at London Heathrow airport last July. Melanie Strickland, one of the 'Heathrow 13', speaks in the Socialist.

On 25 January, myself and 12 others were convicted of aggravated trespass and being in a restricted area of an airport without permission.

We got onto Heathrow's runway by cutting the fence, set up a tripod and cage with temporary fencing, and locked onto it. We had taken extensive safety measures, and no-one was at risk because of the action. It took place less than a fortnight after the Airports Commission recommended a new runway at Heathrow.

We recognise that the destruction of nature is inevitable under capitalism. We took our action because climate change is already killing people and wildlife.

We are on the side of the living, and the side of future generations. We are neither heroes nor hooligans, as some have labelled us. We are just people that want justice for all.

Our action disrupted the UK's second biggest carbon emitter, and sent a clear message against airport expansion.

We need to dramatically reduce emissions from present levels. Obviously a project like Heathrow's third runway is incompatible with that. Aviation is already the fastest growing source of emissions in the UK.

We want to help build the sort of world that the celebrated socialist William Morris envisaged. People can live in harmony with nature, and have decent, meaningful jobs.

Sentence

The judge told us to expect immediate custodial sentences following sentencing at Willesden Magistrates' Court, 9.30am on 24 February. Supporters are welcome to join us at court.

We do not want to go to prison. However, a few weeks inside seems a small matter in the context of our lives, when compared to the suffering of those directly affected by climate change.

We intend to come out of prison stronger and more determined than ever. The messages of support have been really encouraging, please keep sharing those.

Letters

Renter's rant

Beth Sutcliffe is spot on when she comments on the conditions private sector tenants have to live in. (See socialistparty.org.uk, 'Cameron's 10,000 new homes won't hide the problem'.)

For the last two months of my most recent tenancy, I had to put up with the house leaking water when it rained (and there's been a lot of that recently) despite contacting the landlord on numerous occasions.

But this isn't the first time this has happened. Earlier that year we were left without a washing machine for a month and a half.

A few years ago we had no working shower for a month. Only when we threatened to withhold paying rent were these issues finally dealt with!

The private sector cannot provide quality affordable housing. It leaves private tenants dealing either with expensive and distant letting agencies, or small landlords who often don't have the expertise to maintain properties. Hence why the Socialist's demand for a mass council house building programme is so necessary.

'A private sector renter', Leeds

Cuts versus courts

Liverpool's right-wing Labour mayor Joe Anderson claims he sees no difference between a legal no-cuts budget and an illegal budget (Liverpool Echo, 19 January). So I will spell it out carefully.

An illegal budget is where a council decides deliberately to spend an amount, then fails to identify where the money is coming from.

A legal no-cuts budget, on the other hand, would entail the council identifying the amount needed to halt cuts, then using its reserves and prudential borrowing powers to bridge the gap.

For Joe, and here's the rub, it would have to be the first step in a campaign led by his council to force central government to restore the funding. If Osborne can be forced into a u-turn on his tax credit cuts by the House of Lords, he can be made to retreat on council cuts.

Apparently needing a drink after my "diatribe", he sketches the analogy of having only £5 to pay for a £10 round. But, if the mayor's inability to pay had resulted from his pocket being picked by a bloated billionaire quaffing champagne at the bar, I'm sure he would fight to get it back.

"If I don't make the cuts, government inspectors will," he laments. However, such intervention requires parliamentary approval. Corbyn could use his position to denounce such a move. This would help in boosting a community and trade union campaign of such magnitude that the Tories would be compelled to retreat.

Joe should run the idea past Jeremy - he might endorse such a move.

Tony Mulhearn, Liverpool

Muslim women

Following on from the comments in the Socialist issue 886 - from Muslim women in response to David Cameron's racist remarks (socialistparty.org.uk, 'Top tweets: #TraditionallySubmissive') - I would like to make my own observations.

I have attended the picket line for the dispute at Small Heath School in Birmingham on several occasions.

Small Heath is a predominantly Asian area of the city and the school employs a number of female Asian teachers.

To see them on the picket line, dressed in headscarves, chanting, singing and talking to parents and passers-by, they are anything but submissive. Their 'radicalisation' is in the direction of trade union action. They enthusiastically welcomed me and others to their picket line.

Clive Walder, Birmingham

Trident tripe

So we see that the arch-right wing Labour MP for Leeds West, Rachel Reeves, has come out and publicly attacked Corbyn over his opposition to Trident.

It was somewhat ironic that in her attack, she claimed the opposition is not coming from the Labour Party's grassroots. In her own constituency, a recent Kirkstall ward Labour Party meeting voted 40 to two to oppose the renewal of Trident.

Iain Dalton, Leeds

British values

Michael Wilshaw, a 21st century incarnation of Dickens's Wackford Squeers, has the answer to terrorism. It is "British values".

Well Sir Michael, consider these British values:

Not paying tax. Do you condemn the tax dodgers? Or are the British values of the royal family (tax dodgers for over 50 years) predominant?

Should Muslims embrace civilian bombing in Syria? Lying and faking evidence to start the Iraq war. British values again?

Changing the definition of words. "Satisfactory" means whatever Ofsted wants it to mean. Is that one of your values? Disingenuous mendacity?

And bullying. Is there any other simple British word to describe the behaviour of brutish Ofsted inspectors who intimidate teachers who are trying to do a tough job under difficult circumstances?

Derek McMillan, Durrington, Sussex

Right fight

Put yourself in the shoes of people fleeing conflict, people who have lost family members even children to war and famine.

Our fight should not be with people fleeing conflict (which our government supports) or people looking for a better way of living life. We all want a better life, and that's why we should fight the privileged few who inflict so much pain and misery on us in our everyday lives.

Our fight should be against the people who sell off our public assets to private corporations for profit, the people who endorse ever-increasing rents and energy prices. These are the people who turn the working class against each other.

Lee Crick, Herne Bay, Kent

Crawcrook Labour

Two days after the general election result my daughter joined the Labour Party. She subsequently voted for Corbyn.

My daughter lives in the same ex-mining village as I do. The local ward is made of three similar villages - now quite pleasant commuter villages for Gateshead and Newcastle.

Not a single visit to my daughter has been made by any local Labour rep, nor has she been invited to a single ward meeting. The only 'local' contact has been email from the Constituency Labour Party with a basic agenda for an all-members meeting in October.

The subsequent minutes show no roll-call of members, no mention of Corbyn et al and the only actions appear to be to elect a new constituency secretary.

So, in Crawcrook at least, the hope that the Corbynistas may renew Labour through Momentum appears just that for the moment.

Ron Phillips, Crawcrook, Tyne and Wear

Fight to save Huddersfield A&E continues to attract huge support

Mike Forster, Huddersfield Socialist Party

The campaign to stop the closure of Huddersfield A&E, as reported in last week's issue, has continued to attract huge support and mobilise mass opposition.

In the space of ten days, there have been three protests and one monster public meeting. A mass demonstration is now planned with thousands expected to turn out.

The Facebook group now has almost 45,000 followers; local and national celebrities have been retweeting the campaign attracting wider opposition; Huddersfield Town FC invited the campaign onto the pitch before Saturday's game and 400 turned up to a public meeting to elect a steering committee and organise further events.

Several speakers referred to the campaign ten years ago which fought to stop the removal of maternity services and the closure of a local hospital, which Socialist Party members helped to organise.

Youth speakers

Fighting speeches were given by many speakers but the local young people who spoke from the youth forum and students union went down a storm. Everywhere you go posters, car stickers, petitions and badges are being displayed in shops, pubs, and clubs. The local paper has produced a poster to display in peoples windows. The entire town is rising in revolt.

The next steps of the campaign are therefore crucial to maintain momentum. The anger will need harnessing and directed at the Clinical Commissioning Group which has put forward this proposal.

Socialist Party members are throwing themselves into this campaign. There is a palpable feeling that we can win this one; in fact more like, we must win this one. A defeat will mean lives will be lost.

Socialist Students will be leading the youth protests and activity; both speakers at the public meeting were from the Socialist Students and they are now drawing up plans to draw thousands of young people into the biggest protest movement to hit Huddersfield for decades.

Angry south Londoners march against the housing bill

James Ivens, Lambeth Socialist Party

"David Cameron, hear us shout! We know what you're all about: evictions, home losses, mansions for the bosses!"

Over 1,000 angry south Londoners marched on Downing Street on 30 January against the Tory housing bill. Social tenants and part-owners spoke against the bill's attacks on them. But there were also many young, private renters, crammed into human filing cabinets at huge cost, there to fight.

Lambeth, the march's starting point, has suffered a lot under the right-wing Labour council. It tried - and failed - to clear the Cressingham Gardens estate, next to the hilly meadows of Brockwell Park. Green space and clean air are too good for ordinary people. Better to 'redevelop' for the market. And residents at the Guinness Trust and many other estates have been victims of Labour's bailiffs.

So it was galling to see Lib Peck, the Blairite council leader, dare to show her face. One of the Socialist Party's two speakers exposed her real role, to fervent applause from the crowd.

The protest grew as it passed by estates and transport hubs. Two marchers laughed as the wind forced them nearly horizontal, battling their banner across Westminster Bridge.

Protesters were keen to carry Socialist Party placards demanding rent control, council homes and taking the wealth off the 1%. And there was a serious attitude

to taking on the right - both the Tories and the Blairites - and our proposals for no-cuts council budgets.

Newham Labour disunited against austerity

Ben Robinson, East London Socialist Party

Around 80 people gathered in Stratford, east London, to hear shadow chancellor John McDonnell speak alongside Kevin Courtney, NUT deputy general secretary, local MP Lyn Brown, Newham councillors and local union activists.

Kevin Courtney outlined the impact education cuts will have, especially in London, and the NUT's plans for action. John McDonnell opened with the assertion that 'austerity is a political choice' and argued that we need the whole community to move against austerity and to build an alternative.

Unfortunately, the tone from the rest of the platform was far from a fighting lead. The misnamed Newham United Against Austerity was launched by Newham Labour councillors such as John Gray who have implemented vicious cuts in the borough.

The meeting was conducted under the literal backdrop of a chart showing cuts to central government funding for the borough. What the chart, or the speakers, failed to mention was that Newham has £300 million in available reserves, and an eye-watering £1 billion in total reserves!

People made clear their feelings about Newham council's cuts, including housing campaigners forced to move as far away as Birmingham. Others asked if Newham will follow the Unite local government committee decision to call on councils to refuse to implement cuts.

Reserves

Socialist Party members including Lois Austin pointed to the reserves and argued that the council could refuse to implement cuts and build a mass campaign to demand the funding necessary for local services.

Councillor Rokhasana Fiaz claimed that she didn't know the level of reserves, and MP Lyn Brown falsely argued that setting a no-cuts budget would be illegal. Unfortunately, John McDonnell, in his earlier speech, reinforced this stance by referencing the fears around the powers available to a council's chief financial officer.

East London Momentum was launched earlier in January (see the Socialist 886). Newham now has two Labour Party-led groups in one borough. Newham United Against Austerity is attempting to justify cuts, whereas East London Momentum was attended by councillors from Tower Hamlets arguing against cuts. Those councillors, together with Tower Hamlets TUSC, are organising People's Budget meetings to discuss an anti-cuts stance.

The Socialist Party received a good response to our leaflet advertising a People's Budget meeting on 11 February, 7.30pm at Bryant Street Methodist Church in Stratford. We welcome councillors, Momentum supporters, trade union activists and members of the public to join us to discuss how to fight the cuts in Newham.

Councillor suspended after cuts query: activists seek joint work

London Socialist Party

A north London Labour group has suspended one of its councillors for questioning cuts to adult care. Anti-austerity campaigners in Haringey are appealing to Councillor Gideon Bull to join them in drawing up a no-cuts 'people's budget'.

Socialist Party member John Dolan works in the service Cllr Bull spoke out to protect. John said: "Many people who work in this vital service, and who rely on it, were delighted when Cllr Bull spoke out.

"We thought - 'at last, a councillor who is speaking up for services rather than just passing on Tory cuts!' It is outrageous that he has been suspended for doing what, in our view, a Labour councillor should do."

Momentum

Cllr Bull addressed a Haringey Momentum meeting on 28 January, where he vowed to continue speaking up for those who rely on these vital services. He also explained how difficult this period in his life had been. He said the stress of the Labour group's treatment of him brought on a life-threatening heart complaint.

"In December 2014," said John, "Haringey council agreed £70 million of cuts over three years. But the council also has £96 million in reserves. Many Labour Party members, as well as council workers, service users, and campaigners, think these reserves should be used to avoid cuts.

"Jeremy Corbyn won a landslide leadership election victory because people want an alternative. Many new Labour Party members, inspired by his anti-austerity message, will be horrified at this action. I would appeal to Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell to intervene and reinstate this councillor."

The Momentum meeting condemned Cllr Bull's suspension. But unfortunately, local Momentum leaders - including a sitting councillor - ruled out calls for Labour leaders to intervene, and postponed a discussion on a no-cuts budget. A sizeable minority, however, backed these proposals.

John said: "I also appeal to Cllr Bull to join with anti-cuts campaigners in the borough to draw up an alternative, people's budget for Haringey. This would avoid these devastating cuts, and start to build up the massive campaign necessary to win the funding back from central government."

Wakefield tells big business to frack-off!

John Sibbald, Wakefield and Pontefract Socialist Party

Four fracking licences have been granted in the Wakefield District area to Hutton Energy and Igas which would completely surround the city of Wakefield and turn the whole area into a massive industrial complex.

In response, Frack Free Wakefield District held its first public meeting in a packed meeting room at Lightwaves leisure centre in Wakefield.

The meeting started with speakers detailing where fracking was likely to happen and the problems associated with it and then a good discussion took place with questions and opinions from the floor.

We have done interviews with the local press and local radio station but they seem more concerned about the visual impact on local beauty spots and less on the serious health issues involved with fracking.

We have also sent a six page document to all 63 Wakefield District Council members but only received a meaningful reply from one, the council leader Peter Box. He has promised a full council debate on fracking at some point in the future. When that happens we will hold a rally outside county hall to personally lobby councillors.

We demand the council publicly announces total opposition to fracking and other similar processes such as underground coal gasification. We also demand that the council writes to central government and ask them to revoke the licences which

they have issued; this is a course of action already taken by number of other councils in the Yorkshire area.

Celebrating the revolutionary life of Robert Burns

Brent Kennedy, Carlisle Socialist Party

Spare a thought for the poor members of Carlisle Socialist party. With the post-floods mood and ongoing rain dampening down outside activities, we were forced into the Milbourne Arms to celebrate our fourth annual alternative Burns' Night.

Just imagine having to be entertained with live music, served haggis, neeps and tatties, sit through an array of songs, jokes and poems and be forced to drink Guinness all night just to raise money for the fighting fund. It's a hard job, but somebody has to do it. And we collected £175!

Fortunately our burden was shared by lots of new faces who had seen our posters across town and a recommendation in the local paper. Several of them sang and recited in the open mic session. Thanks to 'Now and Again', John Chambers and Jonny Foster for the music.

The Burns' Night 'immortal memory address' corrected the utterly false image of Burns constructed by the British state and Tory media after his death and propagated for over two centuries. Burns was a revolutionary democrat who supported the American and French revolutions.

Burns became an underground poet, anonymously publishing stinging attacks on the corrupt regime, during the British 'reign of terror.' This was when the Tory government sent workers to their death in Australia for joining a trade union or uttering their opinions.

After his early death, Burns was vilified with lies and hypocrisy. Patrick Scott Hogg and Andrew Noble restored the truth in their books "The lost poems" and "The Cannongate Burns", which they researched on an academic grant of just £15,000. But now a project by Glasgow and Oxford Universities, to rubbish this discovery, has been set up - with a state grant of £1.1 million!

I wonder how they will explain away the fact that even as his health was failing he defiantly declared "if I must write, then let it be sedition!"

Fighting to save Coventry's last two play centres

Dave Griffiths

Parents and children who use Edgwick and Eagle Street play centres took to the streets of Coventry on Saturday as part of their campaign to save the city's last two play centres. The centres face closure as part of the council's latest cuts.

Speaking outside the council house, Nebiyu, one of the children using Eagle Street play centre said: "It's wrong to close play centres. They are somewhere safe to go."

One nanny present confirmed that, saying that her grandson "suffered bullying at school and the play centre was the only socialising he gets with kids his own age."

Protest organiser Simon Evans says the campaign will go on. "The support from parents and kids has been marvellous and our local schools including St Elizabeth's and our local police centre are determined to help us keep this open, and have spoken out with their concerns if they are to be closed."

Simon's daughter Kimberly said: "Most of these kids, like me, have made brilliant friends. It's so sad."

The play centre provides a service six days a week (3pm to 5.30pm; 10am to 2.30pm Saturdays) and the site is used to run a youth club on three evenings. George Sands of Unison says it will mean the loss of more female, part-time jobs. He believes the council plans to hand the building over to a private firm for an under two's nursery. "But why can't both services use the facility?"

Jane Nellist of the NUT teachers' union, and secretary of Coventry Trades Union Council, said: "Play is central to children's development and there should be many more play centres, not none! It cannot be right that in Coventry we will have two giant universities and no play centres."

Jane attacked government cuts, pointing out that Britain is a rich country but that if play centres are being closed then the money is in the wrong hands.

Send support messages to: simon_evansuk@yahoo.co.uk

Austerity: How many more protests like this do we have to witness outside the council house?

Coventry Socialist Party supported and will continue to support the protest of the play centre campaigners and believes it is sad that year after year we have seen

countless groups of Coventry people campaigning to save services. From schools, disabled workshops, youth clubs, play centres, swimming baths and so many more. When will this be enough for local councils to say enough is enough?

Dave Nellist warmed to this theme. He said it was shameful that we had to see "kids and parents defending play centres outside the council house and not one councillor was here. What are councillors there for if not to defend our city and its people's services?"

He added: "...the council now has £84 million in reserves, and what would it cost to keep these play centres open? £100,000?"

They could be kept open, he argued, while a campaign is built to fight to win back some of the money that the government has stolen from our city.

In the parents own words: Why a play centre is so important

Simon Evans: My children Kimberly, aged 11 and Rhian, aged 7 will be affected by the closure. Kimberly is now at secondary school and her favourite thing to do is to play football, which if not for the play centre, she would rarely be able to do this as she feels unable to join the boys at her school to play, while her girl friends there do not play.

Rhian has built up a lot of confidence since she started going to the play centre. When she first went she would not speak to more than a few children. Now she speaks to several children there, and even joins in with games. I am very concerned with the safety of the park if the play centre closes, as the staff there report any suspicious activity that they witness to the local police.

Lucy O'Donoghue whose child Saskia goes to the play centre, states: "The closure of the play centre will have a very big negative impact on our family. I am a single mum with no transport and limited resources, my daughter is an only child and the play centre provide a safe, positive, multicultural, tolerant environment for her to play in, and trips to go on."

Lisa Achrar whose children Adriam and Mishara go to the play centre says: "It will mean I would be unable to work to provide for my family".

Salma Begum whose child Muhammed goes there says: "There will be nowhere to go. If parents need to go to work they will know that children are safe without having to worry."

Roxanne Richmond whose child Olivia goes there says: "The play centre has a huge impact on Olivia's social skills and enables her to mix with the children from

all sorts of backgrounds and ethnic groups; This enables her to become more confident and has brought her lots of new social skills."

[Click here for the Coventry Socialist Party website](#)

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 1 February 2016 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

World economy heading into a storm

Lynn Walsh

Every year the global capitalist elite meet at the World Economic Forum held at Davos, a posh Swiss ski resort. This year, the prevailing mood was anxiety, the keynote pessimism. They fear the world economy is heading for a storm. In fact, world capitalism is already being buffeted by very choppy waters.

There has only been a slow, feeble 'recovery' from the 2007-10 slump. Growth has been sluggish, with the partial exception of the US.

World economic growth (real GDP) averaged 4% a year during 2003-12, a period including boom and the 2007-10 slump. During 2013-15, supposedly a 'recovery', global growth averaged only 3.1%. The developed OECD economies averaged 1.7% growth in 2003-13 and 1.7% during 2013-55, hardly a dramatic recovery.

Europe and Japan are stagnant. Quantitative Easing (QE), the creation of cheap credit by central banks, has failed to revive the production of goods and services. Austerity policies, with drastic cutting of state expenditure, have held back the recovery and resulted in chronic mass unemployment. Yet QE produced new bubbles in property, and stocks and shares.

Cheap credit did stimulate massive investment from the West into developing countries, so-called 'emerging markets', inflating a series of bubbles in property, commodities, and financial assets. This was one of the major sources of global growth in the last few years.

But the sharp slowdown of China and the slump in oil prices have changed all that. There is a massive outflow of capital from semi-developed countries, including China. Their exports have slumped. Russia, Brazil, and a whole array of commodity-exporting countries now face economic slump and social upheaval.

The emerging markets have become submerging markets, sinking like punctured dinghies.

China was for years the main locomotive of world growth. Real GDP grew by an average of 10.5% a year during 2003-12. This has now dropped to 6.8% in 2015, and even this is widely believed to be exaggerated. Now the slowdown and fears of a catastrophic derailment are a source of crisis.

These trends have been reflected in the financial sector, with the recent see-sawing of global stock exchanges. At Davos the leaders lamented these trends but it was clear that none of them have any idea of how to avoid a new crisis.

Oil

In the past cheap oil has usually been a bonus for capitalism. Today it is one of the causes of the crisis.

Major oil producing countries, like Russia, Nigeria and Saudi Arabia, became dependent on huge oil revenues. The slump in oil prices from over \$100 a barrel last year to \$30 a barrel this year has hit their budgets, including state subsidies for food, welfare and education.

There has also been a slump in commodity prices, especially minerals. This has slashed export earnings for countries like Brazil. The OPEC producers have so far refused to cut output to reduce the glut and push up prices. They are using cheap oil as a weapon to force high-cost producers (like shale oil producers in the US) out of business.

Major oil companies are now cutting back their investment in prospecting and development. Tens of thousands of oil workers have been laid off.

Many oil prospecting companies have borrowed heavily to finance exploration and the development of new fields, giving rise to a mountain of bad debts.

Emerging markets

The semi-developed countries, known as 'emerging markets', have been the hardest hit by the recent turmoil.

Many of these economies are primarily commodity exporters. The slump in demand, mainly because of the slowdown in China, has had a devastating effect.

After the 2007-10 slump the emerging markets, together with China, were the main source of world growth. Speculative capital from the advanced countries poured in, giving rise to a series of bubbles.

In recent months, this has been reversed sharply. Speculative capital is now flowing back to the advanced capitalist countries, especially to the US, which is seen as a 'safe haven' for financial and property assets. Most of these semi-developed countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America are now plunging into crisis.

The anxieties of the Davos elite have been focused on the slump in the price of oil and the slowdown in China. They fear a slowdown could become a long downturn.

Between 2003 and 2012 China's real (inflation-adjusted) GDP averaged 10.5% a year. In 2015 GDP growth fell to 6.8%, and even this is believed to be an over-estimate.

Previously, China imported vast quantities of raw materials and machinery. This has dropped sharply and the regime has attempted to switch to domestic consumption and away from debt-financed, export-led growth.

Soft landing?

But the boom years have left a legacy - a huge property bubble, a financial bubble and a mountain of debts. Many manufacturing companies now face bankruptcies, and the banks that provided credit are overloaded with bad debts.

The Chinese leaders claim they are moving towards more balanced growth, reducing the role of debt-financed investment in infrastructure, industry and property, and boosting domestic consumption through raising wages and improving social benefits.

The regime still has huge resources to bail out struggling banks and floundering companies, and to subsidise living standards. But can it manage a soft landing for the economy? It is far from certain. The economy could slide out of control and into a deep downturn.

The huge number of strikes and protests taking place show the potential for explosive movements of the working class, poor labourers and peasants.

Every economic crisis is different. The 2007-10 slump (often called 'the Great Recession') started in the finance sector. The huge financial bubble associated with the property market in the US and elsewhere burst, triggering the collapse of a series of major banks and finance houses.

The financial collapse provoked a major downturn in global production, trade and consumer spending. It has still not fully recovered from that crisis. This time, the crisis is beginning in the 'real' economy, with a slowdown in investment, production and trade.

Big corporations are hoarding cash and financial assets rather than investing in new products and services. They are estimated to have \$7 trillion reserves in cash according to Min Zhu deputy managing director of the IMF. Doesn't this reflect a profound lack of confidence in the prospects for capitalism?

Capitalist leaders have pursued contradictory, self-defeating policies. They have imposed savage austerity, cutting government expenditure, which has strangled growth.

High unemployment globally and weak growth of wages has led to demand from the private sector being depressed. Yet they have implemented a series of QE programmes under which central banks pump cheap credit into the economy.

This is 'welfare' for bankers. Rather than stimulate growth of the real economy, QE allowed speculators to create bubbles in property and financial markets (stock exchange, etc).

If the downturn continues as is most likely, it will trigger a crisis in the finance sector. The gyrations on world stock exchanges in the last few weeks are a foretaste of what is to come.

Conclusion

At Davos, the global elite also reflected gloomily on a series of geopolitical issues: a migrant crisis which threatens the cohesion of the European Union; war in the Middle East and its terrorist repercussions internationally; heightened tension between the western powers and Russia (with conflict over Ukraine); the Ebola pandemic, and now the Zika virus in Latin America.

What can be predicted is that the capitalist class will strive to offload the cost of crisis on the working class and sections of the middle class. Today's protests will become mighty mass struggle tomorrow - a struggle for a change in the system.

Zika virus: Another healthcare System failure

The devastating outbreak of the mosquito-borne Zika virus in the Americas, just six months before the Olympic Games in Brazil, has once again exposed the failings of governments and the big pharmaceutical companies to protect public health.

In the following articles, Isabel Keppler of LSR, Brazil (the Socialist Party's counterpart), comments on the health disaster in that country and Jon Dale writes on the wider link between poor public health and capitalism.

Symptom of a sick political system

Isabel Keppler

On 28 October 2015 the Ministry of Health in Brazil confirmed a causal relationship between Zika and microcephaly. Pernambuco state, in the northeast, after registering over 500 cases, declared a state of emergency due to diseases transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito - not just Zika, but also dengue and chikungunya.

Cases of dengue also increased drastically this year - by 176%! At the beginning of 2015, in São Paulo, when the 'hydric collapse' (water supply crisis) suddenly hit, occurrences of dengue increased 57%.

There's little information about whether Zika is solely responsible for the cases of microcephaly. It is therefore vital to invest in research quickly.

With the arrival of summer, cases of dengue began to appear. It's necessary to fight the proliferation of *Aedes aegypti*, and to improve sanitation - requiring new public expenditure.

Budget cuts

However, last year's budget cuts of almost 70 billion reals have adversely impacted on healthcare, education and city councils. Servicing the national debt - by filling the pockets of the bankers - costs 13 times the healthcare budget, for example.

A director for the Ministry of Health, Claudio Maierovitch, declared that the best prevention at the moment was to avoid pregnancies! Even with the ministry declaring that the statement doesn't represent the institution, it might as well do so. After all, the measures applied so far to eradicate mosquito-spread diseases are a joke.

Even before the Zika outbreak the SUS (Unified Health System) was failing communities, with pregnant women not being properly cared for.

No joke

The population needs to get organised and show the ruling class that healthcare is not a joke.

We demand an intensive information campaign is made among the population. The government must guarantee that the mainstream media spreads correct information on how to differentiate the symptoms of each virus, orienting to prevention, and what to do in suspected cases of any of these diseases.

We also immediately need more health workers, as well as kits with quick diagnostic tests, not only in the units of the SUS but also distributed in more remote areas.

This epidemic points to the urgent need for people to demonstrate in large numbers against the cuts of President Dilma and Finance Minister Levy. We need more investment in health. No more profits to the bankers and bosses! No more salary rises and privileges to the politicians!

Disease exposes glaring inequalities

Jon Dale

The Ebola epidemic in West Africa had not been declared over before the latest viral epidemic exploded.

Zika was first recorded in Brazil in March 2015. Since then, up to 1.5 million Brazilians have been infected. It is spreading through South and Central America, reaching the Caribbean and southern USA.

The illness is usually mild but in pregnant women appears to be devastating. Babies born with small skulls - microcephaly - increased from 5.7 to 99.7 per 100,000 live births between 2014 and 2015 in Brazil.

Zika also appears to be linked to an upsurge in cases of a paralysing condition in adults, Guillain-Barré syndrome. Although normally temporary, this can last many months and requires intensive hospital treatment.

Governments have advised women not to become pregnant for between six months and two years, but contraception needs to be free and easy to obtain. It isn't.

Antenatal care is also essential to pick up birth defects early. But even where abortion is legal (it isn't in most affected countries) facilities are lacking, so only those with money can access them. Unsafe illegal abortions will rise.

Affected babies may have life-long physical and learning disabilities and need full-time care. Most parents are poor. Health and social services provision are often basic or non-existent to those who can't pay.

Poor hit hardest

Countries whose economies were based on selling food, metals and oil, especially to China, were facing recession before this latest disaster. As always, working class and poor people are hit hardest.

As the World Bank put it in 2013, "Unequal access to healthcare is still the number one killer for moms and kids." The Zika epidemic confirms that capitalism and its institutions cannot change this.

A vaccine had not seemed necessary for a mild infection but the warning signs that Zika prevention needed to be taken seriously should have been picked up after the 2013 outbreak. Profit-seeking pharmaceutical companies aren't interested in researching vaccines that may never be bought.

The first major outbreaks of Zika virus were on Pacific islands in 2007 and 2013. It may have crossed to Brazil during the 2014 football World Cup.

The mosquito can only fly 100-200 metres, but plastic bags, old rubber tyres and similar urban rubbish make ideal places to lay eggs. All it needs is a little rainfall or stagnant water.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, there was a major initiative to eradicate *Aedes aegypti* from the Americas by public health organisations and national governments. It almost succeeded at a time before the spread of plastic and rubber waste. But the programmes were cut to save money.

Laboratory tests have shown another mosquito, *Aedes albopictus*, could start carrying the Zika virus. This mosquito has spread through large regions of the world in recent decades, so Zika could spread much further.

Mosquito eradication from near human habitation needs a massive coordinated effort to drain stagnant water, clear rubbish, provide sanitation and clean water.

Fight to save 1,550 finance jobs in Surrey

Socialist Party reporters

Members of Unite the Union's finance sector have taken to picket lines for the first time since the 1970s to fight back against the closure of Legal & General's flagship site in Kingswood, Surrey.

The pension and insurance giant plans to close the site by 2018, axing 1,550 highly skilled jobs in the name of short-term savings. Yet in 2015 Legal & General increased profits by 18% - amounting to over £750 million!

It isn't only Legal & General workers under threat; Unite has commissioned an independent impact report which reveals that closing Kingswood will create a £21 million black hole in the surrounding economy.

Following a breakdown in talks between Unite and Legal & General, a ballot of Kingswood members resulted in a 67% vote in favour of industrial action.

In the first step of this campaign the members organised a picket of Legal & General headquarters in the City of London and presented the impact report to the company board.

This will now be followed by a rolling programme of industrial action throughout February, which will last until the employer comes back to the table to save jobs.

This dispute is just the latest example of attacks on workers across the finance sector.

From closing bank branches to off-shoring, the major banks and insurance firms are continuing to hand down the cost of the 2008 crisis to workers.

Alternative

Yet the dispute at Kingswood also shows an alternative is possible. By organising collectively finance sector workers can halt these attacks and bring workplace-led democracy to the industry.

If Legal & General will not recognise their social responsibility to Kingswood then the site must be nationalised.

Along with the government's stake in Lloyds Banking Group and RBS, this would be a clear step towards full public ownership of the financial sector, ensuring it operates for social need and not the profits of the 1%.

Tories axe 310 jobs in Northern powerhouse

Marion Lloyd, PCS union rep, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

The Tories have announced the closure of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) office in Sheffield next year. This makes a mockery of their 'Northern powerhouse' economic policy.

The BIS cut includes the loss of 250 jobs. This follows the 2015 Autumn Statement announcement that the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, based in Wath-upon-Deerne, South Yorkshire, will also close. A further 60 jobs are threatened there. The two decisions are a major blow to the economic development of Yorkshire.

They give the lie to the government's publicly stated 'Northern powerhouse' objective to drive economic growth and make jobs.

Lois Austin, an official for public sector union PCS, said: "The decision to close the BIS office in Sheffield and transfer the work to London, combined with the decision to close the Wath UK Commission for Employment and Skills, demonstrate that the austerity policies of this government override the need for regional economic development.

Closures

"PCS and other trade unions will oppose these closures, and the loss of jobs, with all available resources." The Socialist Party fully supports PCS members fighting this attack. Reverse all cuts - for investment in decent jobs for all, throughout the country.

London Transport workers braced for huge cuts in spending

Andy Beadle, London bus driver

London faces cuts in public transport along with attacks on bus and tube workers after the government announced an end to the subsidy to Transport for London (TfL). The Socialist Party completely opposes these attacks.

In his autumn spending review, Chancellor George Osborne announced a 37% cut in the budget of the Department for Transport nationally. The Tory finance minister said this means the annual operating grant to TfL, currently nearly £700 million, would be cut to nil by 2020.

This does not affect capital grants which Osborne said would be increased, although much of his 'new money' for projects such as Crossrail and the Nine Elms extension of the Northern line has already been previously announced.

Profits

It is clear that the Tories want to continue to fleece public transport users and workers to benefit the profits of big construction firms.

The grant cuts make up about 10% of TfL's annual operating budget, currently £6.6 billion. TfL's main income comes from fares, followed by 'commercial sources' such as advertising.

So how will this 10% cut in revenue before the end of the decade to be financed? TfL says around half can be covered by new commercial activities like turning the recently closed tube ticket offices into shops such as Argos collection points.

That still leaves the other 5% at the mercy of 'efficiency savings', more honestly referred to as cuts in jobs and services, if fares are not to be raised even further.

Like all major cities, for generations, London has run at least a partially integrated public transport system.

Even Thatcher and her cronies understood the dangers in the 1980s when she privatised and deregulated Britain's buses except in the capital. That was left to her sidekick John Major, a decade later.

Even then the government imposed TfL as a regulator to moderate the rampant excess of the privateers.

That clearly comes at a price and these bus firms are the beneficiaries of massive state subsidies. Today there are fewer service buses in the rest of Britain than there are in London! Even since the economic crisis of 2007-08 public transport has continued to expand in London.

What would the consequences of real cuts be in a city whose population continues to grow? This government seems determined to find out.

Campaign

The Socialist Party would support a campaign of all London transport workers to oppose these cuts.

A Labour-led Greater London Authority should lead a mass campaign across London involving transport workers and users to reverse these cuts.

Bus workers should demand that of Sadiq Khan, the Unite-backed Labour London mayoral candidate.

Tories are taking London taxi drivers for a ride

Dave Wallis Vice chair, RMT London taxi branch

Transport for London (TfL) has in the last four years registered another 40,000 mini cabs to drive around London allowing them to ply for hire using smart phone technology.

Under existing legislation only London taxis can show availability, but mini cabs are circumventing the law by using taxi apps making them available for immediate hire.

This is plying for hire which London mayor Boris Johnson admits is breaking the law. But he fails to push for legislation change to protect the Hackney carriage trade in London.

Pre-booked fares

Mini cabs licensed under the 1998 private hire act are only allowed to take pre-booked fares which means having an office and a land line for a customer to call.

We know that David Cameron, George Osborne and Boris Johnson have an unhealthy relationship with taxi app Uber and are constantly lobbying for them by telling the regulator TfL to leave them alone.

Boris Johnson's 'super cycle highway' has also affected taxi drivers. The taxi trade is not against cyclist safety but in my opinion a five year old with an etch-a-sketch could have designed and implemented the works better.

TfL sent out surveys and consulted with the public and drivers but no results from these were released.

My first port of call in the mornings is Waterloo which, living in Wapping, should take about 15 minutes but the same journey is now taking 45 minutes to an hour.

We will fight to the end just like the dockers and the miners did but know that we are not in the Tory government's thoughts and there has been a long term plan to deregulate.

Boris Johnson received a text from Osborne on the day of the mayoral question time lobbying for Uber and when asked about it he said: "I don't deny it!"

So there you have it the Tory party telling the Greater London Authority and TfL they will leave Uber alone.

We have a taxi protest on 10 February at Whitehall from 2pm to 4.30pm to demonstrate our disgust at this unhealthy cover up by Cameron, Osborne and Johnson. Please support us.

Crane drivers' strike for pay rise

Dave Reid, Socialist Party Wales

Ainscough crane drivers took strike action on 1 February after a 90% vote against a two-year pay deal being imposed on the workforce by the company that is also trying to casualise working conditions and hit safety.

Pickets were out in force at the Cardiff depot and the strike was solid - no worker crossed the picket line. Reports from across the country indicated the strike had brought the company to a virtual halt.

The crane drivers are highly skilled operatives who are striking for more than the 2.5% and 2.75% offered by the company. And against new contracts that casualise the industry.

Ainscough made £14 million profit last year and the managing director gave himself a rise of over 20%!

Meanwhile, the company is introducing zero-hour contracts to new workers that further casualise the work and threaten safety.

For these operators there will be no guaranteed weekly hours or pay. Instead they will be expected to work from any depot with no payment for travel time, a cut in holidays and no payment if weather conditions on the site make it unsafe to work.

Unsafe conditions

Management are trying to replace the highly skilled workforce with a casual workforce by making crane drivers redundant and then offering work on a zero-hour basis. It is trying to drive the work back to the unsafe conditions of the past.

The national strike could be escalated with another one-day strike on 8 February followed by two two-day strikes and two three-day strikes, so the company might as well concede now!

Tesco slashes pay for thousands of workers

Scott Jones, Chair, Usdaw east London retail branch (personal capacity)

Thousands of workers at Tesco, the UK's largest private sector employer, could lose hundreds of pounds in pay.

Details of a new pay deal, long overdue, have been leaked revealing many of the 310,000 workers will have overtime, weekend and night-shift bonuses cut as part of new contracts that could be introduced as early as this week.

Staff who receive double time for working Sundays and bank holidays will have their pay slashed to time-and-a-half. Premiums currently available for those working between 10pm and 6am will now only be available between midnight and 6am.

Overtime

And overtime previously paid at time-and-a-half or double time will now be at the normal single rate, which will affect the majority of Tesco workers who are on part-time contracts and low pay and who rely on overtime to pay the bills.

The government already subsidises big business £11 billion a year to top up the wages of 5.2 million low-paid workers - including many supermarket workers - in the form of tax credits and other benefits.

Meanwhile Tesco CEO Dave Lewis received £4.1 million in his first six months as boss in 2015. As one Tesco worker said this week: "I'd rather have a living wage than support the lifestyles of shareholders."

Shop workers' union Usdaw, a third of whose members are in Tesco and who are committed to fighting for a living wage, have been characteristically quiet and lacking in fight over the issue.

A vote on pay deals should be restored to Tesco workers and industrial action discussed by the union so that the strength of the 160,000 Usdaw members in Tesco is used to fight against low pay and attacks on conditions.

Workplace news in brief

FT dispute

Journalists at the Financial Times will be taking 24-hour strike action on 4 February over the £4 million pensions robbery proposed by new owner, Nikkei. Please send messages of support to campaigns@nuj.org.uk and join the picket line at Southwark bridge from 8am. The NUJ members voted by 92% in favour of strike action.

V&A campaign

A PCS campaign against privatisation at the Victoria and Albert Museum is growing fast with 40,000 people having signed a petition in just four days. PCS reps from the V&A were joined by trade unionists from the southern and eastern regional TUC and other culture branches at the leafletting of a late night opening on 29 January. They were protesting over the decision that from January all new staff, from gallery assistants to curators, will be employed by V&A Enterprises Ltd, the museum's commercial arm, on new contracts that are detrimental to those of their colleagues who are employed directly by the museum. Sign the petition here: you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/no-backdoor-privatisation-at-v-a-museum

#SavourSteel meeting

The National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) is hosting a public solidarity meeting in Port Talbot on Wednesday 10 February to build support for the steelworkers facing job losses (see issue 886 of the Socialist). It is at 7.30pm in the lounge at the Grand Hotel, Station Road, Port Talbot, SA13 1DE (opposite the train station) and is open to everyone. Speakers include Rob Williams, NSSN national chair and former Swansea Visteon (Ford) union convenor. See www.facebook.com/NationaliseTATA and shopstewards.net for more information and updates.

Japan: The failure of 'Abenomics'

Building of working class left opposition urgent

Carl Simmons, Kokusai Rentai (CWI in Japan)

Shinzo Abe recently became the longest serving Japanese prime minister in nearly four decades. His Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government has regained its lead position in the opinion polls despite the huge demonstrations of last summer against new security laws, which a majority of the population clearly opposed.

This temporary stabilisation has been possible largely because of the weakness of the opposition and that the failure of 'Abenomics' has not yet become apparent to the mass of the population. However, behind the facade of political and social stability Japanese capitalism faces an enormous crisis - even before the recent volatility in global equity markets.

Japan's economic growth is pitifully low. What started as "the lost decade" has now become "the lost 20 years". In addition to this slow economic decline, Japan faces a rapid decline in its population.

Rise of China

The sense of crisis and alarm at national decline has been exacerbated by the dramatic rise of China as a major world economic and military power, and rival - fuelling the rise of Abe with his nationalist rhetoric.

It has also changed the LDP. In the past this party was dominated by personal cliques sharing the spoils of office. The party today is dominated by the shadowy and reactionary Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference) for which Abe acts as an advisor.

While Abe is personally committed to the right wing's ideology and their programme of constitutional revision (remilitarisation and authoritarianism), he is also aware that the mood doesn't presently exist in Japanese society for such a wholesale turning back of the clock.

The passage of the Secrecy Protection Bill, the attempts to silence opposition by bullying the press, and now, the passage of the new security laws have alarmed a segment of society. Most significantly these issues have awakened a layer of youth to political activity.

While constitutional revision may not be the main emphasis of his campaign in July's general election, Abe will attempt to exploit incidents such as the North Korean nuclear test or further incursions by Chinese ships into waters claimed by Japan to promote the idea of constitutional revision.

Failure of 'Abenomics'

The initial effect of the government's policies of 'quantitative easing' (QE) was to boost the profitability of the major corporations.

The already wealthy have gained most. The National Tax Agency reported the number of people whose income is greater than ¥500 million a year (\$4.26 million), has risen from 578 in 2010 to 1,515 by 2013.

The gains in company profitability have come mainly from a fall in the value of the yen as a result of Abe's policies. Despite this, Japan is still running a sizeable trade deficit.

But an increase in cash held by major companies will not by itself be enough to maintain the recovery. For that, profits need to be reinvested.

But in the face of a stagnant domestic market and a slowdown in China, the bosses will want to know where the sales are going to come from.

Even if there is a market for the new goods being produced, why should companies make those investments in Japan? The fall in the yen has hardly made a dent in the trend to move production overseas.

Abe's original plan was a target of 2% inflation, which he believed would force businesses and consumers to spend or to see existing cash reserves lose their value.

However, despite three years of QE and a massive expansion of the money supply, inflation has averaged a measly 0.2% since July, well short of the government's target. However, QE has increased government debt to a staggering 226% of GDP.

With the economy narrowly avoiding a second recession in the third quarter of 2015 the present recovery is anything but robust. The decision to introduce a negative interest rate for banks indicates the failure to increase demand in the economy.

Another arrow of Abenomics was supposed to be 'structural reform' - a euphemism for making it easier for employers to fire workers.

The 'lifetime employment system', once seen as a pillar of social stability, has been seriously undermined. Full-time permanent workers made up 85% of the workforce in 1984. This has dropped to just under 60% today.

The increase in irregular workers has brought with it a major increase in poverty. The number of working poor, who earn less than ¥2 million (\$17,000) a year, reached a record 11.39 million in 2014 - around one in every six workers.

Abe and his advisors understand the weakness of the present recovery. He is hoping that he can make it through to the Upper House elections next year without another downturn.

The true legacy of Abenomics has been a lacklustre and unimpressive recovery with continuing attacks on workers' living standards.

Opposition weakness

The most significant factor Abe can count on is the weakness of the opposition. The main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), is a lash-up of LDP renegades and former sections of the Social Democratic Party - predominantly from its right wing - supported by the largest and most conservative trade union federation, Rengo.

The DPJ in government from 2009 to 2012 carried out even more orthodox neoliberal policies than Abe.

To its left, but a shadow of its former self, is the Social Democratic Party, the successor of the Japan Socialist Party, once the mass party of Japanese workers. Only a major force in Okinawa, it won't stand candidates in every constituency in the next election.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) is the only party on the left capable of attracting sizeable electoral support on a national basis. However, while its support is up, its membership is ageing rapidly.

The JCP is distrusted by many workers and union activists who formerly supported the SDP. And while they may vote for the JCP candidate for lack of an alternative they do not regard it as their party.

The JCP relegates the idea of socialism to the distant future. Its programme states: "A change Japanese society needs at present is a democratic revolution instead of a socialist revolution."

Recently the party has undertaken an important shift in tactics. Previously it had been reluctant to cooperate with any group outside of its own ranks, maintaining its own union federation, and citizen groups under party control. It stood candidates in every constituency, regardless of its support.

However with the rise of right-wing populist forces supporting constitutional revision, such as Hashimoto's Osaka Ishin no Kai and, nationally, Abe, they have reversed this stance. They have not only withdrawn their own candidates, but even, in Osaka at least, supported LDP candidates as the lesser evil.

The call for a broad opposition alliance to stop Abe has gained an echo. It has been endorsed by the youth organisation, Student Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy - which played an important role in the movement against the Secrecy Act and security laws of last summer

However, this strategy will not actually succeed - as shown when tested in the recent Osaka mayoral and gubernatorial (governor) elections.

Class alliance

Instead of a call for cross-class opposition unity, what is needed is a call for an alliance of citizens' groups, combative labour unions and left political parties around a programme of struggle. This should include abolition of the secrecy and security laws, opposition to Abe's plans for constitutional revision, and shutting the US military bases in Okinawa.

It would include opposition to nuclear power and the present energy policy that threatens environmental destruction. It would also demand a minimum wage of

¥1,500 an hour, permanent status for irregular workers and reform of health insurance to ensure 100% coverage.

It would also need to fight for gender equality and against the reactionary attitudes towards women of the LDP and Nihon Kaigi.

Such an alliance, if realised, could lay the basis for a new party of the left. It would pose a real socialist alternative to capitalism, which in the present epoch brings with it restrictions on democratic rights, discrimination, inequality, environmental destruction and war.

CWI world congress success

130 delegates and visitors from 34 countries came together in Belgium from 25-30 January for the 11th World Congress of the Committee for a Workers International (CWI).

The opening session focused on the new stage of the economic crisis and the international feature of deep instability. This was followed by a separate discussion on the US and the presidential campaign of left-winger Bernie Sanders, where up to 30,000 have attended rallies and one million individuals have donated money.

The Europe discussion highlighted similar upheavals with a political polarisation taking place and a growth of new left alternatives in several countries. Many delegates reported on campaigns taking a socialist response to attempts by capitalist politicians and the far right to whip up division in light of the refugee crisis.

There were also detailed discussions on the developments in Latin America, Africa and South Asia, as well as one on women and oppression.

The final sessions covered organising and building the CWI, including electing a new International Executive Committee. Delegates left enthused and prepared for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

See documents and full reports at www.socialistworld.net