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Councils have a choice: no cuts to jobs or services

Councillor Kevin Bennett, Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, Warrington Borough Council

Councillors in local government do have the power to resist the government cuts. The notion that 'there is nothing else we can do' is wrong.

Labour councils around the country are passing their budgets for 2015-16. But they seem to have forgotten their supposed core values: to protect jobs, services, housing and other amenities for workers and residents.

Councils have the legal and financial powers to delay cuts by drawing on reserves, using borrowing powers, and working with tenants and trade unions to avoid evictions and privatisation. This can all be done within the law and cannot be overruled by central government.

None of these policies mean setting a deficit budget, though that in itself is not necessarily illegal.

Reserves

It's true that some smaller councils don't have large reserves, but the bigger ones do. The combined reserves Labour councils are holding are enough to set no-cuts budgets in them all.

Funding for local councils will have dropped this year by 37% in real terms compared to 2010. But English councils still control budgets totalling £114 billion pounds, over one fifth of all public spending. They have responsibility for adult social care, housing, education support, transport, recycling and rubbish collection, libraries and other services.

That's a powerful position from which to organise a fightback.

What is to stop Labour councils coming together, pooling reserves and using prudential borrowing powers? Collectively they could refuse to implement a single further cut, creating space to organise a mass campaign to win the necessary funding back from central government.

Junior doctors must stand firm as Hunt imposes new contract

Dr Clare Blackwell, Junior doctor, Poole Hospital

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt unilaterally imposed his unsafe and unfair new contract on junior doctors in England on 11 February.

The new conditions, which include dangerous longer hours for reduced overall pay, are due to take effect in August. Last year, members of doctors' union BMA voted overwhelmingly for industrial action against the change. We have struck twice already.

The BMA is currently considering its options for how to resist Hunt's decision. More strike action is one possibility. There have also been discussions about 'mass resignation', where doctors quit collectively if a certain number signs up to do so.

The mood among junior doctors is mixed. People are quite despondent about Hunt's imposition, and feel devalued and demoralised. But we are determined to resist what has happened.

Junior doctors came out solidly on the last strike. In Poole we had 50 people on the picket line at times. We had support from the paramedics and members of public sector union Unison.

The fire brigade drove past and honked their horns. There was a lot of public support from local people as well. It was all quite heartening.

Before Hunt's imposition, it looked like there might have been a weak compromise proposal on the table. But after years of goodwill in the face of vicious attacks on the NHS, doctors are not willing to accept any deal worse than our current arrangement.

The strikes have politicised junior doctors. People have realised the collective power they have. This has spread to other healthcare staff as well: nurses are talking about striking again. Striking together would be a huge step forward.

The Socialist Party suggests next steps should include:

- Mass, joint trade union meetings to discuss what next
- United local union and community protests demanding trusts maintain existing contracts
- Call on Jeremy Corbyn to instigate emergency meeting of Labour's national executive committee and the Trade Union Congress
- This meeting to look at organising a mass demonstration and solidarity action in support of the junior doctors and to save the NHS
- Coordinated strikes across the NHS in defence of pay and conditions, as a step towards a 24-hour general strike against austerity

£300 million to cushion cuts in Tory councils

Roger Bannister, Unison national executive committee (personal capacity)

Threatened with backbench revolt, the Tory government has produced a £300 million 'transition grant' to partially cover gaping shortfalls in local government over the next two years.

But the recipients will almost exclusively be relatively well-heeled Conservative councils!

Councils like Liverpool, Manchester and Knowsley, that top the list of authorities with the highest poverty, will not get a penny. Neither will poor inner London boroughs like Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Southwark.

Birmingham, Leeds, Leicester and Newcastle will also miss out. The government will instead buy off Tory councils and MPs in their electoral heartlands, such as Surrey, Hampshire and Hertfordshire.

The Tories have hammered local government. Initially in partnership with the Lib Dems, cutting 37% of funding, and now as a rule-alone administration.

Local services have been slashed, hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost, and local government workers have faced cuts to their pay and conditions of service.

These cuts have been so great that the whole future of local government in Britain is at risk, to the extent that even Tory councillors are protesting. The prime minister's own mother recently signed a petition against cuts in Oxfordshire!

The government plans to move towards a model where councils must raise more and more of their money locally by 2020. Income from service charges, council tax and business rates will replace central funding.

Previously, part of local business rates was redistributed nationally. This will end under Tory plans. Wealthy areas will have more resources, and poorer areas with more demand on services will have less.

At the same time, the Tories plan to abolish the 'revenue support grant' - the main component of national funding for councils - by 2020. Only diminishing grants for ring-fenced services like policing and schools will remain. This will totally gut jobs and services.

The Tories can find extra funding for local government when it suits them. They will pay attention to their own disgruntled MPs, but must also be forced to pay attention to working class communities.

Labour councils must abandon their strategy of passing on cuts to their employees and electorates and instead support no-cuts budgets. They can legally buy time by using reserves and borrowing to bridge the gap. This would allow them to organise a major campaign with trade unions and residents to win full funding from central government.

Scotland: battle heats up against council cuts

Matt Dobson, Socialist Party Scotland

£1 billion in council cuts over the next two years is the consequence of the funding deal from the Scottish National Party (SNP) government, which will mean the loss of 15,000 jobs and the decimation of services if implemented.

Both the SNP and Labour oppose Tory austerity in words but their councils have all signed up to this deal and look likely to be setting budgets to implement cuts over the next few weeks.

However, a fightback from workers and the trade unions is developing with Socialist Party Scotland activists playing a crucial role. In Glasgow and Dundee the local authority trade unions representing 26,000 workers are jointly campaigning for no-cuts budgets.

Union resistance

In Glasgow the Labour administration is seeking to implement £133 million of cuts. However they have already been checked by the resistance of the trade unions into stepping back from immediately implementing attacks on terms and conditions worth £3.5 million.

Reports of the attacks have immediately fuelled large attendances at workplace union meetings and the local press reported on the likelihood of industrial confrontation on a wide scale.

School janitors in Unison are already entering their fourth week of an industrial action boycott of

duties in a "dirty, smelly, heavy, outdoor" payment dispute.

Glasgow Labour council is paying out £3,000 a day to hire non-union workers in an attempt to undermine the action. The #justice4jannies campaign is getting wide support, despite the worsening mess in schools, and the jannies are determined to fight on.

The resolute fighting mood and an understanding of the serious battle that is developing was shown by the impressive 350 strong turnout to the Glasgow City Unison AGM, the largest turnout for some years.

The branch, with its fighting record, its successful leadership of recent strikes like the homeless caseworkers and being the key reference point for anti-austerity struggle in the city, shows what can be achieved with a fighting socialist leadership.

In Dundee there is growing anger at the SNP implementing £23 million of Tory austerity. Several hundred braved a snow blizzard on 30 January, to march through the city demanding a no-cuts budget.

Jim McFarlane, Dundee City Unison branch secretary and Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition candidate for Dundee West in a recent statement said: "Savage cuts are planned for garden maintenance services, waste recycling, roads and street lighting as well as child and family services.

"Hundreds of jobs will be lost. The council workforce has already been reduced by around 1,300 jobs. We need politicians prepared to actually put the programme of anti-austerity into action."

Work to rule

Also the West Dunbartonshire teachers' action, reported in issue 884, continues. Teachers have organised a work-to-rule and are balloting over an offer from the council. Scottish teachers' union the EIS is campaigning to reject with another one-day strike set for 18 February.

We are organising a political electoral challenge as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) in the Scottish Parliament election in May.

Protests at council budget setting meetings have been called by local authority trade unions in Dundee on 25 February at 2.30pm in City Square and in Glasgow on 10 March at 12.30pm in George Square.

- For the full article see socialistpartyscotland.org.uk

US fears EU exit will hinder vulture privatisers

Clive Heemskerk, National election agent, Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition

It was recently revealed that the US government is discussing how to make a direct intervention in the EU referendum debate. It fears a leave vote would have "disastrous consequences" for US capitalist interests.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee heard former national security advisor Julianne Smith warn that "disaffection about globalisation" is creating "a very dangerous mix". The speculation is that Obama himself will publicly back a remain vote when he visits Europe in April.

Sections of the US capitalist establishment, particularly during the Iraq war, have sought to weaken the effectiveness of the EU as a counter-power to the US - but not to actually break it up.

US big business and its political representatives are largely united, for example, behind the EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Even more than now, TTIP would open up public services - including the NHS - to takeover by private corporations.

TTIP

The Senate committee heard Cameron's EU referendum gamble described as "very risky". The impetus that opposition to TTIP would receive from a leave vote is, no doubt, foremost among the establishment's fears.

But Obama and other supporters of the EU bosses' club cannot be effectively answered by the equally pro-big business 'Vote Leave' and 'Leave.EU' campaigns, dominated by Tory and Ukip figures.

An independent working class leave campaign is vital. This must pose an exit vote as a defence of public services against corporate power, and for international workers' solidarity, towards a socialist Europe.

An immediate first step is to support the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) petition to the Electoral Commission. Public resources must not go to Ukip and Tory projects in the referendum campaign.

Read more at socialistparty.org.uk 'Don't give taxpayers' money to Ukip and Tory EU campaigners!'

- Sign the petition at tiny.cc/EUpetitionTUSC

Liverpool fans score victory v £77 ticket hike

Dave Walsh, Liverpool FC supporter

Liverpool Football Club has backed down over ticket price hikes after thousands of fans walked out during a match.

Fenway Sports Group, Liverpool's US-based owner, had announced eye-watering increases. A season ticket in Anfield's rebuilt main stand would cost up to £1,029, with match day tickets up to £77. Supporters' groups were outraged.

After the 1989 Hillsborough crowd crush disaster and the cover-up which followed, Liverpool fans have known the importance of being organised to make themselves heard.

Earlier this season a protest took place before the side's game with Manchester United involving three groups: the Blacklist Support Group, the Hillsborough Justice Campaign and the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign. Liverpool's new stand is being built by Carillion, heavily involved in blacklisting trade unionists.

Walkout

To protest against £77 tickets, supporters' groups Spion Kop 1906 and Spirit of Shankly called for a 77th minute walkout during the match against Sunderland on 6 February. This call found an echo among fans and over 10,000 walked out.

Recognising the strength of feeling, Fenway Sports immediately backed down and apologised. It has frozen ticket prices for two years, and said the most expensive ticket will remain at £59.

This victory shows that working class people can get big results when we act collectively. Roy Bentham from Spirit of Shankly has received messages of solidarity from supporters' groups across Britain who are planning their own activities.

Spirit of Shankly, Spion Kop 1906 and the Liverpool Disabled Supporters' Association have arranged a follow-up meeting on 20 February to discuss a range of issues that affect supporters.

Supporters' meeting

- New Picket, 64 Jordan Street, Liverpool L1 0BW (near Jamaica Street), 1.30pm on 20 February

Record-high 170 evictions a day

Stephanie Hammond

Evictions in England and Wales reached a record high last year as over 170 people lost their homes every day.

Ministry of Justice figures revealed a 53% increase since 2010. Nearly 20,000 evictions in England were from social landlords and 5,919 were by private landlords.

16,440 were made using the "accelerated procedure" - where landlords hurry evictions through the courts.

16 of the 20 worst areas were in London. The highest rate of repossessions was in Labour-controlled Newham, east London, at 191 for every 100,000 households.

The Conservative Party is intent on destroying social housing for good.

The Housing and Planning Bill will fully transform housing associations into cut-throat businesses. Councils will sell off the last of their stock.

Market

And 'pay to stay' will force social tenants on joint incomes of £40,000 to rent at the inflated market rate.

Recently, Conservative MPs filibustered a motion to put an end to revenge evictions, and this year voted down a proposal for homes to be 'fit for human habitation'.

Meanwhile, Labour councils have enthusiastically sold off council housing and played a shameful role in social cleansing.

But tenants can organise together to resist evictions. From the historic Glasgow rent strikes to the recent win by students at University College London, the record shows that when tenants join forces we can win.

This must take place as part of a general movement against austerity.

The Socialist Party calls for councils to refuse to evict social tenants, and start compulsory registration of private landlords to help prevent abuses. We want democratic committees of tenants and workers to set controls on private rents. And we demand a mass programme of council house building to provide

homes for all.

Boycott ban

The Tories plan to prevent councils - and possibly student unions - democratically boycotting human rights abusers.

Any bodies that receive the bulk of their funding from the government will be subject to the ban. They will not be allowed to have policy refusing to procure goods and services from 'unethical' suppliers.

This could include pension funds which invest in armaments and tobacco, or goods from Israeli-occupied territory in the West Bank. Ministers said there will be "severe penalties" for ordering boycotts.

The Socialist supports the right of democratic organisations to decide who and who not to buy from. Institutional boycotts, carefully applied, can play a useful secondary role in supporting some industrial and political struggles.

Them & Us

Mansion butlers...

Establishment politicians are little better than "ushers and butlers to the wealthy" according to new research on the housing crisis.

Researchers at Goldsmiths, Sheffield and York universities blame social cleansing on toadying MPs and councillors

The research makes the obvious point that out-of-reach rental and mortgage costs are due in part to the mansions of the super-rich distorting the market. But it places the blame squarely with the oily politicians who OK it.

...boomerang MP

Meanwhile, the housing crisis is getting so bad that even one Tory MP has moved back in with his parents.

William Wragg, 28, earns £74,000 a year plus expenses. Even so, high rental costs mean he says he can't afford a deposit for a house while renting. The MP for Hazel Grove in Greater Manchester isn't alone.

42% of Londoners in their 20s are holding off on starting a family due to high housing costs. And four in five aged between 20 and 29 have thought about moving out of London, according to the survey by Opinium Research.

'Prevent' v Badge

Britain's anti-terror police have saved us again - from the chilling prospect of a school student being allowed to go about wearing a badge.

A school in Bedfordshire referred 17-year-old Rahmann Mohammadi to cops, apparently for sporting a "Free Palestine" badge in class. Rahmann also asked to raise money for Palestinian children and read out pro-Palestine literature.

The referral was part of the government's 'Prevent' scheme. The Socialist has called for opposition to Prevent, which is anti-democratic, divisive and racist. We support workers in Palestine and Israel struggling against occupation, state and individual terrorism, and capitalism.

Read more about fighting Prevent at socialistparty.org.uk, 'Tories "Prevent" civil liberties'

An open letter to John McDonnell from Tony Mulhearn

Dear John,

Your assessment of the Tory government's brutal attack on local authorities in your article in the February edition of Labour Briefing is absolutely correct.

This is a government acting as the political wing of the fat cats, hedge fund managers, private equity companies and the bankers - the class that crashed the economy in 2008 for which the working class is paying at enormous social cost. It is recognised, even by Cameron's mother, that councils are now staring into the abyss.

It is obviously welcome then that you support Labour councils using their reserves in an attempt to defend services. But without this being linked to developing a campaign of refusing to implement any further cuts, it falls far short of what is necessary.

Dented shield

Your stance appears to be a repeat of the 'dented shield policy' - in reality a 'no shield' policy - advocated in the 1980s by the then Labour leader Neil Kinnock. You mention the 'no rates' strategy pursued by some councils in the 1980s, naming Lambeth as a brave example. But you say that as it failed then so it will fail again.

But nobody is proposing today that councils should not set a council tax rate - raising that is really a red herring.

In Liverpool at that time, we spectacularly won the first round of the battle against Thatcher's assault on local councils. We argued against the strategy of refusing to set a rate. After the other councils (except for Lambeth) had abandoned the struggle, we adopted the tactic of setting a 'needs budget'.

We identified the shortfall in our budget - which was £30 million. We then launched a mass campaign based on the slogans 'better to break the law than break the poor' and 'no cuts in jobs and services,' which set as its objective winning back the cash that the government had stolen from the city.

If all of those councils who had initially engaged in that campaign stood firm like Liverpool instead of knuckling under, there is no doubt in my mind that Thatcher would have been compelled to retreat. In the event, we were left isolated as the likes of David Blunkett and Graham Stringer (the then leaders of

Sheffield and Manchester councils) one by one retreated.

I know you were a staunch supporter of Liverpool at that time so it seemed strange that in your article you didn't refer to our success.

I note that you do call for a mass campaign of opposition to cuts with the objective of placing the blame on the Tories. But if this is to be effective it must be on the basis of Labour councillors refusing to vote for cuts.

Our campaign involved all sections of the labour movement and rank and file community organisations. Mass rallies, demonstrations and strike action by 30,000 council workers supported by thousands of other workers, were part of this campaign.

This mass activity succeeded in forcing the Tory government to make concessions worth £60 million to Liverpool which enabled us to continue to build houses, create jobs, open nursery classes and defend services.

An essential element in the success of that campaign was our refusal to implement cuts. In short, the opposite of what Labour councils are currently doing. Liverpool was the only council which actually extracted funds from the government. That is truly a record to be proud of.

Commissioners

The same threats of commissioners which are used today to justify implementing cuts were used in the 1980s by those who balked at emulating Liverpool's action. But such was the level of support we received, both on the streets and in the ballot box, that even Thatcher drew back from sending them in.

You argue that because legislation allegedly enables "council officers to take over from councillors the ability to set budgets", councillors have no choice but to do their dirty work for them.

But it is just not true that council officers have such powers. It is ultimately a matter for councillors themselves to decide to accept their officers' advice or not on whether their budget is 'balanced'.

Councillors standing firm and mobilising mass support can effectively neutralise these petty bureaucrats, particularly if councillors in more than one council stood together to resist the cuts. I would hope that you and Jeremy Corbyn would give energetic support to this.

We need Labour councillors to adopt the brave stance, not only of Liverpool and Lambeth, but also of Clay Cross in 1972 and of the Poplar councillors in 1921.

We can't wait

Labour councils today should refuse to make working class people pay for the reckless crimes of the financial spivs who are still unregulated and amassing huge wealth. Those under attack cannot wait until the election of a Corbyn-led government in 2020. The question is what to do now.

Remember, Jeremy Corbyn was propelled into the leadership on a clear anti-austerity programme. This must include Labour councillors voting against cuts.

If such a call was made by you and Jeremy and linked to a mass campaign against austerity, the Tories could be compelled to retreat and to abandon the current all-out assault on the working class and every gain it has made since 1945.

Yours fraternally,

Tony Mulhearn, former Liverpool City Councillor 1984-87

Irish general election: fighting on an anti-austerity agenda

Campaigning in the Irish general election to be held on 26 February is in full swing. The Socialist Party in Ireland is participating as part of the broader Anti Austerity Alliance (AAA). This includes seeking reelection for Paul Murphy, AAA TD (MP), and Ruth Coppinger, Socialist Party TD. Longstanding Socialist Party TD Joe Higgins is standing down but is continuing to play a leading part in the campaign. Joe spoke to the Socialist about the key election issues and debates. Additional material is provided by Kevin McLoughlin of the Socialist Party Ireland.

Socialist TD Joe Higgins explains what's at stake in this election:

"The austerity agenda of the last nearly eight years has intensified inequality in Irish society. It mirrors very much what has happened internationally, reflected in the recent report by the Oxfam charity which shows that for the first time in history the richest 1% own more wealth than the other 99% of humanity.

The election of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain and the enormous support for Bernie Sanders in the USA reflect a growing opposition and anger to this unequal society that is growing apace under international capitalism. That's very much reflected in Ireland too.

We've had a statistical recovery in the economy but many ordinary people just don't feel it, because of the burdens of austerity continuing on them. Subsequent to the financial crash, for example, new jobs tend to be low-skilled, low paid, precarious, zero-hour contracts, and so forth.

We also have a horrific housing crisis which is a real issue in the election. There is a major health service crisis, with A&E's overwhelmed because of a lack of resources and the accumulation of spending cuts.

What we are trying to bring out is that the establishment parties and Sinn Fein are trying to close down the debate on the economy to what they call the 'fiscal space' - a very narrow band of extra tax income which they hope will become available if the economy grows, without problems, over the next five years.

They've had an obsessive discussion here on that but it really is a device for diverting attention from the huge wealth concentrated in the hands of a tiny elite and the big profits major corporations are making. Ireland is really a tax haven for these companies.

We have tried to shift public attention by pointing out there are resources potentially available for boosting people's living standards.

To utilise these resources we need progressive taxation and the banks brought into public ownership. We need large-scale public investment into building new homes.

We link these key demands to the need for a political alternative. We call for a 'political revolution' to cast aside the establishment parties and build a new force that working class people need to represent their interests."

Why aren't the bankers in jail?

In 2014 a parliamentary committee was set up to inquire into the huge banking crisis of 2007-08 that led to bailouts and austerity. Joe Higgins was a dissenting voice on that inquiry (with Pearse Doherty TD) and refused to sign off the majority report. Instead he published a damning 146-page alternative last month, blaming the crisis on the top politicians, financiers and capitalist speculators.

"It meant an intense 18 months of research. We interviewed a parade of former top bankers, property developers, media people, regulators, etc.

Unfortunately, the inquiry's terms of reference were restrictive but nevertheless we took the approach of trying to be a voice for the victims - those who suffered from the speculative financial bubble and the subsequent crash.

It was an eleven member committee with a big majority of TDs drawn from the establishment parties. These people firmly believe in the right of the capitalist bankers and developers to exploit the majority of the population for a profit.

We exposed the whole financial deregulation process which took place throughout the 1990s in pursuit of profits.

The banks acquired massive amounts of money from European financial markets. They then lent billions of euros to speculators.

The price of a home in Ireland went up 400% from 1996 to 2006. Mortgages went from 20 to 40 years duration - unsustainable levels of debt.

The bubble itself acted as a huge crisis on first-time home buyers. I was in parliament at the time and there was no one else shouting out about this extreme profiteering. Inevitably it crashed.

Our minority report showed that the crisis was the result of extreme profiteering driven by greedy bankers and developers, facilitated by the government and leading politicians.

We asked why no bankers or any of the major participants in the financial bubble were in jail?

Of course 99.9% of transactions that caused the bubble were perfectly legal and in fact were legislated for by the establishment parties in the Dail [Irish Parliament].

So we wouldn't sign the official report and instead brought out our own report on the same day. Many ordinary people appreciated this.

We demanded that the major financial institutions be brought into public ownership under democratic control.

Speculation in homes and other property should be outlawed and we called for public investment in providing homes. Some financial institutions have been nationalised. We argued they should be kept in public ownership but democratised and made to work for the benefit of the majority."

It's a recovery for the rich - not us

Kevin McLoughlin

There has been much debate about the so-called recovery in the economy following the financial crash

and the government's severe austerity bailout measures.

While the governing parties have been playing up the limited economic growth others, including Sinn Fein (SF), have been calling for a 'fair recovery'.

The Socialist Party, campaigning as part of the AAA, says that this recovery is primarily a recovery for the rich. To achieve real economic justice, workers should vote for the party that will challenge the system and provide a real alternative.

Fiscal space

Recently there has been an intense debate about what the outgoing Fine Gael/Labour Party coalition government has referred to as "fiscal space".

For years these politicians have been saying there are no funds available to maintain vital services, hence their justification for austerity measures. But now there's an election, they cynically put forward promises about increasing public spending over the next five years.

They are also giving the false impression that this is a large amount of money. First they said this 'pot' is €12 billion but then revised it down to €10 billion. However, the previous years' cuts total more than €50 billion!

So even if this extra spending was delivered, which is doubtful given the state of the global capitalist economy, it doesn't go anywhere near repairing the earlier damage.

SF accepts this 'fiscal space', which means they also accept no radical change in the economy.

The fact that SF has taken this position indicates a shift to the right by them in the middle of the election campaign. This is in response to criticism from the establishment that the 'choice' in this election is between 'recovery or chaos'.

So all the main parties have said the election is all about who will spend this €8 billion or €10 billion over the next five years. This is nowhere near good enough. It will mean that the crisis in the health service, in education, public services in general, and the cost of living crisis will continue to adversely impact on the working class.

The campaign - 'Real change, not spare change'

We started knocking on doors before the formal announcement of the election. Alongside this intensive canvassing we've organised numerous street activities and put up posters, etc.

Our posters say: "End inequality"... "Real change, not spare change" which neatly dovetails with the economy recovery debate.

The response of voters on the doorsteps is generally positive to our anti-austerity message. The AAA is well known - standing in defence of ordinary working people, etc.

Many people are open to our message, especially given the dire record of the pro-big business austerity measures of the government parties.

Socialist Students conference 2016: Delegates

enthusiastic and confident in opposing education cuts

On Saturday 13 February, 100 people packed into the Socialist Students national conference in Coventry. Students from over 30 institutions were represented, including nine school students from east London.

The conference passed lots of policy to direct the work for the next year, particularly focusing on opposing austerity in education (see socialiststudents.org.uk). Reflecting the growth of Socialist Students, a larger national steering committee was elected.

Socialist Students are internationalists. The conference ended on a high with video solidarity messages by student co-thinkers of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI, the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated) in South Africa and the USA. They told us about their struggles for free education, to end privatisation, and the fight to raise the minimum wage.

In the following articles Socialist Students delegates report on the different political discussions and workshops that ran throughout the day.

Embracing socialist ideas in the age of austerity

Claire Laker-Mansfield, National organiser Socialist Students

Socialist Students met for an enthusing national conference. The day's discussions showed a flourishing organisation, confident in socialist ideas and leading in the fight to defend education.

In the main, delegates were university students. But this year, for the first time, a large group of school and college students attended.

Throughout the day's discussions tremendous enthusiasm for socialist ideas shone through. There was a sense that these ideas are resurgent - as international developments like the campaign to elect "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders in the US attest.

The conference took stock of the huge steps forward that Socialist Students has taken in the past year - evidence of the growing appetite for an alternative to austerity and for ideas that can offer a future to the next generation.

The opening session was: 'Building the student movement in the age of austerity'. This set the scene for the day's discussions. Platform speakers - who included Lily Douglas of Willowfield School, Huddersfield Socialist Students member Jackson Mouldycliffe, Jane Nellist of the NUT teachers' union executive and Myka Abramson, a UCU member and anti-casualisation campaigner - outlined the devastating attacks taking place on education and the much needed fightback.

A video from the 2010 student movement was a good introduction to this - a reminder of how rapidly a seeming calm in society can give way to explosive developments and mass movements.

Lily outlined how her and her school friends had drawn the conclusion that they needed to get organised as part of the fight to stop the war on Syria. She described the anger that she and many students at her school had felt when the local Labour MP - Stella Creasy - had voted for the bombing.

Since then, Socialist Students has set up a group at the school, and they have been organising discussions, taking part in protests and have even had to face disciplinary measures for wearing 'books not bombs' badges!

Now Socialist Students at Willowfield school is getting involved in the campaign against the huge cuts that are on the way. Schools in some areas are facing more than 20% of their funding being lost.

Union action

This picture was expanded on by Jane Nellist, who described the huge pressure piled on teachers. Jane spoke about the need for coordinated national trade union action in the fight against cuts, and the importance of students linking up with workers and trade unions to defend education. This was a point reinforced by Myka, who explained that, incredibly, more than half of teaching staff in universities are now on casual contracts.

Jackson gave plenty of examples of the work our societies are involved in on university campuses. At Huddersfield, Socialist Students has organised a substantial free education protest this year and is now playing a part in the campaign to save a local hospital's A&E.

These examples were expanded on in the discussion - with students from other universities contributing reports of similar successful initiatives. Seb Robyns from Cardiff University described how their society had initiated a housing campaign, taking up the sky-high rents and problems with quality.

Amy Cousens from Leeds Beckett talked about building for a regional demonstration in Yorkshire against tuition fees and cutbacks. Gareth Bomhall from Swansea described how his group is participating in a campaign to oppose cuts to mental health services. Vlad from Portsmouth explained how Socialist Students there had initiated a campaign to fight for the university to provide scholarships to refugees, linking this demand with the fight for free and decent education for all.

A theme of the discussion was the failure of both the National Union of Students (NUS) and other left organisations within the student field to measure up to the task of building a movement capable of defending education at a time of such unprecedented attack.

There is a clear need for a mass national campaign to combat both the vicious attacks outlined in the Higher Education green paper and the new round of austerity being visited on schools and colleges.

That's why Socialist Students has decided to launch 'Education Fightback'. This will be a campaign opposing the attacks taking place on our education system at all levels. To kick-start this, we have called for a national day of action to take place on 26 February.

This was a date that had been named by some on the left as a student strike. But in the absence of a proper strategy to mobilise for this, it has been cancelled. Rather than accept that nothing will happen, Socialist Students is taking the opportunity to launch a re-invigorated campaign to end austerity in education.

We plan to organise protests, stunts, lobbies and sit-ins at all the universities, schools and colleges where we are present, and to use this as a springboard to building a huge campaign to defend and improve education.

Join us and get involved!

Building in schools and colleges

Eilis Mulholland and Nur Bahram, Newham school students

We went to the inspiring Socialist Students conference and one of the workshops we attended was on 'Building in Schools and Colleges'.

Lauren and Trishika from Walthamstow introduced it by saying how they organised with school friends in opposition to their local MP, Stella Creasy, voting for the bombing of Syria. They leafleted their school twice, produced badges against the war and took to social media to directly question Stella Creasy's voting. They ran a petition asking their school's head to invite the MP and an anti-war activist to speak to students.

One of their meetings in a café was reported on Channel Four news. The TV reporter tried to patronise the meeting because it was mainly made up of 15 year old students. But that was the point of it - young people organising themselves.

Walthamstow Socialist Students are also campaigning against cuts and over fast food workers' rights, including attending two meetings in Parliament.

During the workshop we discussed the first steps to getting school students involved in campaigns. Nancy said: "If you realise that people are angry about stuff, make leaflets and badges about it and go as far as you can on the issue". Holding bake sales is a good way to get money to pay for the campaign. Walthamstow Socialist Students holds local meetings each week at Costa and goes on demonstrations, leading chants.

The workshop agreed that meetings should always be inviting for students - informal, held near their schools and not using jargon.

NUS conference and elections

Zoe Brunswick, Manchester Socialist Students

During the conference a breakout meeting was held for those students who are looking to intervene further in the NUS over the coming year.

A number of Socialist Students members will be attending NUS conference as delegates - a nationwide conference to decide the direction of the union for the following year.

Socialist Students are also standing for sabbatical positions at some universities, a position which would allow them to influence the running of and campaigning within student unions.

Students standing for sabbatical positions agreed to coordinate campaigns between universities and support each other via social media.

Delegates to the NUS conference will meet again in the coming months to submit motions to the conference and agree who will speak on which motions. The meeting also discussed standing for a position on the NUS NEC, which, if successful, would allow Socialist Students to participate in the running of the NUS at a national level.

We are confident that involvement with the NUS will help Socialist Students engage with a wider audience and are excited to push on with the campaign!

Corbyn, Labour and the fight against the Tories

Theodore Winston

Introduced by Lenny Shail from the Socialist Party, the session on Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party was full of enthusiastic contributions. Momentum, the Corbyn supporting group, was invited to debate but didn't attend.

The discussion was mainly concerned with in what way Socialist Students should now engage with the Labour Party in light of Jeremy Corbyn's election to the party leadership.

Corbyn was unexpectedly thrust into power after Labour's defeat in the 2015 general election. This defeat was largely a result of Labour's politically deficient programme. Instead of mobilising the mass anger present throughout society after five years of the Con-Dem government, Labour sought to mimic the narrative peddled by the Conservative Party and its allies in the media.

It was clear to everyone in the room that Corbyn's victory has opened up a new period for the growth of socialist consciousness for students wanting to fight the Tories and their austerity agenda.

Yet beyond this was an acute awareness of the tasks which still lie ahead if Corbyn's anti-austerity message is to be realised. Clearly, the Labour Party is divided between Corbyn (supported overwhelmingly by students and young people) on the one side and Blairite MPs and councillors on the other. Labour for the time being contains within it two irreconcilable opposing forces.

There was a clear consensus from all who contributed during the session that the capitalist policies of the Labour Party up and down the country have not changed. The right wing still holds a dead hand grip on the party in local councils, voting to cut public services and undermining Corbyn's leadership.

"If Corbyn isn't careful, he runs the risk of compromising on what made him so popular. The right wing of the party shows no signs of taking a conciliatory approach," said one student.

As such, Socialist Students has to intervene at every opportunity in public meetings to both help Corbyn and his supporters in the fight against the Blairites, as well as building Socialist Students as a campaigning socialist organisation. In my view this means all Socialist Students groups supporting anti-austerity candidates in upcoming local elections, be they Labour Party candidates or otherwise.

Video: A junior doctor in East London explains why they have been forced to go on strike.

Doctors' strike 10th February - photos and reports

St Thomas', South London

Dennis Skinner MP visiting the picket line:

Salisbury

The junior doctors on the picket line outside Salisbury hospital expressed their disappointment and frustration with the government. One doctor said: "There's no conversation and no compromise". They were pleased with the overwhelming support they had received from the public but the

government was not representing public opinion and was ignoring patient support. They felt that patient safety was being ignored and said that 'tired doctors mean more people will die and that's why we are here!'

Jane Ward

Waltham Forest Socialist Students (NE London) show solidarity with the junior doctors' strike and nurses' walkout:

Chesterfield

Massive support for the junior doctors' strike at Chesterfield Royal Hospital was shown by the many members of the public sounding their car horns.

The junior doctors do not want to strike but are being forced to by the government. They believe the government plans will not only endanger patient safety and doctors' health, but the next generation of doctors and the NHS itself.

Elaine Evans

Kings College and Maudsley

Kings College and Maudsley hospitals both had big picket lines. These hospitals are over the road from each other and there was friendly rivalry to make noise and get cars to honk support.

Consultants dropped off cookies in solidarity with the junior doctors. Around 40 student nurses and midwives joined the protest at 10am and there was time for short speeches before the rain really started.

Helen Pattison

Royal Stoke

Junior doctors on the picket line today at the Royal Stoke University Hospital were in a defiant mood. Their confidence has grown since the last strike in January. At times the noise made by them and their supporters with singing and klaxons was so loud that even the horns of passing cars could not be heard!

There were more doctors picketing this time than in January. After an hour or so about 20 of them went to set up a second picket on another entrance. A firefighter in uniform turned up to the picket with cakes and a message of support, and tea and coffee was brought out of the hospital by other NHS staff.

The intransigent approach by 'health' minister Jeremy Hunt has angered not just junior doctors but the vast majority of NHS staff and millions across the country as well.

Cait, who had come to support the doctors, told us: "This is the first time I've been on a picket line since the miners' strike but I had to come along to show my support."

Joe Cairnes, an ex-miner who did 12 months on strike in 1984-85, had not come alone to show support but brought his whole family as well!

Socialist Party members from Stoke and Stafford branches were also there to show support. We did campaign stalls in support of the doctors last Friday and Monday and are doing another later today.

Andy Bentley

Leicester

Picket lines took place at all three main hospitals in Leicester, as well as a 'meet the doctors' event in the city centre. Doctors were keen to explain their stand to the public. Picket lines on the main roads got constant beeps of support from passing vehicles.

One doctor explained: "It's not about us wanting more money, it's about defending the NHS. Of course we work weekends and we support improving the health service, including emergency provision at weekends.

"But the government does want to cut doctors' pay. If not, why all the talk of 'pay protection'? Resources are already short, and if the government wants to put more doctor time into weekends for elective surgery for example, it will come from during the week.

"Unless you employ more doctors the service will become more stretched. On the other hand they are also removing protection against doctors working excessive hours.

"What the government wants is to privatise the NHS. This is part of preparing for that. I don't want to have to check people's bank cards before we care for them."

In Leicester the failure of privatisation has been highlighted by the early ditching of the contract Interserve has for cleaning and catering. Because of cuts to staff levels with a reliance on low paid and insecure staff the service provided by this company has been so bad it has had to be taken off them. Blood was left on ward floors, cleaning was totally unacceptable. Patients were left without food and sometimes given meals past their use by date.

It's good these services are coming back in-house, but we need to be vigilant because the management may try to privatise them again at the first opportunity.

Socialist Students in Leicester has been supporting the doctors too. They held a very successful meeting at Leicester university in support of the NHS, two days before the latest strike.

Jeanna Strutinsky-Mason, a junior doctor, explained their case alongside Socialist Party member Matt Whale, a student nurse.

Steve Score

Gateshead

Junior doctors on the picket line at Gateshead's Queen Elizabeth Hospital had a fantastic public response. Alongside buses and cars tooting, people were eager to express their support. Two elderly women made a point of crossing the road to show their contempt for Cameron and his government, saying: "It's okay for them, they can afford private health care."

The mood on the picket line was a determination to take on health secretary Jeremy Hunt. Even more than the first one this strike was clearly not just about pay and conditions, but also about ensuring we have a well funded NHS.

There was also recognition that the NHS should provide free dental care and free prescriptions. One of the doctors commented that some of her peers training to be doctors couldn't afford to go to the dentist.

Elaine Brunskill

Hackney, London

Clare Doyle interviewed Dr Hugh Grant-Peterkin, an assistant registrar, on the picket line at Homerton Hospital:

"I feel frustrated at how we are being portrayed as 'endangering the NHS', we are trying to protect it. Also, media outlets (including Radio 4 this morning) and the government are trying to say this is only about money, strikes are always about pay and conditions but we are also engaged in a battle to protect the NHS as a whole.

"The plans they have for reclassifying Saturday as 'plain time' and other matters related to pay and conditions will degrade services. The government wants more services for the same or less money. Also the changes have a particularly negative impact on people taking maternity leave and academics.

"They say to us that people working in retail have to work all hours at the same rate, but we don't want this to be a race to the bottom. That's what the government wants. I have no doubt MPs would protest if they were forced to work longer and weekend hours for worse pay and conditions.

"This strike is not about demanding more money, it was agreed as 'pay neutral' at the start; besides, we would want other workers to get paid properly, not drag everyone down! The government has been able to offer 70k with no 'on-call' to doctors to assess people for whether they deserve benefits, there is money to pay for those jobs.

"I believe that these strikes are a way of highlighting what the government is doing to the NHS. I have said it before: this form of capitalism is broken, the relentless hunger for new markets and perpetual growth means there is a need to push privatisation into all areas, irrespective of the evidence to support it.

"Alongside this need for new markets the government appears ideologically opposed to what remains of the welfare state and the provision of care to the most vulnerable. They are dismantling our services but it is not theirs to sell.

"We've got great support from the public and I feel really heartened by the public response, who see us as defending the NHS and see this strike in a wider political context."

Royal Free, London

There was again a very determined mood amongst junior doctors on the picket line at Royal Free Hospital in north London. At times there was a constant barrage of hooting from passing drivers including bus drivers and local council workers. There was overwhelming support from people going into the hospital with the doctors being told to keep up the fight.

One of the doctors was angry that Jeremy Hunt was telling the junior doctors that he knew better than

the doctors (who spend the whole of their time treating and caring for patients) what was in the best interests of the patients.

Chris Newby

Manchester

Doctors and supporters were out again in force at Manchester Royal Infirmary this morning. Confident that they are winning the 'propaganda war' with overwhelming support of the public, doctors were discussing what should happen next.

If the contract is imposed, how could they organise a mass refusal to sign it? How can the action be escalated? There was universal support for the Socialist Party's demand for coordinated trade union action.

The picket lines were buoyed up by a lively march of student nurses and other students around the hospital, including stopping traffic whilst chanting "students and doctors, unite and fight!".

Becci Heagney

Bristol

Junior doctors were out in force today in Bristol with several pickets throughout the city. They were determined to keep fighting for their terms and conditions and to defend the NHS despite the Tories' threats to impose a new contract.

Public support was unwavering too; my conversations with doctors were punctuated by the frequent honking of car horns in support. Despite all the lies and misinformation put out by Jeremy Hunt and the government, people can see what's at stake here. It's the future of the NHS and that's something people trust to life-saving doctors far more the pro-privatisation Tories.

Tom Baldwin

Birmingham

Numbers outside the Queen Elizabeth hospital varied this morning, with up to 100 attending at the peak. Patients and families arriving were overwhelmingly supportive, taking leaflets and stickers. One man walked through in good humour, leaving with stickers all over him.

There was much discussion about whether Jeremy Hunt would move to impose the new contract and what steps the BMA should take if he does. Strikers welcomed passing traffic hooting their solidarity. A group of Birmingham university students also turned out to back the strikers.

Kevin Greenway

Wormwood Scrubs POA members join BMA picket line at Hammersmith hospital:

Basildon

Morale seemed very high at the Basildon hospital BMA picket line today. While trying to get my head round the sight of a bunch of doctors in their hi-viz picket jackets, exiled to the edge of the hospital's property on a busy roundabout, I spoke to some of the pickets.

They stressed that the dispute is not about pay, but safe working conditions. "We are standing up for the NHS", said an Italian doctor, "many of us come from other countries to work in the NHS because we believe in socialised medicine".

Speaking to another doctor I asked what was likely to happen if the government just pressed ahead and imposed the new system. "We have plans", he said. Remember Mr Hunt, your (political) life is in their hands.

Dave Murray

Carlisle

Tooting, South West London

There was a warm welcome from BMA members picketing at Springfield Hospital in Tooting, which is a mental health hospital. Pickets recognised that the proposed contractual changes are about making the health service more attractive for privatisation.

There was particular anger about the prospect of working longer hours in an intensely demanding situation. There was also still excitement about the difference that Jeremy Corbyn might make.

David Maples

Tower Hamlets, London

Anaesthetists, paediatricians and student nurses were among the doctors and supporters gathered for the second day of strike action at the Royal London Hospital. Strikers were keen to discuss the dispute, and got a huge amount of support from the public and other workers going into the hospital.

Vishnu Param, BMA Junior Doctor Rep Barts Health, said: "We're really frustrated as we don't want to strike. We doing this because we feel we have a response to whistleblow on something that could seriously worsen patient care. A compromise on the contract was directly blocked by Hunt. The main response we've had from the government is scaremongering to score political points.

"It looks like either they want to push through privatisation, or they have totally misunderstood all the research. As clinical staff we're already on our knees and the new contract would be so damaging to patients. We'd love to make the NHS better but to do that we need more resources. Increasing the amount of services offered without more resources to fund them is very destabilising."

Naomi Byron

Nottingham

Junior doctor Helen Powell at Queens Medical Centre told the Socialist:

"Junior doctors have been picked on by the government because it thought they would be the easiest target. These new contracts are the thin end of the wedge. I'm sure the government will seek to bring in routine seven-day working for all health staff if they beat us."

Wirral

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 10 February 2016 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Rally to defend jobs in Northern Ireland: "We won't sit on the sidelines and watch as Ballymena is left an economic wasteland"

Daniel Waldron, Socialist Party Northern Ireland

On 8 February, 800 people gathered in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, in opposition to the threatened destruction of manufacturing jobs in the area. The JTI Gallaher cigarette factory and the Michelin tyre plant - the largest employers in the town - are to close with the loss of almost 2,000 jobs, which would have a devastating impact on the local community.

The rally - the first of its kind in the town since 1982 - was called by Unite the Union to try to secure a future for Ballymena and its young people.

It received backing from local sports clubs and community associations, as well as high-profile support from award-winning actors Liam Neeson and James Nesbitt, both from the town.

"We are unstoppable"

"I'm proud to be a unionised worker," said John Allen, Unite convenor in the Michelin factory and Chair of the local area activist committee. "A worker is far from powerless. When we stand together, we are unstoppable. Today shows that when we stand together, there is nothing we cannot achieve. We won't be just the object of investment decisions. We won't sit on the sidelines and watch as Ballymena is left an economic wasteland."

Socialist Youth member Emma Montgomery - a 19-year-old from the town whose mother used to work at JTI Gallaher - spoke of the bleak future already facing young people in the area thanks to Tory and Stormont cuts. Many have to travel long distances to college and the jobs on offer are overwhelmingly low paid and precarious.

The national and regional leadership of Unite were represented on the platform. Irish regional secretary Jimmy Kelly told the crowd: "We're not here to demand crumbs off the top table. This is to demand a better future, a future for our class, across all communities."

Unite the Union - particularly its local activists - are to be congratulated on this excellent initiative. It is vital that working class communities do not simply lie down and accept the loss of manufacturing jobs.

The companies behind the closures should not be let off the hook. They are shifting production to lower-wage economies to maximise profits.

The trade union movement should step up the call for nationalisation of factories threatened with closure by profit-hungry bosses, in order to save jobs and skills. The Socialist Party and Socialist Youth were the only political group to intervene in the rally and raise this demand.

Library workers prepare to escalate strike action

A Unite member

Unite members in Greenwich and Bromley are escalating the libraries' campaigns in both boroughs following recent strike action which launched a joint campaign.

In Bromley the Tories are handing six libraries over to Community Links who will run libraries with unpaid volunteers replacing paid, professional staff. The remaining libraries will be handed over to a private company.

So far, the council is refusing to say who has made a bid. Unite will now target our campaign at Community Links to persuade them to pull out - and when we get the identity of the privateers, they too will be targeted.

In Greenwich, there will be two lobbies of the Labour council in the coming weeks. Attempts will be made to persuade Greenwich Labour members to support the campaign - so far an appeal to Greenwich Momentum has fallen on deaf ears.

The council is conducting a 'public consultation.' Judging by the 1,000 plus signatures gathered on the picket lines, the response from the public will be to oppose the closure. Unite has issued a clear warning - should the council ignore the protests and strikes, there will be further escalated strike action.

Unite is making a call to all those opposing library closures to unite in a coordinated campaign. This can start in south London, where campaigners and unions in Lewisham and Lambeth are also fighting to defend libraries.

A public meeting bringing all four borough campaigns together, alongside campaign group Stand Up For Libraries and the National Shop Stewards Network, could launch a London trade union-led campaign.

Since the Tories came into government, over 400 libraries have closed. Families relying on food banks and benefits and those on low incomes cannot buy books and many will not have internet at home.

One campaigner said: "Libraries facilitate a collective social conscience - library closures lead to collective, social dementia".

Historic joint further education strike

Sam Morecroft, Sheffield UCU (personal capacity)

On the 24 February, lecturer's union UCU and Unison will take joint strike action across England in the further education sector for the first time.

This is a huge step and is to be welcomed, particularly in a sector where pay, terms and conditions have been savaged in recent years. Unison joining UCU to take industrial action can potentially provide a huge boost to our members in further education.

The unions' pay claim, which amounts to just £1 an hour extra for further education workers, has been rejected by the employers. Union members have been balloted for action and voted overwhelmingly in favour, with 74% voting to take action. That's a fantastic indication of the willingness of further education workers to struggle in the face of attacks.

But we need to be clear that one day of action alone is unlikely to force the employers to agree to the pay claim. It's great that Unison and UCU will be taking action together, but what is needed now is a serious plan of escalating action, to show the employers that workers are prepared to struggle and will carry out a serious programme of action.

There cannot and should not be any retreat from the dispute, as has happened all too often in the past, when the leaderships of both unions have shied away from escalating disputes.

Public meetings show readiness of workers to fight back

Alec Thraves

Dozens of activists from across South West Wales attended three public meetings this week that were initiated and supported by Socialist Party Wales members fighting against cuts and job losses.

Carmarthenshire Unison and Llanelli Trades Council representatives explained to their audience the determined stand of their Unison branch in arguing for a 'no cuts' budget and the opposition they face from the Plaid-led council that is carrying out cuts with exactly the same determination as the previously Labour-led council.

Mark Evans, Unison branch secretary, said whichever party slashes jobs and services they will face fierce opposition from his branch, the only Unison branch in Wales supporting a 'no cuts' budget.

This theme was repeated at a meeting of Swansea Trades Council the following evening where news that the local government committees of Britain's two largest unions, Unite and Unison, were both now demanding that councils support 'no cuts' budgets, was greeted enthusiastically.

This was particularly welcome news to the education reps present who are battling against Swansea council's plans to cut the education budget by £5 million a year for the next three years!

NSSN meeting

Finally, Rob Williams, chair of the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN), addressed a NSSN solidarity meeting in Port Talbot for steel workers who are facing mass redundancies at the Tata plant. Trade unionists from across the region spoke passionately about the impact of the job losses for the workers, their families and communities.

Rob, highlighting the real danger of the run down and possible closure of the plant, said that nationalisation, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need (which means Tata's executives would get nothing!) was the only realistic plan to guarantee the jobs of thousands of workers in the area.

Owen Herbert, RMT regional secretary, reminded the meeting of how popular the idea of re-nationalisation of the railways has become and said that nationalisation of steel would receive similar support.

An ex-Visteon worker drew applause when he said that if the government can nationalise to save white collar workers (the bankers) then they should do the same for blue collar workers (the steel workers)!

All three successful public meetings had a common theme: a willingness of workers to prepare the organisation of a fightback against the Tories and the employers, the abject failure of the Labour and trade union leadership in Wales to mount any effective challenge to this slaughter of jobs and services, and the intervention of Socialist Party members throughout Wales offering a fighting, socialist alternative for the future.

This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 11 February 2016 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Workplace news in brief

Taxi tumult

On 10 February after visiting a junior doctors' picket line I got off the train in Bromsgrove, Birmingham to see the road blocked by taxis. Drivers explained that the council closed their rank without discussion the day before.

A new station is being built and the council's move has sparked anger. A joke homemade sign pointed to the next nearest rank a mile away. A message went round the previous night to strike and blockade the road. The word was that the Tory council was panicking and a councillor was on his way. The mood was solid and they were planning to stay all day.

The councillor turned up to negotiate and gave in! He promised strikers that the rank would be restored. One driver said: "look at the different nationalities here, people go on about 'foreign workers' but without these lads - all of us in fact - acting together, we wouldn't have got this result."

Kevin Greenway, Birmingham Central Socialist Party

Rubbish revolt

Coventry refuse workers based at Whitley Depot downed tools on 9 February in response to the suspension of a Unite shop steward amid allegations of ongoing bullying by management. In a show of strength and solidarity over 30 workers descended on Coventry Council House to protest and support

their colleague, as union representatives talked with management.

Determined to show their support, workers remained outside the building all morning and early afternoon. It is vital that Unite nationally throws its support behind the rep and this group of workers.

Coventry Socialist Party

Bullying bosses

The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) has been in talks with BT Openreach over the treatment of their members employed as engineers. This has gone on for years with the company using the process to dismiss and discipline members. Many colleagues believe it's used to get rid of older workers and replace them with cheaper labour.

Performance management has been a problem for BT workers with regular reference to the issue at annual conference. Talks have finished and the CWU is giving BT a matter of weeks to improve their approach or a ballot for industrial action will be invoked.

A BT engineer

Hands off the Butterfields estate!

Resist evictions and gentrification - homes for people, not for profit

Sarah Wrack, Waltham Forest Socialist Party

"Everyone talks about community but this is a real community and they're breaking it up!" That's what Joyce, one of the residents on the Butterfields estate in Walthamstow told me after a street meeting on 13 February which the Socialist Party helped tenants organise.

The Butterfields was owned by Glasspool - a charitable trust which charged relatively low rents compared to the rocketing local market rate. But without a word to the tenants, Glasspool sold the properties to private developers.

At least 15 households have now received eviction notices saying they must be out of their homes within two months and six properties have already been up for sale at auction. The company that now owns 63 of the properties, Butterfields E17 Ltd, is openly saying that more evictions will follow with further rounds of sales.

Protests

Glasspool claims there was a promise that nobody would be evicted. Tenants want to see the contract that was agreed and are considering lobbies of Glasspool and the new landlords.

They will also join the Socialist Party lobbying the budget setting meeting of Waltham Forest council on 3 March. We have raised the idea that the council could step in and compulsory purchase the properties, making them council homes on council rents with secure tenancies for all current tenants.

As a very last resort, the tenants should at least be offered immediate council housing elsewhere in the borough.

Joyce told me that a tiny patch of land next to her house and the space currently occupied by two garages behind it have just been granted planning permission for new houses to be built.

This is the pattern across Waltham Forest. The council is selling off public land to private developers to build shoebox sized buy-to-let flats to satisfy the ballooning private rental sector in one of the most rapidly gentrifying areas of London.

The Butterfields homes have been there since the 1930s. As Anna said at the street meeting: "This is a nice street, it's quiet and the houses are nice. They're not perfect - we all know of the problems with [at this point everyone joined in to complete the sentence] mould. But we're used to dealing with that and the prices are reasonable."

Compensation?

Local Labour MP Stella Creasy has highlighted the situation in the national Guardian and has written to all the tenants expressing her outrage at Glasspool's behaviour. But her proposed solution is that evicted tenants should be given a lump sum as compensation.

This might help with immediate costs of moving but it won't make up for the lifetime of inflated rents compared to what they pay now. And it won't compensate the whole community for losing yet more 'affordable' housing in favour of rip-off buy-to-let landlords.

Most of the Butterfields residents are low paid, some need benefits to help them pay even the rents they have now. Mr and Mrs Rashit invited us in for a Turkish coffee after the meeting. Dogan is retired and receives a small pension. Sukran works as a cleaner in a school two hours a day. She receives housing benefit and already has to top up £130 a month from her minimal wage to make the rent.

They're already on the waiting list for council housing. But they don't want to move away from their friends, Sukran's job, and Whipps Cross hospital where Dogan gets medical treatment regularly. Their daughter lives ten minutes away.

Joyce explained to the meeting that she has an assured tenancy and can't be touched for now. But she wants to be involved in the campaign to defend her neighbours. "I've got friends here. My neighbour over the road died recently and I'd been looking after her. It's that kind of street."

The street meeting agreed to call another meeting a couple of days later which everyone took away leaflets for and promised to spread the word.

The second meeting started with reports from residents who had been investigating Butterfields E17 Ltd.

Marc-Anthony had been to visit the registered address of the company but there was no sign of it. Nicole had looked into the two registered officers of the company, who have had a number of short-lived small businesses before.

Battle ahead

The meeting agreed to launch a public campaign and organise a public meeting appealing for support from other housing campaigners, trade unionists and the whole community.

There's a battle ahead at the Butterfields but it's clear that the residents are overwhelmingly up for a

fight. They know the alternative is ending up in a private rental market that's gone mad and probably being forced out of the borough, if not out of London.

Linda Taaffe spoke at the meeting from the Socialist Party and explained the importance of getting organised and keeping track of who lives where and when evictions are threatened so that we can mobilise to resist. At the second meeting Anna and Sylvia took responsibility for going door-to-door to make a start on this.

Marc-Anthony summed up the mood on the estate saying: "We know we might not win, but we've got to try to do something."

■ **Public meeting: 7pm, 24 February, Shernhall Street Methodist Church, E17**

■ **National housing demo: 12pm, 13 March, Lincoln's Inn Field, WC2A 3TL**

The above version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 16 February 2016 and may vary from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Additional report posted on 18.2.16:

Picket of Savills' auction

Yesterday a small group of Butterfields' tenants and supporters scored a big victory.

Six out of around 60 properties from their estate were listed on the Savills auction list at the swanky Marriott hotel in Grosvenor Square, London. Hundreds of buyers streaming in were handed appeals by pickets not to bid for Lots 28, 29, 60, 61, 93 and 129.

Calls were made not to buy properties where people lived. Some potential buyers wanted no trouble and promised to avoid buying properties with people in them.

However, Savills had no such sympathies and threw campaigners out who tried to go into the auction to see for themselves the gory process of selling people's homes.

Some had no moral barometer. Two properties were sold for £300k each. But then two were withdrawn and at the end of the day two remained unsold. In effect the campaigners won 4-2!

Tenants and all supporters are invited to come along to the next Butterfields Campaign to Stay meeting on Wednesday February 24th at 7pm at Shern Hall Methodist Church, Shernhall Street, London E17, where a proposal will be put to return to the Marriott with a mass picket, should there be any Butterfields dwellings listed as lot numbers at the next auction on 2nd March.

For more information contact 0795 2283 5588

Sheffield No-Cuts People's Budget conference

Alistair Tice

Initially John McDonnell accepted the local PCS union's invitation to speak at the Sheffield No-Cuts People's Budget conference held on Saturday 13 February but then couldn't fit it into his itinerary and sent a verbal message of support.

However at the Labour Party meeting he did speak at, he said about Sheffield's Labour councillors who are proposing 400 redundancies and £28 million in service cuts: "They can't do anything else ... councillors are in the most difficult position, because legally they have to set a budget and if they don't, the officers will do it for them."

It's a pity John didn't attend our conference, because he would have heard how Labour councillors do have a choice and could set a legal, balanced, no-cuts budget for 2016-17.

The conference, initiated by the PCS (civil servants' union) Sheffield Town Committee, was supported by the local Trades Council, GMB union and People's Assembly as well as the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), and was attended by 45 activists from several trade unions and campaigns.

Speakers

Marion Lloyd (PCS) opened the meeting by explaining that the Tory government was moving the Northern Powerhouse to London by closing her BIS (Business, Innovation and Skills) office, costing 250 jobs, on top of 500 jobs going with the closure of the city's tax office. Marion said that it was the need for a city-wide response to all these central and local government redundancies that had prompted the PCS Town Committee to initiate the No-Cuts People's budget campaign.

Chris Baugh (PCS assistant general secretary) exposed the Tory austerity agenda and called on all unions to take solidarity action with the junior doctors; and Helen Davies from Barnet council Unison explained how their strike action against outsourcing had built the confidence of council workers to fight the cuts.

Les Wray brought official support from the Trades Council, saying: "Enough is enough. We can't wait till 2020. There'll be nothing left."

Neil Carbutt (South Yorkshire Fire Brigades Union secretary) explained how the South Yorkshire Fire authority had quadrupled its reserves since 2008 by cutting the number of firefighters by over a third and shutting fire stations down, and now wanted to reduce fire control staff from five to only three on each shift.

Shirley Frost (Benefits Justice Campaign) said that 33,000 of the poorest people in Sheffield are affected by the bedroom tax and the demand to pay at least 23% of the council tax.

Speaking for the South Yorkshire Freedom Riders, Sharron Milsom said that their two year campaign, including direct action, had won back travel concessions for the disabled and elderly, but that the Passenger Authority now wanted to increase child fares despite a £2 million underspend last year which it has put into its reserves.

Paul Page (Defend Council Housing) spoke about the Tory's Housing and Planning Bill which will reduce social housing even further and said that Labour councils should resist the bill by a programme of council house building at truly affordable rents.

10 point alternative

All these campaign issues are incorporated in the 10 point Alternative Budget - see below - that Jeremy Short (Socialist Party member and TUSC agent) proposed to the conference. Jeremy outlined a People's Budget that would not only reverse redundancies and service cuts but also fund 100%

bedroom tax and council tax relief for benefit claimants and bring the waste management service (bins and recycling), currently mis-managed by Veolia, back in house. It also instructs the council to use borrowing powers to build 1,000 new council homes a year until 2020.

How will this be paid for? Jeremy said that at a council budget consultation event, Sheffield Labour council leader Julie Dore had accused "those talking of using reserves as making political mischief". Now, lo and behold, we find that the council is proposing to raid the reserves to plug the authority's pension fund deficit by £80 million. This includes leaving only £1,000 in the PFI reserves which we had been told could not be touched because they were "earmarked"!

Unfortunately though, the council still won't use reserves to not sack 400 workers or not make £28 million of service cuts. Why? Because it is not prepared to fight the Tory government.

Our alternative budget would be financed by saving £8 million on redundancy payments (because of no redundancies) and diverting £27 million from the PFI reserves. This one year of No Cuts would give the council time to build support amongst city trade unions and local communities and link up with other local authorities to present a united front against the Tories, to force them to concede more government funding or force them out of office altogether.

The conference agreed the 10 point alternative budget which we will publicise prior to our lobby of the budget setting council meeting on 4th March. PCS will also be organising a Sheffield 'march for jobs' linking up the fight against redundancies in the civil service and local council.

Proposed Amendment to Sheffield City Council Budget 2016-17

1. This amendment is designed to implement a legal balanced budget for 2016-7(1), but one which involves no cuts to services and increases spending in some areas. The aim is to reverse the proposed cuts for one year to enable Sheffield to mount a campaign with other authorities to force the government to restore the previous levels of funding to local councils.
2. The council will make no redundancies during 2016-17, a saving of £8.2 million.
3. The proposed £27.6 million cut to Portfolio Services will be scrapped.
4. Funding to the Discretionary Housing Payment fund will be increased by £2.4 million, effectively ending the 'Bedroom Tax' in Sheffield.
5. Funding to Council Tax Support will be increased by a further £5 million to give 100% relief to those on benefit who have been forced to pay 23% of Council Tax.
6. The household waste management contract currently held by Veolia will be brought back in-house. This will be at least cost-neutral and may result in significant savings even after penalty payments are made(2).
7. £26.8 million from 'earmarked' reserves will be used to fund the reversal of cuts and increased spending. This money will be diverted from the £80.1 million proposed pension deficit payment which has been drawn partly from the earmarked reserves for PFI future expenditure(3).
8. Council representatives on the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority are instructed to propose the use of reserves to reverse cuts, including the loss of 8 control room staff. Similarly, representatives on the Combined Authority Transport Committee are instructed to vote for the use of reserves to reverse the 10p increase in child fares and restore free travel for senior citizens.
9. The Cabinet is instructed to bring forward proposals to make maximum use of HRA funds and

borrowing powers to increase the council house building programme to 1,000 a year from 2017-18 to 2020-21, making necessary adjustments to the 30-year plan.

10. The Cabinet is instructed to bring forward proposals to develop a national campaign with other local authorities to pressure the government to reverse the cuts in central government funding for Sheffield and other councils and provide relief funding for those authorities that have had to deplete their reserves or adopt other temporary budget balancing measures to maintain vital public services.

Notes:

(1) As set out below, the revised budget is balanced as follows:

Increased spending of:

Reverse Portfolio cuts £27.6m

Discretionary Housing Payments £2.4m

Council Tax Support £5.0m

Total £35.0m

To be financed by:

No redundancy payments £8.2m

Diversion from PFI reserves £26.8m

Total £35.0m

(2) In 2014-5 £27.9m was paid to Veolia. GMB estimates that in-house service would cost £25 million, so savings would be made even after penalty payments for early ending of contract.

(3) Total reserves are to be reduced by £53.6 million in 2016-17, including a £28.3 million reduction in the PFI reserve (leaving only £1,000). The statement says: *This is primarily as a result of the planned temporary use to fund an early pension deficit payment to deliver savings for 2017/18 to 2019/20.*

A version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 16 February 2016 and may vary from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

Absence of Corbynism as Labour swings Tory axe again!

Liz Filer, Southampton Socialist Party

Southampton Labour Council squandered a major opportunity to change course and build on the anti-austerity mood that swept Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of Labour and produced the first junior doctors strike in 40 years.

As the council's budget debate unfolded sharp words were exchanged across the chamber. But when it came to contributions from the public gallery it was all too much and the police were called to remove us. We refused to leave and stood our ground in support of anti-cuts councillors Keith Morrell, Don Thomas and Andrew Pope, who all voted against cuts.

Prettifying austerity

If anything, this was a step further to the right as Labour councillors presented their enthusiastic vision of 'transformation' - in truth cuts through privatisation. Incapable of honest debate with the alternative presented to them by Declan Clune of Southampton Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition and Denise Wyatt, a Millbrook resident, we were treated to 30 minutes of prettifying austerity and distortion.

The housing crisis in the city has been 'tackled' by removing 5,000 names from the council waiting list, classifying them as those 'who don't have justified housing needs'.

As care for the elderly faces growing strains, with many kept unnecessarily in hospitals for lack of community beds, the council proposes to close another 45-bed council care home.

The stark reality of austerity, growing poverty and family breakdown is that 25% of children in Southampton live in poverty.

Rather than standing with the community, refusing to vote for cuts and fighting for the government funding the city urgently needs, council leader Simon Letts, justified, his position by distorting the position of Southampton anti-cuts councillors as a 'failed call to borrow our way out of a crisis'. It's no surprise his comments were met with heckles from the public gallery to fight the cuts, not carry them out!

More alarming was the claim from councillor Challoner that these cuts were being carried out with the 'consent' of the council trade unions. Over 200 jobs will be cut by this budget.

Council workers are facing enormous pressures as staff numbers are cut, those left are bearing impossible workloads. With further cuts to come, the support of the Unite and Unison local government committees for Labour councils to set no-cuts budgets is certain to be added to by others in the trade unions.

Pressure

Regardless of the vote, these cuts will be opposed. We need to pressure the council to use its £40 million reserves to maintain library funding, protect jobs and services and link up with other campaigns across the country to turn the tide on this weak and divided Tory government.

That will include the task of challenging the 'no choice' councillors with a clear anti-cuts alternative at the ballot box in May.

"Staines has never seen anything like it!"

Paul Couchman, Staines Socialist Party and Save Our Services in Surrey

Given the absence of a local Momentum group, Staines Socialist Party decided to host a meeting on 11 February to discuss the Corbyn phenomena and to invite all those interested in a real anti-cuts, socialist movement to come along.

We invited anti-austerity activists from the local Labour Party, Green Party, and the Socialist Party to speak. RMT President Sean Hoyle addressed the meeting.

Momentum

All agreed on the need for Momentum to be inclusive and open to non-Labour Party members and on its potential for growth if it was. There was a real mood of optimism at the packed meeting, full of

energy and enthusiasm. Staines has never seen anything like it!

Holly, a local BMA junior doctors' rep, fresh from her picket line at St. Peters Hospital the day before, said how nice it was to hear all about this great guy called Jeremy - unfortunately there is a very different Jeremy in her life at the moment! In the face of Jeremy Hunt imposing the new contracts she promised more action to come.

Ali, one of the 'Heathrow 13' Plane Stupid protesters explained how they are currently threatened with prison sentences over their direct action protest against a third runway at Heathrow.

Everyone agreed that the election of Jeremy Corbyn was a significant breakthrough for the left.

Matt, a local Socialist Party member and prison officers' union rep said he wished he had gotten involved earlier. He decided to join the Socialist Party during the 2015 general election when he saw no difference between the mainstream parties and was impressed with our stand as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC). TUSC fought on the side of the trade unions and for socialist policies - including for the right to strike for the Prison Officers' Association.

Rebecca Geach, local Spelthorne Labour Party parliamentary candidate at the last election, said we should build on the unity seen at the meeting.

Unison and Unite

The news that both Unite and Unison's local government groups have adopted a policy of calling on Labour councils to refuse to make cuts was greeted with a huge round of applause.

The meeting agreed to work together within Save Our Services in Surrey to develop and expand the anti-cuts network and to also to continue to push Momentum to open its doors to the wider anti-austerity left and commit to socialist policies.

Students, unions and parents unite to save Pent Valley School

Eric Segal, East Kent Socialist Party

A coach packed with campaigners determined to save Pent Valley school in Kent left Cheriton to lobby Kent County Council in Maidstone.

Cheriton is a working class area in Folkestone and the Tory controlled council is responsible for the rundown of our services in social care, public health, libraries and in particular the threat to close Pent Valley school. We demand the school remains open, fully funded and under local authority control.

The Swale Trust group of academies is currently overseeing the management and administration of Pent Valley but the school remains under local authority control. Councillors now want to close it and turn it into a 'free school'.

We say that councillors, whatever the colour of their rosettes, are elected to represent us and provide and protect our services. We do not want to hear them say that 'there will be difficult decisions to make.'

South East Kent Trades Union Council unanimously agreed to campaign to stop the threatened closure

of Pent Valley. The campaign is strengthened by the decisions of the local government committees of both Unison and Unite trade unions to demand that councils implement legal no-cuts budgets, using the millions held in reserves, together with prudent borrowing, to stave off cuts and closures.

Unison and Unite have organised a further lobby of Kent Council's education cabinet meeting on 17 February.

Right to protest

This trade union and community led campaign has united local people against the closure threat. However the executive principle of the Swale Trust, Jon Whitcombe, said that he would not authorise students to go to the lobby. So much for democracy and free speech Jon!

However students were on the lobby in what amounts to a school student strike. We will defend school students from any disciplinary action and are calling on trade unionists and community campaigners to show similar courage and audacity and join us on our next lobby.

"You can cut the cake but not our libraries!"

Sarah Smith, Coventry West Socialist Party

Coventry Central Library marked its 30th birthday on 10 February and the guest of honour at the celebration was leader of Coventry City Council Ann Lucas. She proudly cut a cake to celebrate - despite her leading the council that's cutting our libraries!

All our libraries are still threatened with closure and under the current plans almost all libraries other than Central will close on a Wednesday and Sunday. Even Central will close an hour earlier.

Willenhall and Arena libraries are both being moved to cheaper buildings, 35 library jobs will be cut and the mobile library is being scrapped altogether.

Save Coventry Libraries went to the event to tell Ann Lucas to cut the cake but not the libraries, during a peaceful protest to highlight the hypocrisy of Coventry City Council. We were thanked and supported by a number of people in the audience at the event - and we will carry on fighting for our libraries!

London lobbies against cuts to jobs and services

Paula Mitchell, London Socialist Party

In Tower Hamlets on 17 February a second People's Budget meeting is being held jointly between the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition and the Tower Hamlets Independent group of councillors. Following a successful first forum, people have been signing petitions and filling out consultation sheets to say they want no cuts in Tower Hamlets.

Labour Mayor John Biggs is proposing savage cuts to the tune of £31 million, including cruel closures such as the incontinence laundry service and school trips to a rural studies centre - when they have £71 million in the bank!

Service users

TUSC supporters and Socialist Party members are campaigning for a no-cuts budget amendment to be put to the council meeting on 24 February - which local trade unionists and service users will lobby to back up the speakers against cuts inside.

Around London there are meetings taking place to argue for no-cuts budgets - from Ealing Against Cuts, to Hackney TUSC, to Socialist Party hosted meetings in Newham and Waltham Forest.

And these are followed by lobbies of the budget setting meetings. Combined, Labour councils have billions in reserves, yet they are slashing youth and children's services, libraries and other vital services.

All over London people are asking, if Jeremy Corbyn won the leadership of the Labour Party on an anti-cuts platform, why don't Labour councillors make a stand and vote no cuts?

Join the London lobbies: call on councillors not to vote for cuts!

- Greenwich: 17 & 24 February
- Newham: 22 February
- Ealing: 23 February
- Lewisham: 24 February
- Tower Hamlets: 24 February
- Camden: 29 February
- Hackney: 2 March
- Waltham Forest: 3 March

Featured letter

If I had been in 1980s Labour, I'd have supported Militant

Richard Price, Gloucestershire Socialist Party

I used to think Militant were the bad guys. I joined the Labour Party in 1995 as a 20-year-old student. Most if not all of Militant (then in Labour, now called the Socialist Party) had already been expelled or had resigned from Labour.

Blair was already in charge, and all I could see was that we were finally going to be rid of the Tories. I thought Labour was still a socialist party - my political knowledge and history were not enough for me to think otherwise.

Labour swept to power of course, and I proudly carried my membership card with the new 'Clause Four' printed on its reverse. I did not appreciate the significance of what it had replaced.

When, with other Labour Party members, I first saw footage of Neil Kinnock's famous speech delivered to the 1985 party conference, which I had been too young to recall from the time, I cheered with the rest of them. Militant had been wreckers, stopping Labour from being able to achieve power and to help the people that really needed it.

That is what I was led to believe, and I bought into it. This hugely embarrasses me now.

Labour government

I had visions of perhaps forging a career with Labour when I left university in 1998. Instead I went into local government, where I have mostly worked ever since. It was through my work in local government that I first discovered for myself that the Labour Party was not so different to the Tories.

In my first three roles, I worked in Labour-controlled authorities under a Labour government. The cuts were arguably even more severe in the late 1990s to mid-2000s than now, as there were more services to slash or privatise, and more workers to make redundant.

I became active as a rep in my union, helping members facing bullying and harassment and 'performance management', the rising number of disciplinary cases at the hands of bosses. We struck over pay and pensions and detrimental changes to our terms and conditions. And we saw valued colleagues leave through redundancy, or simply because they had had enough.

I finally left the Labour Party and joined the Socialist Party. My story appeared recently in the Socialist (see socialistparty.org.uk "Why I joined: I already feel as if I am finally home").

I have certainly learned a lot about the history of Militant from my new comrades over the past few months. I would like to think that had I been in the Labour Party in the 1980s, I would have been one of them.

Socialist's anti-war art on show in Bradford

Ian Slattery, Bradford Socialist Party

Currently on display at the Bradford Playhouse is a series of paintings by artist and Socialist Party member Peter Robson. The watercolours cover a number of issues relating to war, from collateral damage to those ignored by the history books.

In advance of his publication of a new series of paintings about the World War One, Peter spoke to the Socialist about the role art can play in political movements.

"Artists have a right - a duty - to put up a mirror and reflect what's going on in the world. What is the purpose of art if it doesn't prod and agitate people?"

"That's what I'm passionate about my art doing. It isn't always easy to look at, but hopefully it angers people and motivates them.

"Life can be hard for prospective artists, with confrontational work often ignored by galleries who want safer pieces that will be a more reliable attraction. But you have to be honest and unafraid - and to those looking for protest art then don't give up searching, there are plenty of us out there!"

Refugee crisis: poem

Journey

Festive lights float above the streets below

as the bus starts, stops and starts again
on the journey through town. Upstairs a hubbub
of world languages that resemble an orchestra
warming up. The occasional cymbal crash
of a mobile phone breaks the aural warmth.
It is home here and we feel safe so we dream
of monsoons, rivers, islands and the stars.
On Oxford Street a one legged man in white shorts
begs outside a Body Shop, old wooden crutches
to emphasise his plight. Crutches that speak of
another time, the train to Dover and an earlier war.
Our little world is well lit up as we pass through
a perpetual cool Britannia where style is for sale.
Around us the black cabs bully the red buses, a sign
that there is a gap between the gaudily dressed shops
and a war of salvation that is to be delivered courtesy
of a Pandora's Box of suited rats, who want for nothing
but a conscience. The grass of Parliament Square
is slippery underfoot as the fiery speeches float above.
As one we have lights and some peace at Christmas
but for them it will be where to lay this broken body
or where to lay that broken body. Then weep.

Steve Nally

Letter: Brum Blairite

Hannah Sell answered the false claim of sexism on the part of Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters really well in issue 885 of the Socialist. (See socialistparty.org.uk, 'Outrageous attacks on Corbyn for "sexism"'.)

The Blairite MP Jess Phillips led the accusations. Her opposition to democratic accountability, and the

aggressive defence of her career, are becoming increasingly well-known.

In fact she has been aggressively defending two careers since last May's general election. She is still actually one of my local councillors!

She refused to stand down before her term expired to save the hard-pressed council taxpayers the £25,000 cost of a by-election. When councillors' expenses are published, we will be able to see if her concern for local taxpayers stretched to not claiming her councillor's allowance

Clive Walder, Birmingham Socialist Party

<http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/22245>