

the★commune

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Political platform of The Commune

thecommuene.co.uk



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we're not 'all in it together': no to austerity britain!

editorial of *The Commune*

The message hammered home at the Labour, Tory and Liberal Democrat conferences was clear: 'we' have been living beyond our means and now have to accept slashed public spending to steady the ship of state.

While a few months ago even the mainstream press railed against the excesses of the City of London and corrupt MPs, today their fire is directed almost solely against working-class living standards. The only questions on the papers' and pollsters' agenda are 'what should be cut?' and 'who do you trust most to make the right cuts?'

After his conference speech, incoming Conservative chancellor George Osborne was congratulated by the media for his willingness to make 'tough choices' on welfare and public sector pay: perhaps they might have mentioned that his choices are not 'tough' on the likes of him and his party, but rather, tough on the victims of his plans.

The Labour Party has postured as opponents of 'Tory cuts' yet itself has introduced huge attacks on benefits such as in its Welfare Reform Bill. The Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg embarrassed his party by promising not only "savage cuts" but an era of "progressive austerity".

Even at September's Trades Union Congress the debate focused not on how the workers' movement should organise against cuts and defend jobs and public services, but rather, what can be done to ensure it is Labour cuts rather than Tory cuts that we have to suffer. The TUC's acceptance of the mainstream parties' pro-austerity consensus - which owes much to its unwillingness to further destabilise the already-sinking Brown government - has left an open goal for the

ideological proponents of cuts to burden the working class with the cost of the recession: and many in the movement accept the lie that there is no alternative.

But it is not the responsibility of the workers' movement to tell the capitalist state machine how it can balance its books: that is their problem, not ours. The trade unions should at the very least fight to defend workers' existing rights in the workplace and the provision of free public services. Yet the TUC bigwigs rest impassive in the face of a huge social crisis.

Several groups of workers have taken action despite their leaders' inactivity. In this issue of *The Commune* we report on the struggle of teaching staff at Tower Hamlets College, an example of the now-rare practice of going on all-out strike until workers' demands are satisfied. So too have refuse workers in three major cities taken such action, while postal workers are also fighting hard against cuts.

But as well as the industrial front, there is also a lack of any political alternative to the main three parties. Some on the left argue that we need the unions to create a Labour Party mark II before the election, or revive the inglorious 'No2EU' coalition, which abandoned so many internationalist principles and won so few votes in June's European election.

But politics is not just, or even mainly, about elections. So many times before the left has rushed into last-minute electoral campaigns, each time scoring fewer votes and with increasingly tame politics. Such makeshift initiatives neither go beyond well-worn Labourite ideas, nor are they any substitute for creating real workplace and community organisation to resist the recession and build confidence that an alternative way of running society could be realised. This issue of *The Commune* looks at cases of how that work can be done.

the commune's activities around britain

★London: The Commune are at most major demonstrations in the capital and also have our own activities. We are running a series of reading groups on workplace organising this autumn, as well as our monthly forums.

Join our email announcements list at <https://lists.riseup.net/www/info/thecommune-london>. Phone David on 07595 245494 for more info

★Bristol: after our session at the Anarchist Bookfair last month we are planning further meetings: send an email to uncaptiveminds@gmail.com to join mailing list

★West Midlands: we participate in the Coventry Radical Network and will also be initiating a meeting on local organising work. If you're interested in the meeting or our network, call Dave on 02476 450027

★Wrexham: we are planning a series of meetings around the title "Storming the heavens—alternatives to capitalism". Paper sales will also be launched in and around the town centre

★North-West: in September we held our first public forum in Manchester and are planning more events shortly: contact Mark on 07976 386737

★South Yorkshire-based activists interested in The Commune should get in touch with Barry in Sheffield on 07543 652629

★The Commune also have a Facebook group. You can sign up for news and debate at <http://facebook.com/home.php?#/group.php?gid=100975860952>

★Visit the website at www.thecommune.co.uk or get in touch via email— uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

fragile livelihoods

★Earlier this year BMW laid off 850 agency workers at their Oxford Cowley factory. There was widespread TV coverage of a video of workers angrily rebuking and pelting the Unite union official who had kept his members in the dark—but a planned mass picket of the factory the following week flopped. Here we report on the situation seven months later.



by Brian Rylance

The Commune's 23rd February report on the BMW Cowley plant lay-offs has taken a new and unusual twist with the announcement that Mini production is to be increased, 'safeguarding' present employment and hinting at new jobs. This news has been greeted with considerable joy by the *Oxford Mail*. Yet the fact is that the jobs were cut in an unthinking response to the wider economic downturn, and as was reported by *The Commune* at the time, this was despite the fact that Mini sales were "not falling."

Now in a round of jubilation BMW are hailed as heroes who are providing jobs for those on the breadline. No more mention is made of the cruel way they threw people on the dole without even a shred of economic reasoning and without it even being questioned by the Unite union. In a response to the news of an impending recession they made a panic decision and without even any regard for their own sales numbers they indulged in the orgy of capitalist 'self harming', laying off the very workers who would normally buy the products that keep the economy booming!

The chaos of the markets obviously hits the economically vulnerable first every time it falters and the union is simply not up to the task of defending their rights. The *Oxford Mail* quotes a Unite rep as saying "It would be nice if any new people were given permanent contracts, but it is tremendous news for the plant and for Oxford" — such pleas do nothing to take the company to task over its callous behaviour, and totally fail to protect the employment rights of the workers. BMW would far rather lay off too many rather than too few and Unite clearly failed to question the decision and failed to look towards the rights of their more vulnerable members. The corporations make bad decisions yet are hailed as wealth creators: but we must be clear that that they are creating wealth for the few, with no regard for the many.

what are the london post strikes really about?

★Sheila Cohen (NUJ) interviews CWU Divisional Rep Mark Palfrey: see www.thecommune.co.uk for full text

Basically, Royal Mail completely went back on an agreement they had made - there's no other way of putting it. They've broken their own agreement. They've broken the terms of the existing national agreement, and they've broken large numbers of the local agreements our branches have. Since about June of this year they've introduced what they call revisions, which are basically job reductions. They've done this by what they call executive action, which means without agreement[...]

We're in a major recession. So of course revenue's dropped, volume's dropped. But if you look at the history of Royal Mail, you will see that it survives those dips, and as soon as the economy picks up people start advertising again. Whether or not it'll ever go back to what it was previously I don't know, but the problem is everything's about short-termism. Nothing's built to look at the future. It's all aimed at downsizing and selling off the silverware, selling off the premises and relocating in some industrial estate in the middle of nowhere.

It was in response to all these problems the London Division balloted our members in late June and got a 91% yes vote for strike action. Since then we've staged or will have staged fifteen 24-hour strikes. Even Royal Mail has admitted to our national negotiators that the strikes are still being supported by 95% of our members. That figure shows the level of support that we have had and continue to have. Some have taken more action, depending on what's going on in each locality. Basically Royal Mail has declared war on its workforce and particularly the postal workers in London.

The members' resolve has strengthened and hardened over the few last weeks. We saw a slight bit of drift after June, when the strike started, because the work tends to be lighter during the summer, but now the members are supporting the strikes just as much as they did in the outset, and those you speak to in the meetings are adamant. They've now lost over £1000 in wages, but they're adamant that they're going to see it out to the bitter end, and that's before we even get into the national ballot declared on 8th October - we're confident of getting a big Yes vote nationally on that. So our members' resolve is magnificent, their support has been magnificent, and they understand the issues, that's why they're so strong.

Because of the privatisation issue that was going on last year, we passed an emergency motion at the 2009 CWU general conference that should privatisation go in we would cease to fund the Labour Party. That's still on the stocks. However, because of all that's gone on during the dispute, London postal workers have demanded that they be balloted on that issue. Under the rules we can only do that on a consultative basis, but we have, and the results are that overwhelmingly people blame the government. We don't want to lose our political voice, but we feel that we should not be



post strikes arouse public hostility, but the workers are fighting to defend the service itself

funding the Labour Party or "New Labour". And that has come from the ordinary postal workers. It isn't a political initiative from anyone, it isn't being driven by what I would call the usual suspects, it's come from the picket lines, it's come from the sorting offices, and it's come from their experience of what this government has done to our industry. It's one of their main frustrations. Speak to any postal worker about what they think of Royal Mail, about the government, and they'll tell you quite clearly.

There's been a lot of public opposition to this dispute, helped along by the media. The notion is that postal workers are acting deliberately just to be disruptive. I know how false that is, because I have to deal with some of the hardships - terrible hardships people are going through. Some of our part-time members who only work 20 hours a week - when they take a day's strike it's a quarter of their pay gone. But they're still solid, because of the issues. The struggle is not that we want to destroy this industry. We want to see a growing Royal Mail, but what the British public don't realise is liberalisation was brought in to reduce the cost to big business.

How these top 50 companies - I'm talking about outfits like HSBC, massive, multi-multi-millionaire companies - were able to cut their costs in half... That wasn't some European thing dreamt up by some bureaucrat in Brussels, it was worked up by big business - they went to our government. As a result of their so-called "liberalisation", requested by big business, granted by this government, we've lost tens of thousands of jobs. Britain now, in my opinion - you tell me who's got a good job? We ain't all going to be nurses, we ain't all going to be trained - you used to be able to go into gas, this that and the other - the only industry that's still left for most what I'd call working class kids is something like the Post Office. Once you kill that, where do those people go?

There's a war going on... We're in a war with Royal Mail, a war that we must win.

★To make a contribution to the London Division's urgently-needed hardship fund, send cheques payable to 'CWU London Divisional Committee' to John Denton, CWU London regional secretary, 2nd Floor, 33-41 Dallington Street, London EC1V 0BB

tuc: another wasted opportunity?

by Gregor Gall

This was by far the highest profile Congress of the TUC in many years, most of that being to do with the pre-general election period of more frenzied official politics. The Congress began with Brendan Barber suggesting that big public service cuts by any future government could not only create a 'double dip' recession but also bring about social disorder. But by Tuesday most of the affiliated unions had rolled over when Brown told them Labour's cuts wouldn't be as big, quick or bad as those of the Tories.

Then there was a bit of attention over a motion which had the temerity to suggest that the mandatory wearing of high heeled shoes by women was not good for their health. But the biggest bang was over a motion on Israel/Palestine from the FBU. And on the last day the motion on the People's Charter was passed.

So in the biggest and deepest recession for many decades, the TUC was not the annual parliament or council of war of the union movement which adopted a bold strategy to deal with the continuing attacks on its members' living standards (other than over the People's Charter). No surprise there but that does not mean it is unreasonable to suggest that it should have been.

It is an advance that the People's Charter was passed, especially when Labour organised its rejection at both the STUC and Wales TUC congress earlier this year. But charging the TUC with a major role in organising its campaigning and gaining 1 million signatures for the Charter in the run up to the general election does not inspire much confidence.

More than anything else this year's TUC shows two things.

First, that economically (or industrially) the union movement has not been up to the task of resisting capital's terms for dealing with the consequences of this global recession. I say 'resisting' rather than mount effective resistance because I don't want to put the cart before the horse.

Second, and on the political front, the union movement is in the main obsequious (not awkward) in the face what 'their' party is doing to them and their members. The number of times that union leaders have warned Brown and Labour that disaster lies ahead if they do not change course has been so many that each has a declining impact.

It doesn't seem to be that such union leaders are stupid enough to think a warning shot alone will do the trick. It's more that they think there is nothing else they can do because they lack muscle (or are unwilling to use what which they do have for fear of handing the Tories an own goal). And because of the weakness, division and lack of credibility of the left, the unions are in the main left with Labour. No matter the correctness of the left, it is still not a serious force or contender.

This really is, then, rock and a hard place. Only if Britain had a Die Linke (notwithstanding its problems) would this situation be different. The RMT inspired initiative for an electoral slate for the forthcoming election is too little too late to be any parallel.

So - and without any sign of an immediate and large upturn in industrial struggle - it looks like the union movement is in for another long period of defensive struggles. Let's hope at least we see some struggle. Only then can we look to begin to see any 'green shoots' for turning back the tide of employer dominance and neo-liberalism.

gordon brown's workhouses for single mothers

by Emma Gallwey

September was an exceptionally rough month for many mothers. They took a further beating at the hands of the state with the Labour Party's stultified attempts to kick into motion its lumbering electoral machine, in the mad rush to outdo the Conservative Party's social conservatism. During his mid September speech to the TUC on spending cuts the Prime Minister revealed that New Labour had decided to drop its manifesto pledge to increase paid maternity leave for mothers to one year. In a qualification to this decision Gordon Brown added that this would be counter-balanced by granting fathers the right to take three months of paid paternity leave during the second six months of their child's life. This was on the condition that the mother returned to work. Following this announcement Brown proceeded to make a pronounced and very hostile attack on teenage mothers during his keynote speech at the Labour Party conference. The scale and seriousness of this attack can be seen as a new departure in the state's attempt to control female reproduction, and to penalise and control some of society's most vulnerable women.

In a lengthy and wide-ranging description of the chaos being wreaked on British society by teenage mothers, Brown announced that "from now on all 16 and 17 year old parents who get support from the taxpayer will be placed in a network of supervised homes". He added that the purpose of "these shared homes will offer not just a roof over their heads, but a new start in life where they learn responsibility and how to raise their children properly". Brown described himself as addressing a problem which for "too long has gone unspoken, the number of children having children". (Perhaps the Prime Minister has never perused the pages of recent Tory-convert Sun newspaper, nor indeed the Daily Mail, Evening Standard, and Daily Telegraph publications, which regularly adorn their pages with stories of these so-called disastrous mothers). Brown described his 'family intervention projects' as a 'tough love' policy measure designed to address "tough social questions". He then proceeded to describe these single parents as a key example of those nefarious members of society "who will talk about their rights, but never accept their responsibilities". For Brown the public were not really angry with the bankers and politicians "who have lost the people's trust". No, he said, the truth was that the "decent hard working majority feel the odds are stacked in favor of a minority" those "who let their kids run riot" and "play by different rules or no rules at all". Having identified the proper source of society's breakdown and general disorder, Brown went on to reassure us that he was "not prepared to accept" this state of affairs "as simply a part of



"That's better for them, better for their babies and better for all of us"
Gordon Brown on his proposal to house single mothers in state-run supervised homes

life". His remedy of state homes for teenage mothers would "stop anti-social behaviour, slash welfare dependency and cut crime" and provide a "no nonsense approach with help for those who want to change and proper penalties for those who don't or won't".

The extent to which this new social policy is more than a vague election-season sound bite is unclear. However, whether an impending active policy or not, Brown's protracted sermonising on the scourge of teenage pregnancy and his state interventions to reform these women is astonishing for its reactionary rhetoric and social conservatism. When using the term 'reactionary' in the context of New Labour one usually makes Thatcherite comparisons. The context in which Brown's proposals for remedying these problem women and the catastrophic affect he describes them having on British society, can properly be located however in the sixteenth century. The origins of the system of workhouses governed by the principles of the Poor Law originated in the Elizabethan era. There followed a few centuries development of penal measures designed to punish poverty by instituting a regime of 'less eligibility' and harsh work in penal institutions as a condition of subsistence aid. How this history of Poor Law legislation dealt with young single and homeless mothers is a complicated story. However it is useful to briefly recount this history in order for us to understand the extent to which Brown's policy of 'family interventions' and state homes represents something truly retrograde.

The placement of single women expecting children in reformatories and penitentiaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was heavily indebted to the work of the Church. The purpose of these 'homes' was to punish sin, reform, and rehabilitate 'fallen women'. Their descendants – the 'mother

and baby homes' of the post-1945 period – continued to be a last resort for women turned out by their families and unlikely to acquire social housing, well into the 1960s. Young women were sent to these homes during their pregnancy and then on the birth of the child (who was usually adopted) they were sent back to their families. These institutions began to fade out when women were given access to Council Housing under the Homeless Persons Act of 1977. Here for the first time Local Councils, which had previously rejected the applications of single mothers for housing, were told to give priority to a demographically growing number of homeless young mothers. This change of policy under the Labour government of Callaghan represented a less penal attitude towards young single mothers. This began to change again with increased social alarm and opprobrium for the issue of teenage pregnancy, which emerged in the eighties and with increasing vituperation in the nineties.

Brown is clearly drawing on the most draconian traditions of British social policy deriving his inspiration from the workhouses, and the penal and moral reformatories previously run by the Church. This history is being drawn upon to inform his party's vision of a new Modern Britain. The Labour party's self-styled definition of its purpose in politics is to provide "fairness: fair rules, fair chances and a fair say for everyone". The New Labour government's general approach to questions of women and social and economic policy has undoubtedly been influenced by the goals of a very weak but nonetheless 'liberal' feminism, which espouses a vision of a fairer society in which women are empowered by the state to labour under capitalism on 'equal' terms with male workers. This of course represents the culmination of the policies of Workfare-style welfare which were readily adopted by the Blair government and have continued under Brown to uphold an emphasis on the absolute priority of ensuring women return to work and labour in the economy, in order to negate any possible welfare dependence.

What is clear in Brown's attack upon mothers is that for the state human reproduction is only to be permitted if it is combined with a proper execution of wage labour in the market. The more one reads Brown and the Labour Party's rhetoric concerning the outrage that teenage mothers pose to society, the more obvious it is that the reason these women are the subject of such contempt, is that they represent a deviation from the norm of economic production, which women are now more than ever expected to uphold. Any deviation from the standard trajectory of the young in society from education into the job market represents a betrayal of their duty to work under capitalism. For New Labour such a betrayal of vision and responsibility can only be rectified by their and their baby's institutionalisation in state homes.

'new' tactics versus rubbish bosses

by Adam Ford

With the economic collapse and inevitable banker bailouts hitting national and local government budgets, politicians from all parties are determined to make working class people pay for the crisis of their system. While national Labour, Conservatives and Lib Dems are courting big business support by swaggering into TV studios, boasting of how tough they will be next year, local officials are wasting no time in going on the attack.

Under these conditions, the recent and ongoing struggles against refuse worker wage cuts are serving as a taster for the far bigger fights will soon be upon us. So yes, refuse collectors and street cleaners in Liverpool, Leeds and Edinburgh have withdrawn their labour in union-led campaigns. But perhaps more significantly, they have had active support from various groups, which has gone far beyond the passive routine of letter-writing and appeals to politicians. Desperate times clearly call for more militant measures, and though these isolated events have not tipped the balance in the strikers' favour, they point towards new workerist strategies in the months and years ahead.

The Liverpool dispute began on 28th August, and lasted for three weeks, before the GMB union reached agreement with Enterprise Liverpool on a slightly improved pay offer. The deal leaves the company needing to find a mere £270,000, instead of the alarmist £15 million they were talking about before the work to rules, overtime ban, and mini-strikes began. The local GMB leadership touted the mini-strikes as being a way of preventing strike-breaking, but it soon became clear that Assist Streetcare (based in the Aintree area of the city) were indeed providing scab labour.

In response, a number of activists from outside the mainstream 'labour movement' organised a picket and virtual blockade of Assist Streetcare, on the morning of 15th September. The gathering outside the Aintree depot was small



'solidarity with striking leeds refuse collectors'

enough to be safely ignored, but the numbers phoning, faxing and emailing their displeasure caused a shutdown of the company's phone and email systems.

This virtual strategy seems to be relatively new in terms of UK class struggle. Last year it was used in support of Industrial Workers of the World member Chris Lockwood, who had been fired from his bar job at the Showroom Cinema in Sheffield for organising. Previously to this, it had been quite a long-standing tactic of animal rights campaigners targeting businesses and research facilities deemed to be abusers.

The Edinburgh cleaning workers have also been undermined by scab labour, but activists from the IWW and Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty amongst others have found their own method for dealing with it. At the time of writing, the 'scab stoppers' have blockaded scab lorries three times, detaining them for hours and exchanging views with the strike-breakers, before police cleared the way for the onward march of capital. However, no arrests have yet been made.

The same can not be said in Leeds, where the all-out strike against £6,000 pay cuts began on 7th September, and emotions seem to be running especially high. Supporters of the strike took bin bags of their rubbish to the doorstep of the man they called "the source of the problem", council leader Richard Brett. Six people were arrested and bailed to return in November.

Of course, none of these tactics are entirely original; variations of each have been used by previous generations of class fighters. What makes their modified reappearance so significant is that such militancy must surely increase as the historic crisis confronting working people continues to deepen, and the union tops reveal themselves to be class collaborators. Furthermore, the widespread availability of internet technology provides the opportunity for such struggles to link up with each other, forging solidarity around the globe, and allowing workers of all nations to truly unite.

the commune's trade union reading group

The Commune is holding a series of discussion groups in London on the theory and practice of workplace organising, entitled 'schools for communism?'

Full details and reading material for the series are available at our website www.thecommune.co.uk

The next such meeting is on October 26th from 7pm at the Artillery Arms, 102 Bunhill Row, near Old Street tube station, and is on the theme 'What are trade unions for?': all welcome, email uncaptiveminds@gmail.com to register your interest.

tower hamlets esol strike

★ Two workers who took part in the recent strike over cuts to teaching roles and student places in English for Speakers of Other Languages and other subjects spoke to *The Commune* about the lessons of the dispute.

Tell us about what unions workers are in, their organising capacity, and of their previous relationship with management

All teachers are in the University and College Union. Support staff/admin staff are mainly in Unison or no union. UCU has always been strong in the college and in the two years before the strike successfully campaigned to make 60 hourly paid teachers into permanent employees with higher pay and more rights. UCU also led an unofficial walkout earlier in the year to support our longstanding caretaker who was sacked.

What cuts were proposed?

The original Securing the Future document proposed 40 full time jobs and 1000 ESOL places cut, as well as a general attack on our conditions and contracts, which had been quite good.

How did the campaign against the cuts begin?

Before the document was issued we'd already had an indicative ballot for industrial action based on suggestions that we'd be facing compulsory redundancies. This saved us crucial time as the ballot process is so lengthy. We were officially balloted a couple of weeks later. The campaign began immediately as everyone's classes became campaigning ground, with teachers and students creating materials relating to the cuts, writing letters, discussing, and spreading the word. It was a creative and exciting time with masses of participation, ideas, actions including:

- ★ Unofficial walkout on one site
- ★ Community demonstration
- ★ Two one-day strikes
- ★ Mass rebellion of 250 teachers against imposed staff training: corporate trainers forced to flee the college

The campaign began to focus more on the 13 jobs remaining at risk after 25 people took voluntary redundancy. Case-work began to defend individuals who had been selected through a punitive performance-related scoring matrix for redundancy.

Negotiations were ongoing during this time but were characterised by complete intransigence by Principal Michael Farley who refused to extend the 30 day consultation process to allow alternatives to be considered. Union reps put forward detailed suggestions on money-saving but it was clear that Farley did not explore other cost-cutting measures because the process was designed to ensure that there would be compulsory redundancies at the end. There was never a serious irresolvable financial crisis; there were funding cuts, but they exploited these in order to try to destroy the power of the union.

What actions were undertaken over the summer?

Very little happened over the summer because teachers go away. Some people in London met and began to plan for pickets. We found a strike headquarters at London Action Resource Centre (LARC) in Whitechapel.

Indefinite strikes are very rare - how was the decision to take this course of action made?

Farley had planned the thing so as to make strike action impossible – the 30 day countdown to mass redundancies at the end of the year meant that we couldn't get a strike ballot together in time to make a meaningful withdrawal of labour (the end of term is trips and parties).

It felt like a real stitch up because the next striking possibility was September when people would have already been sacked. After meeting and discussing (the one day strikes were discussing across sites) we realised that there was a huge opportunity to threaten strike action in enrolment week. We held a union meeting directly after the teachers' revolt over training and it was at this meeting where we voted unanimously to go on all out strike in the most strategically important time of the year for the college-enrolment week (funding is based on student enrolments). We may not have been able to make the decision without the strength and solidarity created during the training revolt.

What was the mood at the start of the strike?

Fantastic. People were immediately mobilised into action. Everyone came out to the picket lines – not only the usual activists. Autonomous activity was undertaken by all sorts of people carving out roles in publicity, fundraising, artwork, meetings, leaflet writing, picket line, communicating with students, translating leaflets, organisation and so on.



from the early days of the dispute to the end of the strike there was strong community and student involvement in the campaign

How solid were the pickets, and to what extent was support mobilised among other workers and from students?

Pickets were solid across the three sites. At our site the very few scabs came out with us after a few days. Middle managers were also on strike for the duration. Students stood with us on the picket lines and gave their full support (we've started teaching again now and the support and solidarity continues to be amazing). As for other workers in the college, individuals helped us many small and large ways and that help was so key to the morale on the picket line. We could have done more to work with Unison who are not well organised in the college.

How was the strike organised?

Although there was initial agreement that there would have daily strike committee meetings, in fact the two branches organised themselves in very different ways. Poplar organised on the basis of picket line meetings. This branch is a more traditional branch with Socialist Workers Party members in the key positions. Their strike was based around relentless fundraising and delegation work with little time for discussion. The Arbour/Bethnal Green Centre branch has for years had a decentralised, anti-hierarchical organisation and a focus on real local issues. There is also a culture of discussion and involvement by members. One of the many things that inspired us during the strike were the daily strike committee meetings where issues were brought to the meeting for discussion. The many action points arising from the meetings were taken away and reported back on or further discussed. The effect of this was effective action underpinned by a deep collective understanding and commitment. Each issue that was thrashed out with whoever was there made us stronger.

Did you perceive the strike as losing momentum?

No, the strike got stronger over time. The Poplar reps who came to the strike committee meetings said weekly (from the first week!) said repeatedly that their members did not want to stay out much longer and were starting to drift back to work. This was puzzling to us from other sites because, although there were more scabs at that site, at each weekly mass meeting there was the same huge vote (150+ people) to stay out, and there seemed to be little difference in the strength of feeling between the two sites. Certainly the Poplar reps were pushing for a settlement much earlier than anyone else and it seemed to us that this didn't reflect the feelings of the strikers, but we didn't spend enough time over there so we don't know for sure. There was the same mass vote to stay out two days before we heard about the settlement deal. Definitely people were feeling like we were getting near the end – financially of course it was so hard on people, and there was more talk about people 'worrying about their students' and so forth but people wanted to see it through until we got a decent deal. There were still loads of people on the picket lines and being active in other ways. Striking ESOL tutors had started teaching free 'solidarity' classes in community centres. On the day of the final meeting some of us had been on a demo/banner drop action in the City to put pressure on a College Governor. There were

busking dates and gigs and delegations being organised. There was loads going on.

Those of us in the minority who voted against accepting the offer didn't think we would be out for ages more, but we thought we could have done better. Even going back to work on the following Monday would have made us feel a lot stronger than dancing to Farley's tune and starting work on the Friday.

We still don't understand what the strategy was for the Poplar reps and how similar or different it was from the national union. The UCU negotiator Barry Lovejoy had indicated in the summer that he thought it would be all over in first week, if we even had to strike at all. He also apparently said that strikes are won or lost by four weeks so at the time we took that to mean that we couldn't expect strike pay after this time and sure enough, the strike ended after four weeks.

How did the strike come to an end?

The so-called victory is that there are no compulsory redundancies. Instead the 13 at risk were re-deployed or won appeals or have accepted so-called voluntary redundancy.

There was no withdrawal of the threat of compulsory redundancy.

There has been no agreement that there will be no further compulsory redundancies, or any other agreement about honouring our existing terms and conditions.

Through threats and bribes some of the compulsory redundancies have been re-named as voluntary. The pressure came both from management and from the union. Both national and local officials phoned up people at risk and told them they should take so-called voluntary redundancy. Two days before the Acas 'breakthrough' our mass meeting had affirmed that, it was clear that though most people wanted the strike to be over soon, we were prepared to see it through in order to protect these people, and these people were not under pressure to accept a deal.

The agreement states that compulsory redundancies have been avoided and this is the "victory" that the UCU, the SWP etc are crowing about. In fact there have been compulsory "voluntary" redundancies – people have been bullied into accepting "voluntary" redundancy.

This deal was sold through with the most outrageous manipulation of the mass meeting where discussion was suppressed before and during the meeting as far as possible, with members being shouted down by union officials.

In the short time there was for debate, many people spoke against accepting the deal but in the end there were 24 votes against, many abstentions and the clear majority voting to accept and go back to work (though the meeting was of course smaller than our usual weekly meetings).

What is the mood among the ESOL staff now?

Ready to fight the battles that we've got to fight, but also aware of opportunities lost in the strike – maybe we could have saved more courses. Definitely ready to take on the management over day to day issues – this is already happening with good results.

setting the agenda: trade union, community and electoral resistance to education cuts

by Rob Marsden

Starting out

It is 16 months since Staffordshire County Council announced its plans to restructure education in Tamworth and 14 months since we launched an active and vibrant campaign in opposition to this.

Hands Off Tamworth Schools was born after a wave of outrage swept the town at plans to turn one of our five High Schools into an Academy, close one school completely and remove all Sixth Form provision from the remaining four schools and concentrate it on a single site, entirely in the hands of the Academy.

Queen Elizabeth's Mercian School (QEMS), the school earmarked for closure was not a bad or 'failing' school. It was a well respected, popular and successful one. However, its central location and extensive playing fields made it a prime target for the bulldozers as County, together with the mysterious Landau-Forte organisation, drew up plans to locate a Sixth Form College on the site.

A couple of us parents got together and decided that we needed to start a campaign.

Letters to the press and an article in the local paper, which plugged a hastily convened meeting, meant that 35 people crammed into a room provided by the local GMB union and Hands off Tamworth Schools (HOTS) was born in August 2008.

We had three strands to the campaign - opposition to school closures, opposition to Academies and other forms of privatisation-by-stealth and defence of the existing school-based Sixth Forms and, by extension, the specialisms on offer at each of those schools.

The campaign was parent-led from the outset and we drew in parents, as well as teachers and the wider community, from all the local High Schools. From the outset we enjoyed very good relations with the trades unions in education- not just the teachers' organisations but those representing ancillary staff.

Political geography

Tamworth Borough Council is almost entirely Tory, with just a three Labour councillors after a near wipe-out a few years ago, but retains a Labour MP - the New Labour lapdog Brian Jenkins. Staffordshire County Council which was ramming through the BSF plans, was Labour controlled (until its own wipe-out by the Tories in last June's County Elections).

Clearly, there were no local councillors or other elected representatives we could rely on to fight on our behalf so we had to do it ourselves. Of course, we did canvas all local and County councillors and 'our' MP- sending documents, inviting them to discuss the issues.

In addition to public meetings, petitioning, lobbying etc. we held regular open planning and information meetings to which all were welcome. Each week we would go back to scratch, rehearse old arguments with new people, discuss tactics and strategies. It felt like going round in circles but it did begin to pay off- we developed a layer of people, a cadre if you like, able to carry quite complex arguments back to their schools, their neighbourhoods and communities and to address and counter some of the nonsense coming from County through the media and through their official publications and communications.

I had some initial expectation that we would find at least some local activists with some campaigning experience, perhaps people like myself- ex-members of the SWP or other groups, maybe some Greens, but essentially there was no pre-existing Left, no networks to tap into.

We did enjoy support and advice from socialists in the Birmingham area - in Respect and Socialist Resistance, principally through Richard Hatcher and education researcher at BCU and also from the Anti-Academies Alliance and some SWP members.

In the course of campaigning, we did pull together a hard core of campaigners some of whom were former or current Labour Party members which did cause a few crises of conscience in the initial stages of the campaign and later as the County elections loomed.

The first phase - making local waves

Inevitably, the QEMS closure issue tended to dominate in the first phase of the campaign. This was the sharp end in terms of the effect it would have on our community, the forced uprooting and dispersal of our kids, the loss of teaching jobs and the increase in the size of the school roll at the remaining four.



hands off tamworth schools has sought to resist not only school closures, but also privatisation and the introduction of academies

As a campaign group we were able to ride a wave of anger and also put forward the need to oppose Academies and the other elements of the County plans as well.

We were attacked as being opposed to a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity to bring £100 million of Building Schools for the Future investment into our schools and we counter-attacked by making it absolutely clear we welcomed the money- but we didn't want to see it Building Schools for Forte! The money on offer was tax-payers money, our money, and it should come without strings, it should be allocated to the existing schools on the basis of need. And it should be spent according to plans drawn up by local people- teachers, heads, governors, pupils, parents and the wider community- the very 'stakeholders' who were being carved out of the sham consultation process which always accompanies moves to set up Academies.

These ideas were eventually to form the basis of our alternative submission to the BSF process- "Putting Communities First - Education At the Heart Of Tamworth".

With the aid of funding from the teaching unions- NASUWT (the largest teachers union locally) and the NUT and the goodwill of the GMB and UNISON, we were able to pull off a public meeting of 100 people in a major town centre venue.

We used this as a launchpad to go into the 'official' consultation meetings to be held in the five schools.

The response to the consultation meetings was patchy and most schools saw a small meeting, albeit one where concerned parents articulated their deep concerns to a County Council team which continually repeated the mantra that investment in infrastructure was required and raising standards across the town was necessary- as if by saying these two things often enough people would be fooled into believing that the former is not only a pre-requisite, but a guarantor, of the latter!

QEMS was different. It was big - 450 parents, kids and teachers. And it was angry, as person after person got up to take apart County's plans. I've never felt quite so proud of my 13 year old son as when he made the first contribution from the floor, standing on a chair so he could be seen, and took the panel to task over their lack of consultation with kids and their trampling of his rights under the UN Rights of the Child!

The panellists who had come to sell the Academy, the 'remodelling' of our schools and the closure of QEMS, were lucky to escape without being lynched.

We organised a march of 200 through town just before Christmas, followed by a party where children were invited to make Christmas cards with a message to the Corporate Director of Children and Lifelong Learning, Peter 'privatiser' Traves. We delivered 100 cards to Stafford on Christmas Eve. We later organised another march and public meeting just before Easter, which were both attended by children's author and education activist Alan Gibbons.

The second phase - hitting them where it hurts

In May, the Labour County Council withdrew proposals to axe QEMS- a small victory for us but there were no conces-

sions on the Sixth Form issue despite widespread opposition from all the schools heads and the Academy was set to go ahead, with no changes, in the face of bitter union opposition to the unaccountable anti-union sponsors, Landau-Forte.

At around this time, the two main teaching unions balloted for, and won, action in all the affected schools. There was a withdrawal of goodwill, with teachers no longer providing cover and out of hours activities along with a number of one-day strikes and rallies.

This dovetailed with the County Elections which Labour were widely expected to lose heavily and, after much internal discussion, the HOTS campaign eventually made the decision to stand a full slate of six candidates at the County Council elections.

The aim was to force education onto the agenda as an election issue - which it most certainly became. The Labour Party refused even to mention its flagship policy on its election literature - not a word about Academies and privatisation, just platitudes about raising standards and one concrete pledge- to replace plastic meal trays in schools with locally sourced china plates! Radical stuff and I still wonder if they would have had the bottle to try to impose this bold socialist policy on the Academy had they not been utterly annihilated at the Election!

All our candidates were active in the town centre, talking to local people on Saturday afternoons whilst the other parties made scarcely an appearance. We also visited the teachers picket lines and addressed their mass rallies and got 33,000 leaflets out to every house in town

The Tories, sensing we could make a big impact in this lacklustre election, came out with a policy of their own to retain the sixth form provision within local authority control and under the governance of the existing high schools. Of course, they reneged on this as soon as they were elected, adopting wholesale the current Labour proposals.

HOTS gained 10% of the town's entire vote (matching the proportion of eligible electorate who have children at Tamworth's High Schools). In some areas our vote was as high as 18%.

The future?

After the elections, with the summer holidays approaching, the campaign and also the teachers' industrial action lost momentum somewhat. However, County has lost its most ardent champions of this particular Academy plan, the New Labour government is floundering and has lost the clear direction it had when Lord Adonis was in charge of schools privatisation.

Lobbying continues, with the unions taking a more direct role, albeit not in the field of industrial action. The campaign continues and we are confident there will be future flashpoints as local people see the direct and immediate effects of the loss of Sixth Forms on their schools, the demoralisation of teaching staff and little in the way of improved facilities or raised standards to show for it.

on the necessity of pluralist communism

by Nathan Coombs

★ Beginning a series on communist re-composition

It is not difficult to imagine the results if a newly trained M.B.A. in marketing arrived in London with the following diabolic challenge: do what Blair did for New Labour for the far Left; make them sell!

Clipboard tucked under arm, what our marketer would firstly observe is that the Left is indeed a crowded marketplace, with far too many groups attempting to sell their wares to far too few customers. Cross. However, looking into the content of these groups our marketer would be encouraged to see that their products are already well differentiated. Each group has a clear sense of their identity and the ideological niche which they represent. Tick. Conclusions: good product differentiation and branding, but insufficient mass market appeal and attempts to reach out to new consumers.

How should the Left take these findings? Surely the moral that emerges from this imagined scenario is a fairly predictable one – the Left is an incestuous place, more concerned about scoring points off one another than reaching out to create a broader base? No doubt there is some truth to this. Yet what the findings should highlight is something more profound: that the high-stakes invested in sectarian differentiation actually mirror a certain capitalist logic; what Marx called ‘fetishism.’

Could it actually be the case that the ideas of the Left have themselves taken on the character of an ideological fetish? The first counter-argument against this would be the expected one: these ideological splits are not some arbitrary marketing trick, but real differences that have emerged out of the experiences to realise Marxist-Communism in the 20th century. To try and tuck these differences under the rug is much the same as the maligned Stalinist ‘popular front.’

Certainly, the historical argument at first glance appears a convincing one. How could we debate the splits that emerged with respect to the following epochal events: Lenin’s siege of Kronstadt, the Stalinisation of the USSR, the phenomenon of Maoism, Castroism, the subscription of many Western Left parties to the ‘state capitalist’ interpretation of the USSR. Surely ample fodder for significant splits that we should be duly reverent of to this day? As a friend put his aversion to The Commune – “you don’t start to revive communism by falsifying history, adopting the insights of imperialist Sovietology and smearing Lenin!” In other words, historical truth is the truth.

The biggest shock to my friend was the following reply: even if these opinions were attributable to The Commune the reason I was attracted to this network is exactly because I feel under no pressure to adopt them in any sort of enforced Party line. The reason why The Commune was appealing to me was not as much its branding niche (workers self-management) as much as a general disposition away from sectarianism and towards pluralism; which after the inherited splits of the 20th century to me seems pivotal for any reconstitution of the idea of communism for the 21st century.

At root what we are dealing with here is the question of general disposition as a political factor. There is a laboured, perhaps overly-rationalist and instrumental assumption throughout much of the Left that the only thing that matters is the particular constellation of ideas represented by one group or the other – generally, to repeat, of a historical interpretivist nature.

Despite his numerous political failings, none the least his disastrous love-affair with Khomeini’s faction during the Iranian Revolution, it was Michel Foucault who first articulated



out with the old... but many left groups justify their existence with the idea of holding onto tradition

his dissatisfaction with this view of politics set against the vagaries of the French Communist Party. In Foucault’s meditations politics is as much an ethics as it is solely an ideological struggle – having the right ideas, the correct historical interpretation, the best strategic analysis etc. is not enough. Just as significant is how these lines are arrived at, and how they are implemented with respect to the contingencies of an unfolding reality.

Lately, in philosophy circles, Graham Harman has made a similar point: the dry sterility of Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy is attributable to the over investment in a fetishised conception of the rational argument, as opposed to the merely rhetorical or poetic-invocative. Broadly speaking, this is the assumption dating back to ancient Greece where according to Socrates the Sophists were nothing but purveyors of cheap trickery, whereas his dialectical method provided the route to nothing less than truth itself.

Now this is also not to say that we should also be too quick to become loyal card-carrying post-modernists and rebuke truth altogether. In the end, what Socrates was sentenced to death for in Ancient Athens was his willingness to relentlessly question authority and received wisdom. In the modern liberal imagination, Socrates, and his chronicler Plato, becomes the Fall of humanity: the moment in which the peaceful toleration of opposing opinions lead inexorably to the 20th century totalitarian state and the subjugation of nature.

It is this particular pious liberal pluralism – the type that renounces truth altogether and chastises any attempt to change society as a slippery slope to the gulag – that we should be quick to reject. For it amounts to nothing more than moral blackmail on the part of the status quo: “discuss all you like, but do not attempt to force change upon others: it will inevitably lead to disaster!”

No – what I mean by a general disposition towards pluralism is rather as follows: the investment in these historical splits

takes on a fetish character when we fail to realise that they are no longer relevant for the praxis of communist reconstitution, and thus a pluralist disposition towards these questions is exactly what is needed so that we can leave said fetish behind and concentrate on the future. The 20th century’s eventual sequence – which arguable stretches from 1917 to something like 1989 – is one that has closed; and it is high time to realise this.

When in a recent article for the *New Left Review* Slavoj Žižek talked about the necessity to ‘Begin at the beginning again’ my reading of this is not the obvious vulgar one: Žižek wants us to forget the 20th century and naively return to some pre-Leninist, or even pre-Marxist, idea of communism. What I take him to be saying is closer to what I argue now: the Marxist event sequence of the 20th century has closed, and an over-invested faith in what actually happened blinds us the way things have moved on regardless of this sequence and how we should retool our more fundamental faith to meet this challenge. A disposition towards communist pluralism is a strategic necessity as this particular point in history. And not only that, it allows us the opportunity to engage in a level of analysis that is not tied to endless historical exegesis and references to 20th century events.

Or to put it another way, our challenge today is not to fetishise even Marx but to repeat that fundamental gesture of Marx when he disappeared for more than ten years to write *das Kapital*. Nowadays we have to put our faith in philosophy and conduct new dialectical analyses of the situation. History does not culminate in the present; history has failed us – any good liberal will be quick to evoke history as a bogeyman to warn us away from communism.

Rather than get trapped in the vicious cycle of refuting the dubious claim, our move is to demonstrate with the utmost logical rigour why capitalism fails and oppresses, and how only radical communist ideas lead us out of the historic-deadlock of the rarefied false dichotomy between free market liberalism and authoritarian state socialism.

a letter from tegucigalpa: resisting the honduran coup

★ A report on the situation in Honduras over three months after the military coup against centre-left president Manuel ‘Mel’ Zelaya: by a member of Socialismo o Barbarie

The resistance is at its lowest ebb since the coup. The mobilisations have reduced in size to just a vanguard section: in the case of Tegucigalpa [the capital] marches of thousands of people have been replaced by meetings of a couple of hundred or pickets of twenty people of various organisations (for example, feminists, Radio Globo journalists, etc.)

I believe that this situation is the result of various factors emerging since the pro-Zelaya majority on the leadership of the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular put the brakes on the movement in the *barrios* [poor districts] which had been causing the coup government great difficulties and which had made them uncontrollable.

As always, they have sought to keep the movement restricted to the capital and central areas of Tegucigalpa. These are marches for the consumption of the international

media, pressuring the top-level negotiators: they are as much for the US State Department as for the coup government. They are like the marches to the border. At the same time these small marches and actions separate the vanguard from the masses and the *barrios* and decrease the likelihood of a general strike or a mass uprising.

This policy of the FNRP leadership reflects a backward step in the struggle, aggravated by its coincidence with:

1. Zelaya’s call for dialogue, his meeting with and embrace of the coup government, leading to some resistance but also confusion and despondency: a situation which [post-coup president] Micheletti has successfully taken advantage of with his call for dialogue, whose only objective is to buy him time.
2. The declaration of a state of siege with the suspension of constitutional rights. The state of siege has not been challenged by the mass movement.
3. The closing-down of Radio Globo demonstrating the

weakness of organisation in the capital, no longer with any means of communication and calling protests.

4. The evacuation of the Instituto Nacional Agrario with the arrests – and trial for sedition, and jailing – of 41 comrades (all of them supporters, none of them a union leader).

The combination of these factors and the media bombardment on the theme of negotiation and elections have disoriented the FNRP across the country. It ploughs on but with no strategy to defeat the coup. Meanwhile the politics of Zelaya – who allows them no control over his games and the negotiations taking place on the back of the people’s struggle – has disturbed them. They have said nothing on the elections, and made no criticism of them as yet. They have maintained a curious silence on the idea of an ‘Independent People’s Candidate’. Neither they nor Zelaya are telling us anything...

★ read more analysis on the coup and its aftermath at www.thecommune.wordpress.com/?s=honduras

political report from the land of the haggis-eating surrender monkeys

by Allan Armstrong

Political developments in Scotland are hotting-up in the aftermath of the decision by Kenny MacAskill, the Scottish National Party's Justice Minister in the current Scottish government, to release Abdelbaset Ali-Mohamed al-Megrahi, the so-called Libyan bomber, on compassionate grounds.

It is possible that the SNP leadership thought that, with Barack Obama as President, the new US Democrat government would welcome the MacAskill's compassionate approach. After all Obama had personally given an undertaking to the Moslem world in Cairo that he represented a new type of American leader. However, as the continuing war in Afghanistan (and now Pakistan), and the US's failure to discipline Netanyahu in the face of continued Israeli settlements on the West Bank demonstrate, Obama is only trying to rebrand US imperialism, not challenge it.

The SNP has been trying for years to win the approval of corporate America, with the prospect of low business taxation. Donald Trump, the dodgy property speculator, has been assiduously wooed. Therefore, defending MacAskill's decision in the face of blatant US imperial pressure did not come easily to the SNP leadership, particularly after the display of Scottish saltires being waved at Tripoli's airport, welcoming Megrahi upon his return. After all, MacAskill still insisted that he acted solely on compassionate grounds, but that he upheld the Scottish court's extremely dubious decision that Megrahi was guilty.

Early opinion polls seemed to indicate that MacAskill was indeed isolated. However, the Church of Scotland, followed by the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, gave their public backing to MacAskill. Whilst this was undoubtedly embarrassing to sections of the unionist alliance, it was the decision of Nelson Mandela to support MacAskill which turned the tables. Within days, support for MacAskill's decision had risen to 45% in Scotland.

It was in this context that the SNP Government announced its next year's legislative programme on September 3rd, with their proposal for a referendum on Scottish independence given flagship status.

However, a more immediate by-election battle is looming in Glasgow North East, after the resignation of the disgraced Westminster Speaker, New Labour's Michael Martin. Not wanting to be portrayed as the 'Orange' party (Labour's main accusation against the SNP, when it stood against Scottish party leader, Helen Liddell, in the Monklands constituency of Coatbridge and Airdrie), the SNP leadership is taking no

chances. It has adopted David Kerr as candidate. He is a member of Opus Dei! Furthermore, Glasgow City Council is still under Labour control, so the SNP can not so easily be held responsible for the type of unpopular local policies, which contributed to their surprise defeat in the last Scottish by-election in Glenrothes in Fife.

For it is at local council level that the contradictions of the SNP strategy of trying to appeal to all Scots, regardless of class, have first come unstuck. In Edinburgh they share responsibility for the current city council's attempt to impose draconian pay cuts on refuse disposal workers, with the threat of privatisation looming. In West Dunbartonshire, they have suspended Scottish Socialist Party councillor, Jim Bolland, for nine months, for his tireless commitment to working class communities.

Yet, the long honeymoon enjoyed by the SNP led minority Scottish government is also under strain. Wedded to a neo-liberal economic model, which once placed such spectacularly failed corporations as the Royal Bank of Scotland in the driving seat of their proposed new Scottish economy, and which lauded the successes of the Irish 'Celtic Tiger', the SNP government now meekly accepts its role in administering the Westminster government's latest measures to deal with the current crisis – massive public spending cuts to bail out the bankers.

Although the prime press interest in Glasgow North East will be the battle between New Labour and the SNP, there will be other significant political struggles going on. In the last election here, following the mainstream parties' convention of not standing against the Speaker, the Conservatives did not field a candidate. This left the way open for the Scottish Unionists to stand. They represent that traditional Orange wing, abandoned by the Conservatives, when the party broke their link with the Ulster Unionist Party in the 1970's. David Cameron has recently reformed that alliance. Official British Conservative backing for a Protestant unionist party in 'the Six Counties' will have knock on effects in Glasgow, where sectarian divisions still exist.

Both the previous New Labour/Lib-Dem and current SNP Scottish governments at Holyrood have been promoting a bureaucratic and moralistic campaign against sectarianism in Scotland, based on the false notion of there being a 'war between two tribes' – Protestant and Catholic or, sometimes more simply, between Rangers and Celtic. One of the aims of this official campaign is to cutback on the many Orange Order and the handful of Irish Republican marches held in Scotland's Central Belt. This will become a focus of opposi-

tion for hard line loyalists, with whom the BNP are desperate to forge stronger links. The BNP are standing in the Glasgow by-election. They would love to have the sort of clout that loyalists demonstrated, when the PSNI meekly bowed before their intimidation of Roma families in Belfast.

Tragically, the Left remains divided in Scotland. The concern is that, with a now more divided Left, and the possibility of SSP, Solidarity and Socialist Labour candidates, the BNP vote will overtake the Socialist vote. More worrying than any vote, would be the opportunity this could provide them for becoming the 'shock troops' of hard right unionism in Scotland, at a time when the issue of Scottish independence is coming to the fore.

The SNP remains a thoroughly constitutionalist party, and has indicated, by its recently declared support for the British monarchy, a complete willingness to play politics by Westminster rules. The problem is, that the British ruling class only play by these rules when it suits them. When their state is under threat, both Conservative and Labour governments have shown their preparedness to utilise the anti-democratic Crown Powers to thwart any challenges, as any Republican living in Ireland can testify.

Although there is no deep-seated tradition of independent republican organisations in Scotland, such as the Republican Movement in Ireland, there is nevertheless widespread popular support for a Scottish Republic. Furthermore, this is strongly linked to support for public services provided on the basis of need, and opposition to British and American imperial wars. A vote for the SNP sometimes expresses this feeling in a sentimental way.

It is the job of socialist republicans to organise this sentiment in an effective way, by linking everyday struggles, such as the 'Save Our Schools' campaign in Glasgow today, with the demand for a Scottish Republic tomorrow, when the SNP independence referendum comes up against British unionist intransigence. Since the British state and its Irish government allies coordinate their actions through the 'Peace Process' and Devolution-all-round; and both the British and Scottish TUCs and the Irish CTU promote 'social partnerships', which subordinate workers' interests to those of the bosses; whilst the BNP and loyalists are trying to cement links 'across the border' and 'across the water', it becomes all the more imperative that Socialists in these islands organise ourselves on the basis of 'internationalism from below' to more effectively promote working class interests throughout these islands.

★ Allan is a member of the Republican Communist Network

electoral parties: let's not put old wine in new bottles

by David Broder

If June's European election results were disastrous for the traditional social democrat parties like Labour, France's Parti Socialiste or the German SPD, they were unspectacular for the so-called 'radical left', despite the capitalist crisis. Yet recent general election results for Die Linke ('The Left') in Germany and Bloco de Esquerda ('Left Bloc') in Portugal have bolstered some left groups' keenness to try and create something similar in Britain.

Die Linke won more than 5 million votes; 76 of the 622 seats; and the most votes in two of Germany's 16 states. The Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal increased its support to over 10%. Certainly these results are the envy of any coalition the British left has managed to put together: from the Socialist Alliance and Socialist Labour Party to Respect and, worst of all, 'No2EU', the various unity initiatives have failed to make any impact on the national political scene, despite the size of movements such as Stop the War or the significant rightwards drift of the Labour Party.

However, this very electoral success brings into question the very reason-for-existence of such parties, and therefore raises doubts over why we would want to emulate them. Die Linke and Bloco de Esquerda come from different traditions – Die Linke is largely a merger of the former East German ruling party and a breakaway from the SPD, whereas the Bloco was created by Trotskyist and Maoist groups – but are similar in ambition insofar as both want to form coalitions and enter government as junior partners to the mainstream social democrats. But surely we do not just want to rack up votes, but outline a political alternative so as to build a movement for a different social system.

Socialist Worker of 10th October approvingly quotes a Bloco article about the traditional ruling party's options to the effect that "As it is now in a minority in parliament, the Socialist



does die linke want more sway in the corridors of power, or to get rid of them?

Party will be forced to choose between an alliance with the left or the right wing parties. If it opts for the left, we will submit proposals from the Left Bloc, for example the repeal of the Labour Act and to impose a tax on the wealthy to finance improved social security." Die Linke in Germany has already entered regional governments with the neo-liberal SPD and thus taken responsibility for its budgets, sometimes implementing harsh cuts and indeed opposing the March 2008 Berlin transport strike. It says it would not enter a national coalition with the SPD, who in turn reject the idea of a 'red-red' lash-up: but it is hard to see any particular distinction in political principle.

Both therefore look to repeat exactly the same mistake as made by the once-promising Rifondazione party in Italy, which joined Romano Prodi's government and so was forced to vote for reactionary legislation, including extra troops being sent to Afghanistan, in order to save Prodi's neo-liberal 'centre-left' administration from collapse. This meant both abandonment of its objectives and the loss of all its MPs at the subsequent general election.

These parties all think it possible to hedge over the question of joining government, displaying their belief that a left government can manage the capitalist state – its services, bureaucracy and forces of law and order – in a 'socialist' manner, when in fact they themselves always end up engulfed by the state and its need to organise a capitalist system prudently. Even if not in the traditional social-democrat party, they are nonetheless constrained by the logic of the infrastructure and budgeting demanded by the profit system.

The political error of revolutionaries trying to fill the political space vacated by the likes of the Labour Party by copying its former policies is not only that they do not break with the idea of electoral viability – in which case voters may as well stick with the more left-wing of the mainstream parties – but that even if successful, their party faces exactly the same obstacles as the original, perhaps well-intentioned, old Labour reformers. Surely, as American socialist Eugene Debs once commented, "I'd rather vote for something I want and not get it than vote for something I don't want, and get it".

In the Winter 2009 *ISJ*, Socialist Workers' Party theoretician Alex Callinicos sharply criticised France's Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste for 'ultimatism' when it made rejecting coalition with the Parti Socialiste one of its founding principles. Yet taking sides on the question of whether the left's ambition is simply to help run the capitalist state is surely an absolutely fundamental point of principle and strategy.

To create some new electoral coalition with no proper discussion of such issues – as would undoubtedly be the case for any 2010 General Election initiative – would just lead us down further dead ends. In a sense the SWP's recent left unity appeal is to be welcomed, but the discussion over its politics having died down in the pages of *Socialist Worker*, and only an electoral non-aggression pact on the agenda, the left seems as far as ever from building something other than a rehash of failed state-socialism and Labourism.

a beginners' guide to cuts

by Robert Kirby

In the last few months, the constant refrain from all the mainstream parties has been the need for cuts in the public sector. Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg promised "savage" cuts at his party conference – before rapidly backtracking when his attempt at virility didn't go down well with the party faithful. David Cameron has promised an "age of austerity"; an entire political era built around government belt tightening. George Osborne has threatened a pay-freeze for all public sector workers. And whilst Labour party figures like Peter Mandelson have complained that the Tories would be "gleeful" in enforcing cutbacks, their "responsible" brand of austerity will mean the same cuts in living standards for ordinary people.

The UK national debt is currently around £800 bn; around 60% of GDP, and is predicted to rise much higher in coming years. The government runs an approximately 12% deficit, meaning that a predicted £175 bn more will go out than come in. Around half of this deficit is structural – meaning that it is a permanent feature rather than a credit-crunch induced blip. This means that the increasing interest on government debt has to be serviced, a cumulative weight on the exchequer that will get worse and worse without action. The deficit could raise interest rates throughout the economy, cause inflation and potentially lead to a devaluation of the currency. From the perspective of the ruling elite, these figures make it seem pretty imperative to restore the economy to balance and competitiveness. But ultimately, capitalism isn't about balance and competitiveness, but about profit.

A Marxist understanding of the "age of austerity"

The "age of austerity" isn't just the abstract book-balancing act of accountancy that it is presented as by the mainstream parties and the media. It is a counter-crisis measure, designed to return capitalism to prosperity by the most rapid means possible. The proposed cuts are about the private sector, not the public, and can only be understood in the context of the recession, and from the perspective of the totality of the capitalist economy.

Marx understood that the driving force of the capitalist economy is the production of surplus value: that part of social wealth produced above and beyond what is necessary to pay for the means of production, raw materials etc. used in production, and that which goes to sustain and reproduce the working class at the generally accepted standard of living. This surplus is the source of a capitalist's profits.

But this surplus doesn't just go into the pockets of businessmen. A portion is hived off into the coffers of the state, to supply those services necessary to the reproduction of society as a whole that no individual capitalist can make a profit from doing; building roads to transport goods, healthcare to maintain the working class, and police to maintain social order. This state spending, whilst needed by capital in general, becomes an increasingly heavy drag on the profits of individual capitalists. Whilst this is a bearable burden during the good times, during a recession, when capitalists can't produce sufficient surplus value to turn a profit, this becomes a crippling and potentially bankrupting outgoing. The state, as the ultimate guarantor of the capitalist mode of production needs to step in (or out, as it were), and reduces its spending to ensure that it doesn't squash the capitalist goose that lays the golden egg of surplus value.

Where the axe falls

The main political discussion in British politics is currently about exactly where the spending axe should fall, whether on the "surveillance state" or on "greedy" public sector workers. But it is clear where cuts *will have to* fall, no matter how many promises to protect "front line services". The cuts agenda is about a return to profitability. If the state cuts spending on Trident or aircraft carriers, then the deficit goes down. But if they cut public sector wages or benefits, then not only does the deficit go down, but the standard of living of the working class and reserve army of the unemployed are reduced, enabling employers to apply downwards pressure on wages as well. The axe can't fall on the police or army, without whom the state's international prestige and

monopoly on violence would be weakened; or on the "corporate welfare state", the massive subsidy to private industry that is much of state spending, through government purchasing and PFI. To ensure a return to profitability in the private sector, the cuts must be made at the expense of the working class.

Theory and practice

The argument above suggests why the age of austerity might be tempting to Cameron and co. – it offers a way out of the chronic crisis of profitability that has been afflicting the British economy for years. But whether this far-reaching clampdown on workers' living standards is possible is another matter. As mentioned above, the corporate welfare of recent years keeps many companies in business and can't be cut. Equally, more than a million jobs have been created in the public sector in the last ten years and the state is the largest employer in many regions. Cutting such jobs will merely shift spending from wages to welfare, and decimate economic activity. Likewise, an overly-vigorous programme of cuts could drive down effective demand and damage the economy further. But the British elite faces the problem that the Keynesian solutions that are their other potential way out of the crisis haven't worked historically, and, more importantly are currently unaffordable.

Equally, the "age of austerity" presents a challenge to the left. The left need to understand that the cuts agenda is a necessity for capitalists, rather than just a subjective tendency towards being bastards on the part of the Tory party. Likewise, it is impossible to challenge the cuts agenda on the basis of counter-proposals for "affordable" restructuring. Good standards of living for the working class are unaffordable for the bourgeoisie. But it is worth remembering that these living standards – though not perfect – were affordable before the crisis. That they no longer are is their problem, not ours. These cuts ultimately present an opportunity; they clearly reveal the divergence of interest between the working and ruling class: our task is to organise against them.

political platform of our communist network

We are communists: we fight for a new self-managed society based on collective ownership of the means of production and distribution and an economy organised not for value production but for the well-being of humanity and in harmony with our natural environment. Communism will abolish the system of wage-labour so that our ability to work will cease to be a commodity to be sold to an employer; it will be a truly classless society; there will be no state, no managers or organisations superior to those of workers' self-management.

We are internationalists: we seek the greatest possible collaboration with communists in other countries; we build solidarity with workers' movements around the world; we are opposed to all borders and immigration controls; and we are opposed to all forms of oppression of nationalities.

We know that communism can only come from below, through the organisations of the workers themselves. This conception of communism has nothing in common with the fake "socialisms" of the Stalinist state planning of the former

USSR, of the sweatshops of China, and social-democratic "humane" capitalism. No nation in the world today is communist, nowhere is the economy managed by the workers. These models of "socialism" have all proven to be complete failures, maintaining and in many cases aggravating the working class's lack of self-determination. There is no particular connection between socialism and nationalisation by the state, which merely replaces one set of managers with another; alongside fighting day-to-day battles we advocate a struggle for vestiges of workers' control in the here and now as preparatory steps towards real workers' self-management and collective ownership.

We are the most consistent advocates of social liberation in all its forms. We fight sexual repression, sexism and homophobia and advocate sexual liberation; we champion anti-racist and anti-fascist struggles; we oppose all limits to freedom of speech and free cultural expression. These struggles are not just some adjunct to working-class struggle but are the cornerstone of democracy and human freedom. We know that it is impossible for the working class to fight for

and create a communist society if it is unable to control its own organisations: we support rank and file movements against the bureaucrats who lord it over the unions and parties of the left; we are for openness and democracy in the workers' movement.

We have no gods, not even revolutionary ones. We reject the practice of using the works of this or that socialist of decades past as sacred texts from which "revealed truths" can be read off as gospel. The "traditions" to which the traditional left groups appeal are universally ahistorical and anachronistic, used for the sake of feigning historical legitimacy rather than to critically examine and draw lessons from the past. We believe that the defeats of the workers' movement in the last three decades; the decay of the left and the absolute poverty of its ideas and slogans; its abandonment of class politics; and the sectarianism of the groups vying for supremacy with their own front campaigns and so-called unity projects; are all evidence of the need for ground-up rethinking of the left's project and the re-composition of the workers' movement.

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